

**Photographing Desire:  
Women Exploring Sexuality through Auto-photography**

**Kai-Wen Evangeline Tsao**

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University of York

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## Abstract

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Feminist debates since the second-wave movement frequently construct ‘women’s sexual liberation’ and resistance to patriarchal heteronormativity as oppositions. This framework oversimplifies the interwoven relationship between personal and cultural constructions of women’s sexuality; furthermore, it risks overlooking individuals’ lived experiences and emotions. This research investigates the multiplicity and complexity of ‘women’s sexual desire’ by engaging with feminist symbolic interactionism and ideas from queer theories. How does a woman negotiate her personal ‘web of desire’ within social conventions? The project adopts auto-photography – a participatory method incorporating self-photography, journaling and interviews – to engage 18 UK women residents from seven countries in the co-creation of knowledge. This method encourages women to actively develop ideas; thus, it has an activist potential to reveal underrepresented meanings of women’s sexuality. In addition, the methodology generates rich textual and visual materials that demonstrate the depth of participants’ self-analysis and reflexivity. Multiple analytical methods (thematic analysis, discourse and narrative analysis, social semiotics) are deployed to read the women’s narratives critically, as well as representing them as valid. Desire is fluid, and women explore its meanings through metaphors and symbols. The women’s understanding of desire is negotiated within four cultural sites – Christianity, ethnicity, popular culture and feminist ideas – through which they might adopt, reject or struggle with dominant sexual scripts. Their sexual feelings are embodied experiences that can be generated through four preconditions: a positive perception of body image, sensations, fantasy and intimate relationships. The diverse ways in which participants visualise their sexuality reaffirm that each woman’s desire can be understood as a web interwoven by personal identities, social interactions and cultural scenarios in a continuous process. In particular, the extensive references to popular culture suggest that its sexual scripts are influential in constructing women’s desire.

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*In Memory of*  
*Professor Lin, Shu-Jung (1958–2014)*

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## **Author's Declaration**

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This research and writing are original and I am the sole author. Extracts from an early draft of Chapter Three were presented in 2012 at Network Of Interdisciplinary Women's Studies in Europe (NOISE) Summer School in Utrecht, and in Gender, Sex and Power Conference in Hull. A part of my discussion about the methodology in Chapter Three and some of my analyses of photographs in Chapters Four and Six were presented in Transformative Feminist Methods Conference in 2014 in Durham. In addition, some of my reflections on auto-photography, representation and empowerment in Chapter Three and Seven were used in an oral paper given in Feminist Research Methodologies Conference in 2015 at Sheffield Hallam University. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

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When I was an undergraduate student in Taiwan, a female friend once asked me to tell her how I explored my sexual desire. I remember starting by telling her that I watched pornography, and immediately she was too overwhelmed to listen to the rest of my story. Her reaction was comical, but also a bit worrying. Why would my friend, apparently curious about how another woman explored and dealt with her sexuality, panic over my answer? Was it because I mentioned ‘pornography’? Would she have felt less embarrassed if I had not been so straightforward in my answer?

Despite this incident, I was able to talk about my desire, and this felt very liberating to me as a young woman, particularly because I came from a family and a wider cultural environment which expected me to be reserved and sexually innocent. I sometimes wondered what made me so *different*: I was born and raised in a family embedded in Taiwanese patriarchal society, yet I seemed rebellious and ‘too independent’ (my aunt’s words) to some of my friends and relatives. There were mixed messages in everyday life, though. While sex was – and still is – a taboo subject at home, the TV programmes and films played at the dinner table were full of sexual images and talk. Some of my university friends were shocked to hear me talk openly about sex, but almost everyone was accustomed to men making sexual jokes. When I first learnt about feminist ideas in university seminars I thought they answered many of my life’s questions, including why it was okay for men to make sexual remarks, while a similar comment from a woman would be regarded as inappropriate. The double standard seems to be based on nothing but a gender dichotomy imposed by a heteronormative, patriarchal culture: I should be allowed to do what men are entitled to do. Hence, for me, recounting my sexual desire was to make a statement that I no longer conformed to the social restraints imposed on women.

My personal fight against patriarchal culture was far from triumphant. Although I did enjoy some gratifying moments when it was obvious that my heterosexual male friends felt challenged, I could not change the broader cultural perceptions and criticisms of women like me who acted against conventions. In fact, I still struggle to even communicate with

the *men*<sup>1</sup> in my family about my feminist career because I am expected to be obedient, serving the patrilineage<sup>2</sup>. My experiences as an ordinary woman made me curious about other silenced, ordinary women's sexuality – as opposed to that of celebrities represented in the mass media. What shapes their – our – desire, and how do they talk about it? Is a woman's desire really empowering, or does it only bring trouble and confusion to the individual located in a patriarchal culture? I decided that conducting a research project would provide me with a legitimate reason to explore women's desire – including my own – and to ask whether desire is potentially subversive. More importantly, I wanted to expand my scholarship to investigate how feminist ideas have contributed to the construction of a sense of empowerment that women feel when they speak out about their desire; and, furthermore, to assess how women's lived experiences might illuminate ongoing feminist debates about sexual liberation and the theorisation of human sexuality.

This project of researching women's desire is thus partly a personal journey into culturally shaped concepts of sexuality. I have many questions. I attempt to investigate what my own desire entails; meanwhile, I am eager to discover whether there are other young women who also think that women's empowerment can possibly be initiated by the declaration of desire. However, I am aware that these are far more complicated issues than I have thus far suggested. Popular culture in countries such as China, Taiwan or the UK – where my participants<sup>3</sup> and I have lived – frequently represent sexual images of women in mainstream media and on social networks, creating an illusion that women are free to express their sexuality as they wish. However, in daily life, women have to constantly deal with verbal and physical abuse for being overt about their desire, for example, by the way they dress or by trying to develop creative ways to communicate what they find sexually pleasurable<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, women who decide to challenge the sexualisation of the

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<sup>1</sup> I refer here to my grandfather and father. My father's parents, my parents and my sister live under the same roof.

<sup>2</sup> To be more specific, I was told by my grandfather to marry a Taiwanese man (*foreigners* are forbidden), to produce a male child and have him carry the patrilineal family surname 'Tsao' because I do not have any brothers.

<sup>3</sup> I use the term 'participant' to underline the active role women played in generating research materials in this project. I discuss this methodological topic further in Chapter 3.

<sup>4</sup> This is what my thesis is about: encouraging women to represent their sexuality by making photographs.

female body are ridiculed and threatened with sexual violence<sup>5</sup>. Although I hope that this piece of research can speak out for women's desire with a louder, collective voice, I emphasise that the women who participated in this research do not necessarily share my agenda. Nevertheless, the complexity and depth of 'women's desire' encourages me to explore the issue of negotiating personal desire with/in the cultural shaping of sexuality in a more sophisticated and reflexive manner.

So far, I have indicated how my research stemmed from my personal life. My exploration of the cultural aspects of 'women's desire' started with *language*. Language provides a way of making sense of the world, and also reflects the local lives and culture in which it is embedded. As a trilingual<sup>6</sup>, I usually find certain expressions more 'accurate' in one language than in another. When I was recruiting Taiwanese women to join my project, I tried to translate my research outline into Taiwanese Mandarin. The first obstacle I encountered was that there is no equivalent term for 'sexuality' in Mandarin, since the concept of sexuality was developed in Western, English-speaking societies. The closest translation in Mandarin might be 性 [xing`], which usually refers to sex *in general*; or occasionally it is translated as 性態 [xing` tai`] – the state of sex, the meaning of which seems to be slightly lost in translation. So, when I need to write my research outline in Taiwanese Mandarin, I choose either to be more specific about my meaning – using terms such as sexual identity, desire or behaviour – or put a footnote outlining the meanings of the concept of sexuality.

For the translation of desire, I considered three possible phrases: 慾望 [yu` wang`], 情慾 [qing` yu`], and 性慾 [xing` yu`]. These three terms approach desire in different ways. 慾望 [yu` wang`] refers to desire that is directed towards anything: food, fame, money, sex, among many other things. It suggests an intense 'want'. 情慾 [qing` yu`] implies a desire that is accompanied by the feeling one has, usually in relation to other people: one 'has feelings for' another person, hence wanting the person sexually. 性慾 [xing` yu`] indicates

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<sup>5</sup> In 2015, the #FreeTheNipple movement is receiving a lot of attention in Taiwan. Many people – regardless of their gender – are actively participating in this campaign and sharing their photographs online to reclaim the rights to their own bodies, and to ask for gender equality. This ignites many responses on social media. Some male commentators outrageously claim that women showing their nipples is an act of seduction and will result in sexual crimes. Other are more concerned that these topless images may reproduce the objectification of bodies; hence, finding ways to negotiate bodily liberation within a sexist culture becomes a difficult task.

<sup>6</sup> I speak Taiwanese Mandarin, English and Taiwanese Hokkien.

sexual desire, but the term is understood as animalistic and raw, suggesting a kind of uncontrollable lust or sexual drive. As I recall, there seems to be a social convention that associates 情慾 [qing' yu`] with women and 性慾 [xing' yu`] with men. That is, desires are gendered. Although 性慾 [xing' yu`] appears to be the most literally-fitting phrase I can use, I am not certain that it represents the concept I am investigating. This is because, from the way I understand 'sexual desire' in English, the term does not equate to lust. I discussed this issue with a few Taiwanese friends, and received a number of different suggestions. In the end, I decided to use 情慾 [qing' yu`] in my research outline and for my research blog<sup>7</sup>. The phrase 情慾 [qing' yu`] is slightly more specific than the 'desire' for everything, 慾望 [yu' wang`]. 情慾 [qing' yu`] implies the emotions and feelings one has when talking about sexual desire; in addition, despite and because of its problematic gendered association, the term would resonate with many Taiwanese women's experiences and interpretations.

The process of finding an appropriate Mandarin translation inspired me to think about how language shapes one's conceptualisation of desire. I decided to talk to other friends who are not native English speakers to see how they understood 'desire' in their first languages, and how they would describe the concept in English. Whereas in Taiwanese Mandarin, desire is associated with sex and a strong feeling for other people, in Greek, it is about *passion*. A friend from Cyprus told me that, when thinking about *desire*, she related it to *epithymía* in Greek. *Epithymía* on its own can mean desiring money and success, craving food, wanting sex with passion, or desiring love or a relationship; when this term is used between close friends or partners, the meaning becomes 'I miss you.' *Epithymía* has connotations of intense feelings and positivity. When my friend was describing the various situations in which one would use *epithymía*, she said 'sexual passion' at times when I would have said 'sexual arousal'. After I told her this, she explained that the term *sargigí epithymía*, which is associated with *érotas*, means an intensely passionate and sexual feeling; whereas the Greek term for 'sexual arousal' would be more scientific and written in textbooks. To have *epithymía* – this passion and love – is seen as a positive thing. My friend concluded by telling me that Greeks were very passionate people. 'It's all or nothing', she said, suggesting that when they had sex, Greek people devoted all their

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<sup>7</sup> At the start of this project, I set up a blog (<https://photographingdesire.wordpress.com/>) to recruit participants. I discuss this part of my methodology in Chapter 2.

passion to that moment<sup>8</sup>. While I was asking around for more ideas on desire, a Dutch friend provided me with several terms she would consider when translating ‘desire’ into Dutch: *willen*, meaning *want*; *verlangen*, which shares the same etymological origins as *longing*; and *wensen*, which translates as *wishing*. She also mentioned *trek hebben*, a ‘moderate craving’, suggesting that one is ‘in the mood’ for something. Most interesting is *begeren*, a word for which she could not find a direct English translation. *Begeren* has a very strong sexual connotation and, as far as she understood, this term can only be used between people. The explanations she provided suggest that desire is related to one’s expectations and a sense of feeling: wanting and being in the mood for something. When desire is *sexual*, it is about the people who are involved in the experience.

This exploration into how desire is illustrated in different languages is an indication that the concept of desire is heterogeneous, although there is a similarity in that it is regarded as an emotion and a wish, often for other people. The meaning of desire is not univocal; rather, the interpretation of desire depends on the cultural context and how one makes sense of it in one’s social location. These ideas suggest that desire is fluid – not only that a person’s desire changes over time, but also that the very definition of desire is unstable. Because it is so difficult to define what desire *is*, my participants and I ended up talking *around* desire. Two participants, Cherry and Brigitte, even developed analogies for desire – by using water and food – as a strategy to illustrate what sexual desire entails.

[Desire] is something that you can, you can explore. Something that has... I’m trying to think of a, like, analogy or a metaphor that it could be like, erm, I mean, desire is like, if you imagine desire is like water, it’s going to go somewhere. Like, it can channel itself, it can move. But you can also swim around in that water, or you can direct it in different, into different avenues, and trying to discover where you like it best. So yeah, I think that’s, I mean that’s how I feel about it. That’s a cranky metaphor, but it very much describes it... The fact that desire is something you can explore and analyse, it’s kind of intrinsic to the concept to me. (Cherry, interview 1)

The hesitations, repetitions and verbal fillers in this narrative indicate how Cherry talked *around* desire: although she intended to provide a coherent interpretation, her language was nevertheless filled with obscurities. In this narrative, desire is conceptualised as delicately

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<sup>8</sup> This, of course, is my friend’s personal interpretation – as one can imagine, there must be occasions where sex is not as ‘passionate’ as she describes.

balanced between subjectivity and a sense of uncontrollability. On one hand, the analogy with water suggests that desire is not static: it flows around and can easily be reshaped as though having a life of its own. On the other hand, ‘I’ being the subject of my desire means that I can bring it along to experiment with different sexual scenarios and, by doing so, I get to explore which types of interactions are more arousing and pleasurable. Furthermore, Cherry’s description of one *swimming in the water* indicates that desire is an overwhelming sexual emotion in which one becomes immersed, while one can still navigate oneself within it. In addition, I associate water – a direct reference to fluid – with desire in two distinct ways. Firstly, sex is often referred to as ‘the exchange of bodily fluids’, an expression that is common in both English and Mandarin. Although sex is not always about desire, sexual and sexy acts can be arousing. Secondly, ‘fluid’ connotes the queer theoretical construction of desire<sup>9</sup>. Being changeable, ambiguous and embodying multiple meanings, desire can be understood as fluid in the sense that it is beyond our grasp.

Compared to the difficulties of discussing the *definition* of desire, the participants and I were more eloquent when talking about our *experiences* of desire – the scenarios in which desire was generated and felt. In Brigitte’s interpretation, desire is experienced as it *comes to be* rather than it being an intrinsic drive<sup>10</sup>:

It’s like when you make erm, a spaghetti Bolognese, and the Bolognese you’re looking for, perhaps, is sexual desire. But in order to achieve that, you need all these other ingredients to be added to the mix. You know, minced beef on its own doesn’t make Bolognese, nor does tomato, nor does garlic. It’s how these things are put together, how these things interact with one another. And as I said, sometimes it’s paradoxical, these things don’t interact with one another. And that’s for me what you have to then look at, and look at why we have certain urges towards them, some behaviours which might seem to go against our nature, or our belief systems, or, erm, our culture. But you can’t look at one thing in isolation. (Brigitte, interview 2)

Desire, like cooking, is concerned with how a person uses cultural materials – such as a recipe – to combine ingredients in particular ways for it to ‘work out’. Yet Brigitte suggests that the outcome cannot be controlled; rather, desire requires some negotiations

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<sup>9</sup> Queer theories on gender and sexuality are discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>10</sup> See Chapter 2, section ‘From Freud to Foucault: a Move Towards the Cultural Construction of Desire’.

and improvisations with the recipes or *scripts*<sup>11</sup>. There exists a variety of recipes for Bolognese – competing cultural materials that claim to make enjoyable desire – and still one might alter the ingredients, spices, timing and the heating control in accordance with one’s tastes or particular circumstances. Some people might prefer heat and intensity, while others like it mild. Some might be more adventurous with various dishes, while others find unfamiliar meals difficult to swallow. At times one might be too busy to cook, or the recipe just does not work. The analogy with a recipe for food suggests that sexual desire is heterogeneous: to develop into desire, all sorts of elements need to come together.

The complexity of Brigitte’s and Cherry’s analyses contrasts with my naive understanding before starting this project. Being exposed to popular cultural portrayals of ‘sexy women’, I once not only identified with such illustrations, but also assumed that this type of image represented women’s desire *in general*. This project amazed me with how women use cameras to depict their sexuality in a diverse, sophisticated manner. I am interested in ‘creative ways’ of using photography, encouraging other women to do it, and pushing myself to experiment with photography.

I have been interested in photography for many years; I enjoy both taking pictures and viewing other people’s work. I am conscious that photography is not simply a tool for ‘keeping a record’, it is also used to represent ideas and create artworks. Since I felt that my own use of photography was quite limited – I did not consider myself the creative type – I decided that I should experiment with it in my research. For my master’s degree project in 2011, I used self-directed photography<sup>12</sup> to investigate women’s clothing and identities. I asked my participants to bring two sets of clothes – one that they wore on a daily basis, and the other that they owned but never or seldom wore – to join me for interview. At the start of each interview, I took several pictures of these clothes, partly as directed by the participant who owned the clothes. I had a couple of ‘rules’ for the photo shoot: the casual outfit was displayed flat – either hung-up or placed on a surface, while the participant dressed in her seldom-worn outfit. Each participant then reviewed the photos and chose the images she found most satisfactory to discuss in the interview.

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<sup>11</sup> Brigitte’s analogy illuminates Gagnon and Simon’s (2005) *sexual scripts*, a metaphor that is particularly useful for understanding participants’ desire. I discuss their theory in the next chapter.

<sup>12</sup> In self-directed photography, the researcher takes photographs of participants and/or props following participants’ directions.

This photographic method highlighted an important issue: women's delicate negotiation between the self and cultural convention, an issue which I failed to address in my MA project. In that task I found that my participants composed comprehensive self-representations using clothes to see themselves as 'appropriately unique' on various social occasions. That is, participants did not just put on any outfit; rather, they paid attention to organising their appearance in order to 'fit in' with other people as well as to express their personal characters. To achieve this, participants needed knowledge of dress codes for various events, and they also required skills to organise a coherent image that followed cultural conventions. Additionally, participants had to find ways to express their uniqueness – such as by applying make-up, choosing accessories and doing their hair – within reasonable limits. The skill of managing this self-representation required practice and continuous self-reflection by participants – acts which they demonstrated in our photo sessions and when they reviewed their photos during the interviews. Self-directed photography revealed the process by which participants illustrated their cultural knowledge and self-reflexivity: they negotiated between personal styles and social conventions, and they constructed a representation of themselves which demonstrated both their own unique flair and their ability to accommodate to various events.

Whereas an MA dissertation lasts for only a few months, a PhD project allows more time for generating research materials. Given the large amount of time available, I chose to adopt auto-photography<sup>13</sup>, a method which requires participants to be more fully involved in creating photographs (and words) to represent their desire. At a time when images of sexy female bodies and sexually empowered women permeate popular culture in both Taiwan and the UK, I was keen to find out how women might visually represent their desires. What kind of images might women produce now that the cameras are in their own hands? How might these photographs be different from, or similar to, mass media representations? If popular cultural images of sexy women exist to cater to heterosexual men's desire, as some feminists suggest, how might my participants' pictures differ? How might they disclose a culturally shaped 'women's desire' that displays individual

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<sup>13</sup> By auto-photography, I mean a combination of participants taking pictures and other research methods – such as semi-structured interviews and journaling, as in this project. I explain this methodological definition in Chapter 3. In this section, I focus on the use of 'photography'.

uniqueness? To what extent can this method generate activist work (and activist for whom: the participants themselves, researchers, or viewers?) as well as materials for analysis?

My use of photography as a research method was not only demanding of participants, it also forced me to step out of my comfort zone in order to analyse the images. Viewing photographs used to be a rather private activity for me; at most, I would discuss my interpretation with close friends. Although the analysis of participants' photographs is not *essential* – I could have treated these photos merely as an aid to eliciting verbal responses and argued that participants have already discussed their sexualities in words – it seems such a loss not to explore the rich meanings of desire embodied in these photographs. In order to *responsibly* read participants' photographs and avoid speculating, I recognise the ways in which my cultural background and lived experience affect my analysis. This means that I frequently reflect on my own interpretation, and re-examine my initial, comparatively straightforward responses to the photos in order to explore the viewing conventions that I have readily acquired. This process is challenging, and it took some time for me to gain enough confidence to write down my reading of the photos. As it turned out, I found that this photographic method revealed not only participants', but also my own negotiations between a 'personal' reading and an acquired 'cultural' analysis.

This project is being conducted at a time when visual communication has become an inseparable part of our daily experience. When I began my research in 2011, almost everyone around me had a camera phone which allowed them to snap a picture whenever they wished. At that time, there was already a trend for people to take pictures and share them via the Internet. Since I was readily immersed in this form of communication, and because of the growing convenience of sharing digital images, using photographic research methods became an ever more fascinating concept. I was eager to discover how images can communicate ideas.

One aspect of this 'visual culture' which resonates with the rationale of auto-photography is the emergence of the 'selfie.' A 'selfie' is a photo one takes of oneself that is shared on social media, usually accompanied by a few lines of caption<sup>14</sup>. Although taking self-portraits is not a new phenomenon, sharing them on the Internet for public view only

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<sup>14</sup> However, the definition of 'selfie' keeps shifting, and it now also refers to a group photo that includes the person who took the shot.

became popular recently. Taking selfies has become such a prevalent practice that in 2013 ‘selfie’ was added to the Oxford English Dictionary and named word of the year. The rise of the selfie was made possible by the wide ownership of smart phones and the popularity of social networking websites; and the ‘selfie phenomenon’ indicates that people are familiar and comfortable with the technology of self-image production and distribution. Taking a selfie means that one uses the camera to take control of self-representations (Saltz 2014) – although the resulting images have similarities to those created by others – which is a significant aspect of auto-photography. By taking and publishing self-images, individuals not only gain a sense of agency, they also bring personal experiences into the realm of the social. Just as selfies are one-time private photos that have found public platforms (Day 2015; Saltz 2014), auto-photography as a research method generates, collects and publishes self-made photos for *personal* voices to be heard.

A general conception of the selfie is that people use it to draw attention to themselves<sup>15</sup>, meaning that people edit and publish their self-images in order to construct a unique online identity that appeals to other viewers<sup>16</sup>. To achieve this goal, selfie practitioners need to know the cultural rules of taking a ‘good’ selfie (Figure 1.1) – slightly lower the chin, take the photo from above or on the horizontal, use a mirror to get a picture of the body, and consider making a duck face – meanwhile emphasising personal characteristics to distinguish their representations from other people’s. A successful selfie should gain the practitioner social recognition (praise) and personal gratification. The taking of a selfie, like other photographic methods, demonstrates that the production of self-representations can illuminate the negotiation between personal preference and cultural convention. Of course, the photographs of desire in this project are not selfies<sup>17</sup>: participants did not create these images to appeal to other people but to represent their emotions for a piece of research; nevertheless, the selfie phenomenon signifies a contemporary approach that is adopted when composing a photographic representation that is able to communicate personal ideas to other people.

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<sup>15</sup> The rise of the selfie is quite often associated with narcissism. See, for instance, Chamorro-Premuzic’s (2014) ‘Sharing the (self) love: the rise of the selfie and digital narcissism’.

<sup>16</sup> Levin (2014) further suggests that the selfie phenomenon signifies modern individuals’ move away from interacting with the strangers around them towards seeking social acceptance from online communities. See ‘The Selfie in the Age of Digital Recursion’.

<sup>17</sup> Many participants took pictures of their own bodies; however, these images were not made to display on their social network websites. As far as I am aware, only one photo was uploaded to the Internet by an auto-photographer herself because she was happy with the representation.

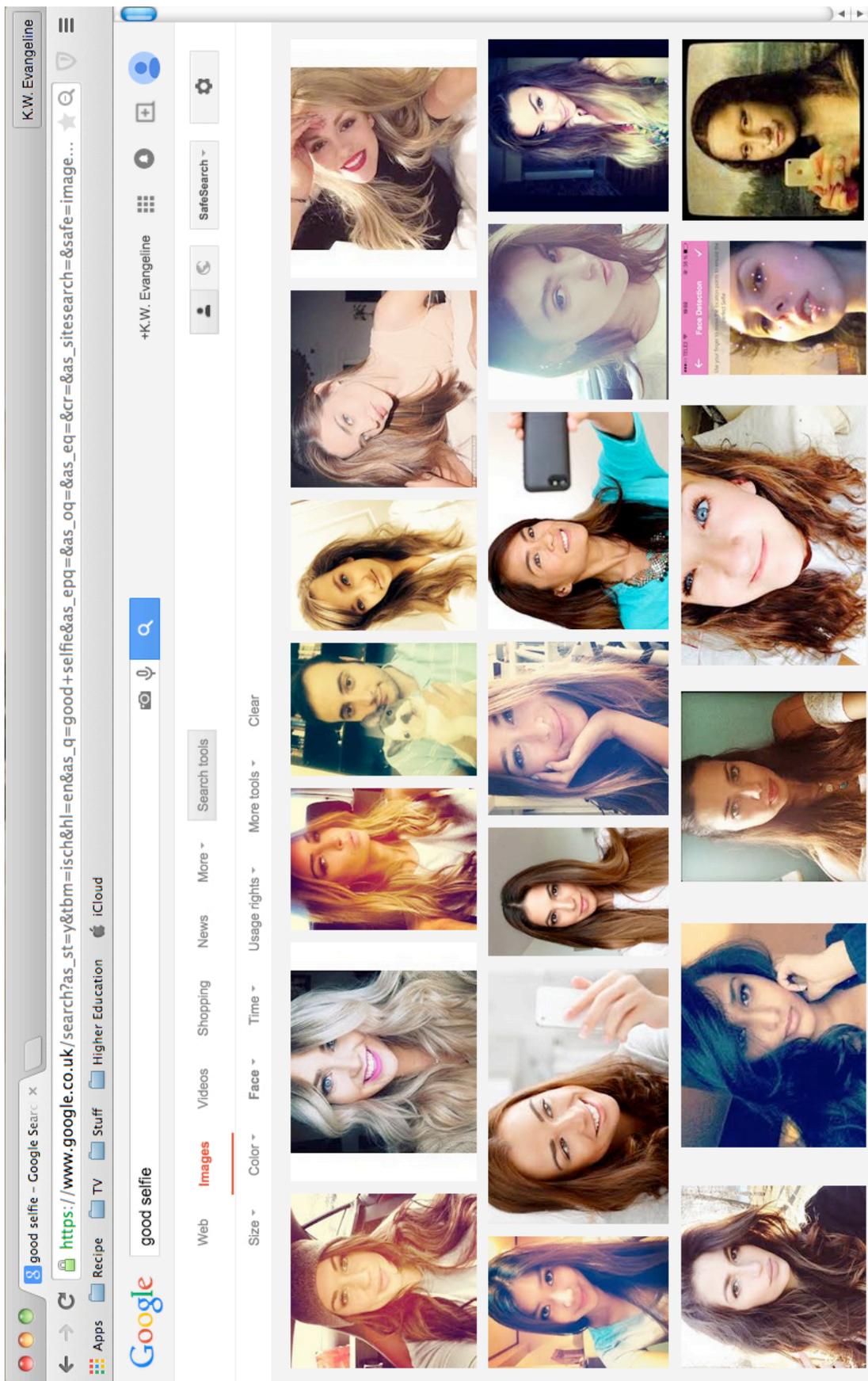


Figure 1.1 A screenshot of the first results of 'good selfie' on Google Search Engine (accessed: 18 Jan 2015)

As I intend to demonstrate, the core of this project is an examination of the complicated relationship between the personal and the cultural. My expression of sexual desire as a younger woman bore the hope that such action might challenge the heteronormative patriarchal culture and bring myself a sense of empowerment. On a more conceptual level, our personal understanding of desire is shaped by cultural materials, such as the languages we use, and this approach signifies that one's desire, as well as one's interpretation of desire, is malleable depending on the available materials one chooses to adopt. Because of this 'ambiguity' of desire, and because women's sexuality has long been suppressed and sidelined in favour of heterosexual men's pleasure, the task to reclaim 'women's desire' is particularly difficult. I start by examining several influential concepts of desire. In Chapter 2, I deal with three *webs* of theories that illuminate our understanding of human sexuality, particularly that of women. The first web encompasses popular discourses and social norms which shape the way we *define* desire. In the second web I focus on feminist and social theories to suggest that feminist debates on women's sexual liberation signify the struggle between the personal pursuit of sexual pleasure and the collective resistance to the sexualisation of women in Western societies. I further argue that a theory of feminist symbolic interactionism can best illuminate how my women participants *conceptualised* their own desire. Finally, in my third web, I discuss how feminist and queer theorisations of a 'fluid' desire inform my use of visual representation in this project.

Chapter 3 is concerned with methodological matters. The chapter is divided into two parts to attend to the critical contexts and my practice of my methodology. A simple definition of auto-photography is self-photography with self-analysis. By examining other auto-photographic projects, I consider what 'roles' a practitioner can play in different scenarios, particularly: can one become an activist by producing work that challenges dominant representations? How does one become a *participant* in research that facilitates auto-photographic methods? In this project, I adopt a combination of self-photography, journaling and semi-structured interviews to generate materials. I emphasise participants' active roles in creating and choosing the work they contributed to this research, and how they potentially reshaped the research agenda by directing me to ideas that were significant to them. This methodology prompts me to re-examine several important ethical issues: what is the relationship between the participants and me? In what ways do I engage my participants in the co-creation of knowledge? To what extent can a researcher claim that

her methodology ‘empowers’ participants? (And what does ‘empower’ mean?) Finally, who can decide which photographs to publish, and in what contexts?

Participants’ materials demonstrate very diverse ways of conceptualising desire. In Chapter 4, I focus on the *cultural* aspects that are influential in participants’ sexual practices – particularly in terms of how they interpret and negotiate desire through the use of prevailing cultural materials. I identified four cultural sites: Christianity, ethnic background, popular culture and feminist ideas. Even though these cultural sites are powerful, participants’ narratives indicate the complex interactions in which they engaged while interpreting conventions by reflecting on their experiences. In Chapter 5, I discuss four preconditions for participants’ *personal* sexual feelings: perception of body image, sensations, fantasy, and intimate relationships. These preconditions reveal that, for participants, desire is an embodied experience that is shaped and negotiated in social interaction; more importantly, these women focused on generating their own subjective sexual feelings rather than pleasing others – which is generally perceived as what women do.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I place a great deal of emphasis on analysing participants’ ‘words’ – interview transcripts and journals – whereas in Chapter 6 I turn to reading their photographs. As I had not acquired an established system of visual analytical practice, I experimented with a mixed method in which I integrated techniques from discourse analysis, social semiotics and narrative analysis to explore the rich meanings embedded in each photo. I observed that participants actively made use of cultural materials to compose their images of desire, and although some images contain visual cues resembling those of popular cultural representations of ‘sexy’ female bodies, every photo is unique in itself in communicating the subtle nuances of participants’ sexualities. Furthermore, a few photographs represent women’s desire in ways that are not seen in popular media. An in-depth reading shows that participants manipulate their images to demonstrate what they want sexually. As a result, auto-photography illuminates the multiplicity of desire; it also signifies the ways in which participants mobilise their cultural knowledge – such as photographic conventions, or the use of accessories – to create their own images.

Finally, in the last Chapter, I provide a summary of this thesis, and I discuss the challenges and future development in my research. In particular, I examine the influences of popular culture, the strong sense of control in the participants' narratives, different ways of thinking about *embodiment*, and how auto-photography can be empowering – for whom, and in what contexts?

I am aware that the structure of my analytical chapters is rather 'unconventional' – many projects that deal with visual materials would discuss the researcher's reading first, then examine their research subjects' comments on those images – and perhaps also discuss the researcher's interpretation of the images. I structured my thesis differently as I intended to engage participants' ideas in the co-creation of knowledge<sup>18</sup>; hence, I put their understanding, as well as the contexts of the photographs – embedded in their journals and interview transcripts – before my reading. However, this practice does not mean that I did not read participants' words critically; rather, I endeavoured to find a balance between representing their sexuality as they experienced it, and exploring other meanings embedded in their interpretation.

When I first started this project, a friend told me, 'I think you will feel very liberated after you finish this project.' But then, rather than having specific research questions in mind, I simply let participants lead me to explore the sites of desire that prevail in their materials. Will I feel liberated? Perhaps, as Dr. Trev Broughton said in my very first Thesis Advisory Panel meeting, 'the proof of the pudding...'

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<sup>18</sup> I discuss this in my methodology in Chapter 3.

## Chapter 2

### Mapping Desire:

#### Negotiating the Personal and the Cultural in Theories of Sexuality

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The study of sexuality has long been a subject of inquiry across many academic disciplines. Since Freud's ambitious psychoanalytical theorisation of human sexuality, erotic practices and desires have been investigated in fields such as psychology, medicine, sociology, education, art, and gender studies – just to name a few. This extensive and diverse research is indeed fascinating. However, my interest – deriving from my lived experience and connection with feminism – lies in the feminist analysis of *women's* sexuality: how feminists engage in conversations with other theories of sexuality, and how (women's) sexuality has been mobilised for political activism. Although there already exists abundant feminist research on sexuality, my project particularly encourages women not only to share their stories, but also to create representations of their desire. This participatory research works with women to investigate the ways in which *they* conceptualise desire, exploring what they tell about their sexuality, both directly and implicitly.

My women participants' interpretations of desire are multilayered, and significantly shaped by their gender identities and their lived experience in culture. In this project, I specifically explore the complex relationship between individual subjectivities and the cultural constructions within which self-identified women participants negotiate their personal sexual interests by using feminist ideas and social identities. The negotiation between the personal and the cultural is not a new concept in feminist debates on sexuality; however, it is quite often sidelined or constructed as a dichotomy in order to highlight other arguments, such as using *women* as a collective identity to battle against institutionalised heterosexuality in second-wave movements, which I will discuss in a later section<sup>19</sup>. To examine how women interpret their desire, including the ways in which they choose, justify and balance personal sexualities that are embedded in a specific cultural context, I use the metaphor of 'webs' to discuss theoretical discourses that shape participants' and my understanding of sexuality. 'Webs' suggest that there are no priorities or hierarchies but

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<sup>19</sup> See 'Sexuality – at the Heart of Feminist Debates', Chapter 2.

rather complex intersections of languages, values, interactions and choices that are woven together in the construction of sexuality. These webs can be partially unravelled and rewoven, and signify potential contradictions that become entangled in our lived experiences.

In this chapter, I explore three webs of analysis that are significant to my project: firstly, popular discourses and social norms which have found their way into the *meaning* of desire, the meaning that we constantly reconstruct and negotiate. These theories and values can sometimes create a ‘false positive’ understanding of desire, such as the psychoanalytical proposition of an innate and universal drive, or the Confucian-inflicted patriarchal norms which construct women’s sexuality as serving men and procreation. The second web is the *conceptualisation* of women’s desire, which – as the participants’ rich and diverse materials demonstrate – can be better elucidated by a feminist symbolic interactionist theory than by other existing theories of human sexuality. The concepts of sexual scripts and embodiment, in particular, locate women’s subjective sexual experience within a cultural context. This illuminates how a woman negotiates and justifies her personal sexuality within the confines of social expectations. The third web encompasses the academic discussions of sexuality that inform my interpretation of desire and ways of ‘treating’ participants’ materials – particularly their photographs. This includes queer theory and feminist explorations of fluid, multiple sexualities. The idea of webs is helpful for indicating the relations between concepts which inform my theoretical understanding of sexuality; in the following sections, I will focus on theories of sexuality rather than the ‘webs’ themselves.

I acknowledge that the theories I employ can be contradictory in some respects. On one hand, I am arguing that participants’ conceptualisations of desire are embedded in their gender identity; on the other hand, I also use queer theory – which advocates the destabilisation of identities – to explore the fluidity of sexuality. However, the recognition of this tension is meaningful and necessary. Plummer (2005) demonstrates that, despite the differences between critical humanism and queer theory – the former focusing on subjectivity, meaning and experience, and the latter on representations – they both share the view that researchers should be critically self-aware, a belief in the value of human rights, and a recognition of the ‘contradictory messiness of social life’. Acknowledging

these tensions indicates that the researcher is critically self-reflexive, and honest about the limitations of theory in interpreting human experience, which is fluid and multiple. Additionally, the materials I analyse include participants' narratives of their experience as well as the representations they create; hence, the use of feminist symbolic interactionism and queer theory should be helpful in exploring diverse meanings of desire.

Occasionally, I use the terms 'desire' and 'sexuality' interchangeably. Nevertheless, the questions need to be asked: what is 'desire', and what is its relationship to sexuality? Jackson and Scott (1996, 2010b) suggest that sexuality incorporates aspects that are erotically important, including identities, *desires* and practices. Desire is one aspect of sexuality (Vasvári 2006; Weeks 2011) that has been interpreted as an emotion or sensation (Cixous 1976) and associated with imagination and fantasy (Hollibaugh 1984). Desire does not equate to sexuality, nor does it dictate a person's sexual orientation or practice. However, analytically, I find it difficult to completely separate desire from sexuality. This is because desire is experienced, and hence interpreted, as an integral part of sexuality: when participants talk about desire, some of them also describe their relationship with another gendered person and their sexual preferences. Hence, the conceptualisation of desire cannot totally escape individuals' identification or practices. Additionally, many theories of sexuality are applicable to the investigation of desire, but they do not necessarily distinguish one from the other. Since desire and sexuality are interlinked and empirically inseparable, I cannot leave out an extensive literature of sexuality that illuminates participants' conceptualisations of desire.

### **From Freud to Foucault: a Move Towards the Cultural Construction of Desire**

At a surface level, many people might regard sexual desire as a biological impulse, describing it as animalistic and an urge which prompts one to engage in sexual acts. This association indicates that desire has been perceived as an innate force embedded in human nature. The temptation to define sexual desire as an intrinsic compulsion – a *drive* – is powerful. This is because biological essentialism, particularly in Western societies, has enjoyed a privileged position in theorising human sexuality (Tiefer 1995); furthermore, psychoanalysis, inheriting the idea of desire as an inner drive, has also been influential in popular discourses of sexuality. I start my discussion with Freud's and Lacan's psychoanalytical theories, not because they are 'accurate', nor because they resonate with

individuals' lived experience. Rather, using Foucault's concept of discursive power, I suggest that, as a powerful theory, one of the first established theories of human sexuality, psychoanalysis has been moderated and slipped into popular discourses to construct a sense of how desire *should* be interpreted, as well as seemingly 'explaining' how childhood sexual development is crucial for the formation of individual subjectivity.

Sigmund Freud started to produce a psychoanalytical theory in the early 1890s. He argues that the development of human sexuality begins in childhood, and the process is different for boys and girls. According to Freud (1925), infants are bisexual, and their primary sexual object is their mother. However, when a boy sees a girl's lack of penis, he fears that he will be castrated, as a punishment, by his father for desiring his mother. As a result, the boy represses his desire for his mother, turns to identify with the powerful father and his masculinity, and retains his desire for women. A young girl, on the other hand, notices her lack of penis and blames it on her mother. Thus, she diverts her object of desire to the father figure, meanwhile intending to mimic her mother in order to replace her. Since the girl's desire for a penis can never be satisfied, she can only displace it with the desire to bear a child. Freud asserts that, during puberty, boys' libido will lead to active sexuality; whereas girls will experience a repression of their libido, leading them to adopt a passive, feminine sexuality<sup>20</sup>.

Freud's theory is highly problematic, and it reproduces preconceived ideas of gender roles and gender as binary. Firstly, his theory is based on a middle-class nuclear family unit in which the mother is the main caretaker. This type of family formation is culturally and historically specific. Hence, Freud's psychoanalysis – which claims to theorise human sexuality – might not be applicable to shifting cultural and historical contexts. Secondly, Freud assumes that young children will have the knowledge of – if not visual access to – the genitals of both male and female. What happens if this assumption is untrue to one's lived experience? Furthermore, Freud's theory is phallogentric: children's sexual development is based on either the possession or the lack of a penis. Why should penises, rather than vaginas or wombs<sup>21</sup>, be so prominent in this theory? Why should women be

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<sup>20</sup> Some psychoanalytical ideas of desire have been adopted by queer theorists such as Judith Butler, as I will briefly mention in the later section 'Queer Theory'.

<sup>21</sup> Countering Freud's 'penis-envy', German psychologist Karen Horney proposed the idea of 'womb-envy' (see, for instance, Miletic 2002), in which men are anxious about women's biological capacity and their role of nurturing.

defined as passive and wanting children because of their physicality? Betty Friedan (1963) points out that Freud's theory is prejudicial to women because he sees a woman as (a penis) less than a man. Friedan suggests that the application of Freudian theory during the 1950s in the United States had a powerful impact on women's lives because it frames passive femininity as a natural result of women's desire, reducing a woman to her biological functions, and hence reinforcing women's domestic roles.

Lacan (1977) suggests that Freud's theory should be read symbolically rather than literally. He uses 'phallus' as a signifier of power and control in the *symbolic order* – a social world of language and culture, also known as the big Other. Lacan states that, when an infant is born, its desire spreads everywhere without specific direction. When it enters the *mirror stage* at 6 to 18 months of age, the child can perceive and differentiate itself from its mother in the mirror image. When the child sees itself in the mirror, it imagines *self* as a unity; however, this sense of unity is only imaginary because it comes from the other's point of view – just as I can only understand myself through other people's perceptions of me. At this stage, the child has not yet acquired femininity or masculinity because it has not learnt language. Once the child gains language, it splits away from the mother, enters the *symbolic order*, and starts to acquire gendered subjectivity.

Whereas a boy, in possession of a phallus, can identify with 'the father figure' – a signifier of the order, including laws, cultural values and virtues – a girl cannot and has to enter the symbolic order in a different relation. The father figure with whom a boy identifies is a symbol that has control over power and meaning, and he desires what the Other desires; however, the boy's identification is a misrecognition since he can never be the Other, and can never possess control over language and meaning. Lacan (1977) explains that, to enable a girl to be the phallus, she will reject parts of her femininity, such as by using masquerade, to cover up her lack (see Moi 2004). However, since a girl is not the Other, she 'expects to be desired and to be loved' (Lacan 1958, p.84). Following Lacan's theory, one's desire is the desire of the Other but is misrecognised to be one's own. Desire is constantly subject to deferral because it is a product of language, and the meaning of language cannot be controlled (Weedon 1987). Furthermore, desire is a lack because it can never be satisfied (see Jackson and Scott 2010b; Hewitson 2010), just as the child's unity with the mother has been lost and can never be recovered.

As Lacan's psychoanalysis emphasises that human beings only develop into sexed subjects within language and culture, it opens up the possibility of conceptualising sexuality as socially shaped. However, Lacan's assumption that desire pre-exists the symbolic order means that at least part of his theory is still based on biological essentialism. Furthermore, Jackson and Scott (2010b) argue that Lacan only uses 'language and culture' in general terms; hence, his theory cannot account for sexual variations in different social contexts. Additionally, Lacan's universalisation is still trapped in phallogentrism and a gender – or, as I would put it, 'sex' – dichotomy. Even though, since Freudian psychoanalysis, drive and society have been separated – that is, a distinction is made between nature and culture (Stein 1989; Epstein 1994) – Lacan does not differentiate between biological sex and social gender because, in his theory, gender is readily predetermined by sex: in a *natural* development, a female child will adopt passive femininity and turn to desiring men. The universalisation and essentialism in Lacan's conceptualisation make it impossible to discuss more diverse sexual identities and desires in local contexts. His idea of subjectivity as located in the unconscious also makes it impossible to recognise individual agency and reflexivity in sexual development.

Despite these questionable propositions, Freudian theories remain powerful and influential in our daily lived experience. Psychoanalysis is persuasive not because it makes sense, but because of its popularity in academic studies as well as in mass culture – particularly within parenting advice. For instance, the idea of children's pleasure zones – which shift from the oral to the anal, and later to the genitals – has slipped into a popular discourse of childhood development to explain adult behaviours. The child-rearing advice given by Benjamin Spock in his bestselling book *Baby and Child Care*<sup>22</sup> come from Freud's ideas about childhood development (Sullivan 1995). Spock advises that, rather than following a rigid schedule, feeding should depend on the infant's need and focus on creating a positive experience for the infant. Force feeding, at the oral stage, can make the infant defensive and suspicious towards people in adult life. Other parenting manuals warn mothers that their children's dissatisfaction at the oral stage may lead to a sense of insecurity and negative behaviours such as smoking, overeating and alcoholism<sup>23</sup>. These discourses are

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<sup>22</sup> First published in 1946, this book is still being sold in its latest, 9th, edition.

<sup>23</sup> In my understanding, this discourse seems less common now in Britain than in Taiwanese society. The discourse is popular in 'guidelines for mothers' in social media in Taiwan.

powerful because they are productive and they claim to be true under the guise of knowledge (Foucault 1977). As a result, I consider that my participants' interpretation of their sexual emotions as an urge comes from these biologically essentialist or psychoanalytical ideas that are so pervasive in popular discourse.

Unlike Lacan, who uses language on a general level, Foucault (1978) discusses the power of discourse in shaping people's understanding of sexuality in a Western context. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault asserts that the perception of sex being repressed in the Victorian era is a fiction. Talk about sex has always existed in the form of confessions, and throughout the nineteenth century sex was a major part of biological and medical research. Foucault argues that the 'repressive hypothesis' could hold up because, by claiming that 'sex is repressed', those who talked about sex placed themselves outside the reach of its power. That is, by criticising the repression of sex in the social order, they frame themselves as part of the process of transgression. The repressive hypothesis is yet another discourse that is pervasive because of its claim to contain the truth.

Foucault's perspective on the repressive hypothesis makes me think about my experiences of talking about desire in Taiwan, even though the social contexts of the two are different. When I was a university student in Taiwan, being able to share my desire in a culture that repressed women's expression and exploration of our sexuality felt like a liberating experience. Can Foucault be suggesting that my understanding of sexual repression in Taiwanese society is false – after all, discussions and representations of sex are not uncommon in the media – and that I only talk about desire in order to be transgressive and feel empowered? In fact, even though the discursive power that Foucault proposes is pervasive rather than structural (Foucault 1978), a discourse must carry authoritative weight to be influential. This authority seems to come from a more collective rather than a personal utterance. For example, Foucault explains that, in Western societies, confession has become one of the 'most highly valued techniques for producing truth' (p.59). This idea of confession does not imply that any individual person's truth-telling is important in itself; rather, it is the common practice of many people as part of a culture that makes it influential. Reflecting on my personal experience, I consider that it is my contact with feminist theories and existing popular discourses which made me *feel* that talking about my

sexuality was an empowering act. However, I am not sure whether my personal experience then contributed to a larger, collective attempt to challenge the social order.

Although Foucault explains how sexuality is constructed through discourse, he does not discuss individuals' agency and reflexivity in the discursive 'webs' (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 1993; Jackson and Scott 2010b) – that is, how a person might have negotiated their sexuality within diverse, competing discourses. For instance, Foucault suggests that *homosexuality* only becomes an available identification – one can only *be* homosexual – after the concept is produced within modern discourses of sexuality; before then, people only understood the acts. Foucault does not examine the ways in which individuals learn, evaluate, adopt or reject the 'knowledges' presented to them – and in this process, how individuals reflect on their emotions and interactive experiences to negotiate and reinterpret their sexuality.

Foucault not only ignores individuals' agency and self-reflexivity, he also avoids directly discussing the impact of gender in the shaping of sexuality. Ramazanoğlu and Holland (1993) argue that Foucault's theory suggesting that power is not structural but spreads everywhere in social relationships poses challenges for feminist scholars, particularly in the analysis of Western sexuality. Feminists are concerned with the extensive and stable power imbalance between men and women, and some – such as radical feminists – have identified this inequality as rooted in patriarchal and heteronormative structures. In this sense, Foucault's idea of dispersed and unstable power webs simply does not fit. However, as the 'structural' hypothesis offers little space for the gendered power imbalance to be overturned, some feminists started to seek a way to negotiate. For instance, in a study by Holland et al. (1994), they argue that since male control is 'constituted, reproduced and resisted' (p.35) on a personal level, it is only through the practice of resistance at a micro-level that young women can potentially destabilise male power (see also Sawicki 1991).

By locating sexuality in the premise of language and culture, Foucault suggests that it is unstable and changeable: sexuality is only stabilised through expert knowledge and becomes fixed in individuals through self-representation and therapy (Warner 2012). This poststructuralist view – even though Foucault never identified his work as poststructuralist – provides the grounds for queer theorists to analyse subjectivity, gender and desire.

## Queer Theory

Queer theory originates from notions of sexuality that destabilise sexual categories. Although its fundamental politics of rejecting identity categories does not seem compatible with either my participants' or my own lived experience, queer theory draws attention to the limitations of theorising sexuality within a gender dichotomy. By challenging given social identities, queer theorists provide a challenging yet inspiring insight into how sexual desire is multiple, unstable and even beyond comprehension. The queer assumption of fluid sexualities allows me to explore ways in which diverse meanings of desire can be delivered through participants' photographic representations; meanwhile, it is exactly this heterogeneity that makes it impossible to communicate what desire really *is*. As a result, participants and I mostly 'beat around the bush' to discuss preferences in sexual fantasies and acts, and the process by which desire *becomes*. The queer proposition of multiplicity also opens up sexuality to more possibilities, both on the individual level of exploration and the conceptual level of overturning normative theorisations of women's desire.

The queer movement started in the late 1980s in universities in North America. Diverging from lesbian and gay movements, activist groups such as ACT UP and Queer Nation used the term *queer* to mobilise people beyond sexual identities to act against normalisation and attend to AIDS issues (Stein and Plummer 1994; Gamson 1995; Warner 2012). The use of this term also functions to reclaim it from the connotation of sexual deviance directed against homosexuals prior to the 1990s. Indirectly related to queer activism, queer theory rejects normalised notions of stable sex, gender and sexuality; instead, it adopts the poststructuralist idea of unstable, fluid, multiple subjectivities (Davies 1990; De Lauretis 1991; Butler 1990 and 1993; Jagose 1996; Epstein 1994; Warner 2012) and suggests that there is no coherent selfhood. Viewed as a whole, queer politics is evocative of social transformation (Epstein 1994; Warner 2012); however, its effect cannot be anticipated because queer, by definition, is itself multiple, in constant formation and always under construction (Jagose 1996).

Teresa de Lauretis' contribution to a special issue of *Difference* in 1991 offers an insight into the importance of queer theory at the start of its development. She addresses two problems in gay and lesbian studies: the silencing of lesbianism and the invisibility of race. First, lesbianism is usually subsumed into male homosexuality as a 'sight variation' (p.vi),

such as when 'gay' is sometimes used as a shorthand for both male and female homosexuality. Likewise, the adoption of the term 'Uranian' – male homosexuals – in the title of the reader's guide *Uranian Worlds* suggests that it is centred on male homosexuality, even though the book discusses fiction about all sorts of sexualities, including bisexuality and those that are undefined. Other underrepresented stories include those of minority groups, such as the narratives of non-white homosexual men and women. Alongside these two issues, de Lauretis points out that individuals negotiate multiple identities within themselves and prioritise certain social aspects over others. Such examples demonstrate the risks of using gay and lesbian labels in identity politics. The categorisation inserts a false sense of unity, and it risks both ignoring the differences within a particular group and excluding those who fall outside of an identification from possible collective activism (Jagose 1996; Epstein 1994).

Ault's (1996) study with bisexual women also demonstrates the restraints that dichotomies of gender and sex pose to the interpretation of human sexuality. The concept of bisexuality is based on the homo/hetero-sexual binary system, which is defined by the gender relationship between a desiring subject and a desired object. The existing dichotomies over-simplify the complexity of sexuality, hence limiting the scope for investigating bi-women's diverse erotic emotions, identifications and practices. The normalised assumption that one's sexual desires, identities and practices should be coherent raises further difficulties for bisexual women in Ault's project. For instance, one of her interviewees struggled to define herself as bisexual because, even though she desired women, she had never had sex with one. Ault argues that the limits of language make it challenging for bi-women to use the term for transgressive purposes: when interviewees spoke of 'bisexual', they articulated it using the ideology readily attached to the term, such as describing their bisexuality as 'half and half' (p.317) – half heterosexual and half homosexual. To resolve this issue, Ault (1996) proposes that bi-women can adopt a 'queer cloaking mechanism' (p. 322) to declare themselves as critically non-heterosexual. After all, queer is about sexual multiplicity and the rejection of the polarisation constructed in binary language.

However, the take-up of queer is contradictory. After all, queer theory rejects social labels (Stein and Plummer 1994; Epstein 1994) and promotes a non-identity or anti-identity politics (Jagose 1996); that is, queer is a critique of identity rather than an identity itself.

Epstein (1994) argues that this contradiction comes from a division within queer politics itself that calls for people to subvert ‘popular notions of stable identities’, at the same time ‘fashioning a new queer identity with their own enforced boundaries’ (p.201). Ault (1996) herself also warns that an *identification* with queer constructs another binary: that of queer and non-queer, which polarises multi-sexual and mono-sexual, rendering the latter marginalised. Nowadays, it would appear that queer has become an identification as well as a fashion that is gradually shifting from the margin to the centre of social life in Western cultures.

Despite its contradictions, queer theory, with its criticism of gender norms, has inspired me to re-examine the possibility of using sexuality as a political tool in women’s liberation. In particular, Judith Butler’s contestation of the normalised coherence between sex, gender and sexuality and the concept of gender performativity (1990, 2004) lead me to think about my participants’ experience of desire and how it can be interpreted. Firstly, Butler (1990) questions the division between sex and gender<sup>24</sup>. In Butler’s analysis, both sex and gender are discursive constructions, and the feminist making of gender serves as an accomplice in shaping sex as natural, neutral and pre-discursive (p.7). She criticises the way in which, by constituting a normalised gender identity, feminists are also constructing a *normal* way of being a woman; furthermore, this false sense of ‘unity’ can exclude different experiences within the community, for instance second-wave feminisms have often been criticised for serving only white, middle-class women. Butler suggests that a stable and unified identity is not necessary for effective political action; instead, she argues that a fixed identity is exclusionary, and it forecloses the possible emergence of new identities.

Nevertheless, a stable identity still seems crucial for my *women* participants to interpret their sexuality. Butler (1990) argues that the correlation between sex, gender and sexuality must be stabilised in discourse for one’s identity to be intelligible. This *heterosexual coherence* (Butler 1990) – the heterosexualisation of desire – relies on the asymmetrical oppositions constituted within the dominant gender binary in order to make sense. In cases when the coherence between sex, gender and sexuality is disrupted, identities can become

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<sup>24</sup> The term gender was constructed to signify its cultural meaning – one’s identification – in order to differentiate itself from the ‘natural’ sex. The concept of gender has been used to destabilise biologically determinist claims that femininity and masculinity are predetermined by different bodily compositions. Since the second-wave, feminists have also been using women as a universalised gender category to mobilise female agents in its movements.

logically impossible, hence unintelligible. For instance, when a person possesses both ‘male’ and ‘female’ sexual organs, or no sexual organs, how can we define *the* sex, gender and sexuality? There are many discursive difficulties present, starting from the intelligibility of an identity that is not discursively constructed – I could barely get beyond the definition of *sex* – to finding an appropriate pronoun for this person. This supports Butler’s notion that sex is not pre-discursive but merely an effect of cultural construction. Butler considers this ambiguity and multiplicity of identities to be an opportunity for transgression, as heterosexual coherence is a regulatory fiction that can be destabilised by gender imitation, placing it in a different historical and cultural context, or through my previous questioning of the inadequacy of language. However, when I examine my participants’ narratives and sexuality, I find that their accounts follow a coherent gender-sexuality alignment<sup>25</sup>. Their identification with non-heterosexuality – including bisexual, pansexual and being in a same-sex relationship<sup>26</sup> – might be seen as a disruption of heterosexual coherence; however, their sexualities are better viewed as the products of a newer discourse of desire which is still built on the understanding of gender dichotomy, except that *pansexual* seeks to overlook gender.

Perhaps the slight flexibility in participants’ gender-sexuality relation can be illuminated by the *performativity of gender* (Butler 1990, 2004). Here I am considering particularly the complex relations between participants’ rather fixed identification as women, their comparatively variable sexualities, and the spectrum of the personal–cultural construction of desire. There are two aspects to gender performativity. Firstly, the performance of gender suggests that it can be imitated, such as drag putting together an image of ‘woman’ by creating a parody of the body. The fact that gender can be created through imitation indicates that sex and gender can be denaturalised by performance. Butler (1990) argues that sex/gender is ‘an imitation without an origin’ (p.138). Just as in psychoanalytical theory, where the identification of the Other is merely a misrecognition, gender parody demonstrates that the ‘original’ from which identity gender acquires its form is merely a copy.

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<sup>25</sup> Among 18 participants, 11 identified themselves as heterosexual (2 wrote ‘mostly’ heterosexual), 4 bisexual, 2 pansexual, and one in a same-sex relationship. See Appendix 2.

<sup>26</sup> Celeste prefers to describe herself as ‘currently in a same-sex relationship’ because she thinks her sexuality has changed over time. By doing so, Celeste rejects a fixed sexuality.

On the other hand, gender performativity suggests that gender is a doing, a continuous activity performed by individuals that cannot be dictated. The performativity of gender is not something automatic or mechanical; instead, it involves a certain improvisation that is practised within the constraint that one cannot claim to have ‘one’s own’ gender unless there are existing social norms that support and enable this claim (Butler 2004, p.7). This performativity can potentially be subversive of the arbitrary gender system; however, subversion cannot be achieved by one’s will alone. That is, rather than assuming an agent who acts upon desire and beliefs, Butler proposes that our agencies have already been organised and normalised, for instance, to perform gender in ways that are intelligible to other people (Warner 2012).

Butler’s concept of performativity provides a way for me to explore participants’ identities and their interpretations of desire. Participants’ self-identification as ‘woman’ can be seen as an effect of the normalised framework with which they are constituted as women. Participants constantly imitate and perform gender by working on their bodily images, and the process of repetitively doing gender reproduces and reconstitutes participants’ sense of gender. They thus experience relatively fixed gender identities, and make sense of their sexuality in accordance with the gender system: desiring one (hetero/homo-sexual), both (bisexual), or regardless of which gender (pansexual). As *gender performativity* suggests, sometimes the *doing* of identity requires improvisation; and it is perhaps the ‘slip’ here that allows a personal touch to be added to the cultural/discursive construction of sexuality. Butler’s view of agency as readily being organised by discourse suggests that we are normalised the moment we enter language. Hence, it seems that the only way to transgress is to recognise the fluidity of discourse and to reject the identification based upon it.

Another possible route to transformation, it would seem, is through *desire*. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler (2004) argues that desire is multiple, uncontrollable, and unable to be determined by gender or norms, even though, like identities, it is constituted within normative discourse. Butler adapts her idea of desire from a psychoanalytical interpretation that desire is ‘characterised by displacement’ (p.5); hence, it cannot be fully captured or regulated. Following this logic, desire becomes incomprehensible because of its fluidity – meaning that desire is beyond knowledge. This concept is inspiring for reading participants’ photographs of desire. On one hand, the pictures represent desire as strongly

associated with a participant's body image – the site where gender is performed – indicating that desire is shaped by participants' gender identification. On the other hand, none of the pictures can depict what desire really *is* – it is only through signs and interpretations that desire reveals itself to us.

Queer theory is indeed intellectually challenging and inspiring; however, I find it quite difficult to converse with queer theory within my participatory empirical research. Firstly, queer theorists primarily base their analysis in literature and philosophy rather than engaging in empirical studies. They are more concerned with theorising discursive power on a macro-level than understanding how cultural factors have an impact on individuals' lived experiences. Following on from this, even though queer theory suggests that subjectivity is inconsistent and changeable, its theorisation of agency as readily constructed by dominant discourses provides little room for investigating how an individual might experience herself as a sexual being, act upon her desire or negotiate sexual meanings. Additionally, since the queer focus is on the destabilisation and denaturalisation of identity, my women participants' strong feelings about their gender could be easily dismissed as a misconception rather than an aspect significant to their lives – although I entertain the idea that if I had recruited *queer*<sup>27</sup> participants, my conclusion could have been different. Besides, even though participants agree that their desire is changeable and variable, this fluidity is interpreted as culturally conditioned rather than operating in the unconscious. As a result, it is important to analyse participants' identification and desire within their cultural contexts. This calls for an approach that focuses on the micro-level of human sexuality: symbolic interactionism.

### **Symbolic Interactionism and Sexual Scripts**

Sedgwick (1990) boldly claims that social life in modern Western culture would be incomprehensible without a critical examination of the intersection of sexual meanings. This over-emphasis on sexuality in virtually all aspects of our lives reflects the sexualisation of modern societies, even though the term 'sexualisation' is much contested (see Attwood 2009; Gill 2009). My own study of women's sexual desire also indicates my

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<sup>27</sup> When I was recruiting participants, a friend who identified with queer politics said that my project – investigating *women's* sexual desire – was not for her. Hence, I am curious about how 'queer people' understand their desire in relation to their identity, although I am aware that considering queer as an identity contradicts its non-identity politics.

interest in how sexuality and gender identity are constituted and mutually influential in participants' social lives, but I would probably not go as far as claiming that *sexual* (only sexual?) subjectivity shapes our agency, including our capacity and our confidence to act in the world (Martin 1996). Nevertheless, an empirical investigation of sexual desire cannot overlook participants' subjective identification and experience as a sexual being, as Tolman (2002) points out, '[s]exual desire is at the heart of sexual subjectivity' (p.6). As my interest lies in women's everyday, subjective emotions and practices manifested in their conceptualisation of desire, I adopt a symbolic interactionist epistemology – particularly Gagnon and Simon's (2005) theory of sexual scripts – to analyse participants' materials.

Symbolic interactionism assumes that there is a 'group nature' to human life (Longmore 1998, p.50) – that is, humans are social beings. Its central idea is that humans *act* towards an object because of the meanings they ascribe to it. These meanings are derived from a person's interaction with other people and society, and they are reshaped and modified through interpretation (Blumer 1969). Symbolic interactionism proposes that human beings are agents who 'selectively acquire the skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, motives, norms, beliefs and language' of their society in order to constitute a unique self during the process of socialisation (Longmore 1998, p.53). Since human beings are capable of self-reflexivity, meanings can be negotiated and reinterpreted through our social interaction with and in the cultural world. This approach, applied to the study of sexuality, rejects the 'innate' desire suggested by biological determinism and psychoanalysis. Instead, symbolic interactionism argues that these knowledges of sexuality are social constructions which provide a way for us to make sense of our experiences and give us a feeling that they are the 'truth' (Tiefer 1987; Tolman 2002).

Following this *construction*, desire only exists when it is given meaning by individuals embedded in the social environment. Based on this line of argument, Gagnon and Simon (1973) use the metaphor of a script to explain the cultural impact on individuals' actions and the process of sense-making in sexual development. They propose three dimensions of scripting: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts (Simon and Gagnon 1986; Simon 1996). Cultural scenarios are 'instructional guides' for human conduct (Simon 1996, p.38). They provide cultural knowledge of sexuality as represented in mass media, popular culture, and common-sense knowledge (Jackson and Scott 2010b,

p.15). Sexual conduct is not fixed; the guidelines offered in cultural scripts are resources that are open to individual interpretation and improvisation. Interpersonal scripts are played out in everyday interaction, and they transform the social actors into scriptwriters (Simon 1996, p.39). Interacting individuals can co-construct the scripts as they interpret, negotiate and even experience conflict in daily interactions which are embedded in a wider cultural script. On a personal level, intrapsychic scripting engages internal self-reflexivity, occurring at the individual level of thoughts and interpretations. Individuals reflect upon cultural scenarios and interpersonal scripts in order to make sense of their experiences and feelings. Jackson and Scott (2010b) note that it is through the intrapsychic self that we ‘experience desire, construct fantasies and reflect upon sexual experience’ (p.16).

Sexual conduct is composed of meaning and sexual behaviour. Gagnon and Simon’s (1973) scripting theory provides a way to imagine how cultural meaning not only shapes, but importantly constructs, personal sexuality. They argue that a bodily response occurs when social meaning is given to a physical act. Through the process of learning from cultural resources and social interaction, individuals reflect on their feelings and experiences to interpret what sexual desire *is*. The entire process and the symbolic meaning given to physical actions are multi-layered and complicated. Hence, to re-examine participants’ narratives on ‘animalistic’ and ‘uncontrollable’ desire, I argue that they sometimes thought of desire in a biologically essentialist and psychoanalytical manner because they acquired these meanings from a cultural script that prevails in modern Western societies. Participants might have considered desire to be innate in their immediate response, yet they have constructed much more sophisticated narratives which conceptualise desire as *not* intuitive.

Jackson and Scott (2010a) argue that scripting theory allows researchers to explore the ‘everyday gendered doing of sexuality in interaction’ that has been ignored in queer theory (p.812). Even though queer theorists recognise that one’s sexuality is organised around gender identity, they regard this as a *problem* that needs to be resolved through destabilising gender (see Davies 1990). Symbolic interactionism, however, allows me to acknowledge the importance of *being a woman* for participants: the identification with being a woman has an impact on the ways in which participants act and how they conceptualise their desire within specific cultural contexts. Furthermore, examining

personal experiences and emotions brings to light the micro-politics between participants and those close to them, including friends, family members and sexual partners, who can potentially shape their sexuality. This micro-politics further reveals participants' struggles with cultural conventions and their negotiation with other individuals; however, participants were also able to find room to explore desire and experiment with different practices for their own pleasure. By reading participants' photographs, one can see that some of their representations might resemble each others'; however, these images are not *the same*. These *subtle differences within resemblance* are not coincidence; they are the result of personal interpretation, improvisation and play with the cultural shaping of desire.

The space that symbolic interactionism opens up for social agents indicates that sexuality is not a fixed or socially determined conduct, as some might believe. As discussed earlier, the meaning of an object that a social agent acts upon is constantly reinterpreted and negotiated in interaction, and the element of improvisation further adds to the changeability of sexuality. Additionally, human beings are mobile and dynamic; as they move across cultures and come into contact with various scripts, they evaluate, choose, and embody those that make more sense for their sexual subjectivity – just as I managed to talk about my desire in a more public sphere than other people did, and my doing becomes an experience of myself as a sexual being. On the *symbolic* level, one might also argue that the dramaturgical metaphor of a *script*, when acted out, would always require some form of improvisation; and every individual's experience of the same (sexual) drama would be different because of the complicated, multiple layers of symbolic meanings (Jackson and Scott 2010a). Tiefer (1987) argues that the act of using a metaphor can itself direct readers to explore sexual possibilities; that is, the changeability lies in the effect of this conceptualisation of sexual conduct, which motivates readers to interpret the meaning of sexuality themselves.

One pressing problem with Gagnon and Simon's scripting theory is the lack of the *body*, which is an inseparable part of the play of the erotic. Without the physicality of the body, individuals would not be able to experience desire or sexual interaction; and these sexual encounters require an embodied self to reflect upon and reinterpret. The concept of embodiment emphasises two theoretical grounds. Firstly, embodiment focuses on the ways in which the body is influenced by cultural ideas and expectations of gender. Individuals in

a given society might adopt a certain form of bodily image and, by so doing, reproduce the social conventions of the gendered body. This can be seen to be manifested in how participants were highly aware of gender embodiment and its impact – including how men’s and women’s desire are portrayed differently in popular media, and the ways in which women are (not) expected to express their sexual feelings<sup>28</sup>. Secondly, the idea of embodiment breaks down the dualism of mind and body. Body and mind are not two separate entities, and the body is not a medium which connects the mind to the outer world. Rather, the embodied self is capable of perception, reflection and interpretation of cultural scenarios, social interactions and intrapsychic scripts. The embodied self emphasises self-reflexivity and the location of the body in social context.

The embodied self is key to participants’ experiences and conceptualisations of desire. Plummer (2003) suggests that social constructionist theorists focus too much on the meaning of the sexual and too little on the sexed body (p.522). Jackson and Scott (2007) theorise sexual embodiment by reworking the three categories of body – the objectified, experiencing and experienced body – proposed by Gesa Lindemann (1997). In their theory, there are three levels of sexual embodiment: objectified, sensory, and sensate embodiment (Jackson and Scott 2007). Participants’ personal sexual experiences and emotions are strongly related to these three forms of embodiment, as I will further analyse in chapter 5 when I consider the ‘preconditions’ for desire. Objectified embodiment is the body that can be perceived in physical and social space; more importantly, it refers to one’s recognition that, as an object of desire, the body can be acted upon. Sensory embodiment is our ability to experience the social world through our senses – such as by seeing, touching and listening – hence to ‘perceive another’s embodiment as sexual’ (Jackson and Scott 2007, p. 99). Sensate embodiment enables us to feel emotions, pleasure and pain; also, to interpret certain bodily experiences as sexual.

Incorporating the three levels of embodiment into scripting theory, Jackson and Scott (2001, 2007) explain how cultural understanding becomes an embodied experience through social practice – through the example of women faking orgasm in heterosexual sex. A woman, attending to her male partner’s emotional needs, might perform orgasm

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<sup>28</sup> Participants’ awareness of gender differences in sexuality arises from their understanding of feminist ideas. At least 7 out of 18 participants have, or at the time of participation were doing, a degree in gender and women’s studies. All participants have studied in higher education and have been in contact with feminist ideas.

according to the available cultural scripts of female sexual climax. This performance may continue whether she is actually experiencing pleasure or faking it. She learns from the cultural representation what sexual pleasure is supposed to be like, and she looks for those cues in her sexual interaction. Finally, she learns to define those cues as sexual pleasure. The three levels of embodiment inform the learning process of sexual pleasure. Similar learning processes can be applied to defining desire. The development of my participants' sexual understanding of desire is affected by cultural representations, from commercials and films to erotica and pornography. Once participants learn the cues, they might turn to their relationship to search for similar cues of desire. When certain cues of desire are not practically achievable in interpersonal scripting, participants might use their imaginations and experiment with their own intrapsychic script, such as using fantasies.

Desire is not fixed, nor is it free floating. Diverse, co-existing cultural scripts continuously construct and reconstruct our embodied self, meaning that our experiences and interpretations of desire are constantly being reshaped. However, since scripts and the embodied self are both embedded in social contexts, any change within intrapsychic and interpersonal scenarios will have been drawn from available cultural resources. Thus far, all the theories I have discussed are Western conceptualisations of Western – if not claimed as *universal* – sexualities. However, since there are four participants – plus myself – who have cultural connections with East Asian countries<sup>29</sup>, it is important to examine the cultural scenarios – ideologies, norms, attitudes, representations, and even sexual theories – that are influential in constituting women's sexualities in East Asian countries. Through the exploration of *East Asian sexualities*, I also revisit the theory of embodied sexual scripts to explore 'sexuality in transit'.

### **'East Asian' Sexualities**

'East Asian sexualities' constitute neither a discipline nor a theory, but are a generalisation referring to any study of sexualities located in 'East Asian' countries. I use this section to discuss the predominant thoughts and cultural norms that constitute women's sexuality in 'East Asian' countries, with a particular focus on Taiwan and China. The term 'East Asian

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<sup>29</sup> My nationality is Taiwanese. Odinsleep is Taiwanese; one of Alexia's parents is from China; Steel Vagina's parents are Chinese; and Pumpkin is Chinese. For participants' details, refer to List of Participants (Appendix 2).

sexualities' is highly problematic, yet it has been so commonly used in academic research that when I first thought about addressing the cultural constitution of sexuality in China and in Taiwan, this is the term that immediately came to mind: I thought, 'I have to write a section on East Asian sexualities'. To start with, the definition of 'East Asia' is ambiguous – even though it refers to a geographically and geopolitically designated area which includes China and countries near its east coast, such as Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan<sup>30</sup>; North Korea is quite often left out – perhaps because it is impossible to conduct 'Westernised' research or to discuss human rights under its regime – from this academic area of study. Secondly, even though historically and culturally the aforementioned countries have close relationships with one another, the umbrella term oversimplifies the diversity and conflicts between them, as though 'East Asia' is a homogeneous zone. More importantly, the use of 'East Asian sexualities' reproduces otherness, suggesting that there is an area of study that has to be named because it is outside the normative framework of Western sexuality research.

Nevertheless, since the term 'East Asian sexualities' has been so prominently used to address research on sexuality that encompasses cultural and social lives in the area, the term is sometimes helpful for understanding the values and norms that are more or less shared and mutually influential amongst these countries. By using 'East Asian sexuality' [in scare quotes], I hope to address the ambiguity and the problematic simplification of the term while I attend to the cultural scripts – particularly constituted around Confucianism-inflicted patriarchal culture – which shape the understanding and construction of women's desire.

There are several cultural and religious traditions in 'East Asia', such as Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, of which Confucianism is the most influential in constituting gender relations (Taga 2005). In China, before the Communist government, Confucianism was the dominant system of values that governed people's thoughts and practices; and in Taiwan, literature around this line of thinking is part of the core materials in obligatory education. Its influence is extensive. One of the key components of Confucianism is its focus on collective rather than individual welfare; hence, within Confucian ethics, an

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<sup>30</sup> To avoid confusion and for ease of reading, I use the names China and Taiwan rather than People's Republic of China (China) and Republic of China (Taiwan); likewise, I also choose to use South Korea (Republic of Korea) and North Korea (People's Republic of Korea).

individual's personal decisions and actions should be based on, and contribute to, the interests of society: it is one's *responsibility* to serve the whole. One of the key ways to achieve this is for everyone to stay in their role and perform accordingly. One can see why this philosophy is popular among the ruling class: it strengthens the hierarchies in favour of those people who are already privileged and in power, amongst them the unequal relationship between men and women.

According to Confucian philosophy, a woman's virtue lies in her ignorance and obedience to men (Mao 2012; Sechiyama 2013). In *The Analects*, the only recorded quote in which Confucius addressed women<sup>31</sup>, he compared them to 'uneducated people' or 'morally inferior men' (Mao 2012)<sup>32</sup>. In Confucianism, public space is occupied by men; whereas a woman's role is in the domestic sphere, primarily serving the males in the family – her father, and after marriage, her husband and son. Patrilineal tradition and the Confucian attitude towards gender reinforce a woman's inferior position in society. A woman's sexuality only serves the purpose of producing a male child to carry on her husband's family lineage (only a boy can do this, as a girl will grow up and marry *into her husband's family*); that is, her sexuality is constituted for procreation within marriage. Even when the communist regime in China denounced Confucianism along with other traditions and proposed equality between men and women for both to join the labour force, women were still largely portrayed as dependants (Jackson, Liu and Woo 2008). Although this rather misogynist Confucian attitude is being challenged in modern East Asian countries nowadays, it is still influential in shaping people's gender identity and sexual subjectivity.

In his research on 'East Asian' – Chinese and Japanese – masculinities, Taga (2005) defines modernisation as the dramatic social changes under the influence of Western culture and politics that began during the mid-19th century. Taga argues that, rather than bringing gender equality, modernisation reinforced gender divisions and hierarchy in Japan and China. In the context of Japan, the Meiji government enforced the household *ie*, an exclusive patrilineal family system, during the 1890s in order to construct a modern

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<sup>31</sup> From *The Analects of Confucius*: 「唯女子與小人為難養也，近之則不遜，遠之則怨。」 Confucius said, 'Women and the uneducated people are most difficult to deal with. When you are familiar with them, they become cheeky, and when you ignore them, they resent it' (Translated by Lin Yutang, n.d.).

<sup>32</sup> There are different interpretations for the term 小人 [xiaoxǐ ren]. Its literal meaning is 'little (小) person (人)'. In this context, the term 'little' carries a demeaning tone.

nation-state (Ueno 2009)<sup>33</sup>. During this period, the ideology of the ‘good wife, wise mother’ also emerged – and later spread to China and Korea – to emphasise women’s domestic responsibilities in helping to strengthen the country (Sechiyama 2013). Even though the virtue of the ‘ignorant woman’ in pre-modern Confucian ideology was replaced by the ‘capable woman,’ women’s social status remained lower than men’s. As a result, one may conclude that the norm of patriarchal households and the gender vision between public and private spheres were reinforced during modernisation in Japan.

However, this conclusion does not suggest that women and men had an equal status in pre-modern Japan. Taga (2005) claimed that, before modernisation, women were considered equally as important as men under the Japanese nationalist ideology that ‘women also contribute to the nation through the production of high-quality children’ (p.131). I disagree with Taga in the sense that defining women’s equal position based on the premise of reproductive ability strips women of their subjectivities, not to mention that the deployment of this discourse once again constrains women’s sexuality within procreation. While one may argue that modernisation institutionalised gender inequality in Japan, it nevertheless also brought in different norms and values from the Western world that reshaped local sexualities.

With the development of global capitalism and the use of communication technologies, women in ‘East Asia’ are provided with multiple cultural scripts which allow them access to Western-initiated values such as individualism and feminism. These scripts offer women possible ways of reconstituting their gender and sexual subjectivities. I recall the first time I saw the Spice Girls on TV when I was twelve years old. At that time, many boy bands from the United States and the UK were popular in Taiwan. The appearance of five energetic young women with their own distinct *personalities* (packaged for sale, of course) was not only refreshing but also inspiring. As I turned my attention to their songs, the lyrics of *2 Become 1* – at first ambiguous because of my lack of sexual knowledge and limited comprehension of English – seemed to me to be a representation of a Western ‘openness’ within which women could express their desire and initiate sex without any negative connotations (I mean, look at their glamorous styles!). My perception of the

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<sup>33</sup> According to Ueno (2009), before the Meiji era, only about 10% of the Japanese population – the warrior class and their families – followed the patrilineal family system; 90% of the population had diverse family structures.

sexual ‘openness’ of Western culture was nevertheless a misconception constructed by popular media – ranging from Hollywood films to music videos. However, my experience is an example of how my attitude towards women’s sexuality changed as I picked up this particular script. My stance on women’s freedom of sexual expression was reaffirmed when I came into contact with liberal feminism at university; hence I am *able* and happy both to speak about my own experiences and to conduct research on women’s sexual desire now.

Referring to Gagnon and Simon’s dramaturgical metaphor: even if individuals are presented with the same script, it is likely that everyone will experience the sexual drama differently. Even though extensive representations of women as autonomous sexual subjects exist, they are not necessarily appreciated or adopted by ‘East Asian’ agents. In fact, Jackson et al. (2008) suggest that, since feminist sexual liberation movements attack the central value of Confucian traditions, they are usually seen as ‘unwelcome Western imports’ (p.23). Apart from media representations, social changes – such as giving women equal legal rights to education and employment – can also give rise to women’s autonomy, which then opens up the opportunity for their sexual subjectivities to be reconfigured. Unfortunately, women in East Asia are still conditioned by patriarchal values and practices; hence, it is difficult for them to attain sexual autonomy, particularly when their sexuality falls outside the heterosexual norms. Additionally, there are always competing scripts which both reflect and reproduce dominant attitudes towards gendered sexuality. Chan’s (2008) study of Hong Kong women’s sexualities indicates that, although local TV media may broadcast explicit materials against the background of a sexually conservative society, they usually represent women as providing services for men’s desire and pleasure rather than women being sexual subjects.

Still, some researchers remain optimistic about the ongoing input of multiple scripts and the potential for ‘East Asian’ women to reconstitute around a more positive sexual self. Ho (2003) argues that young women in Taiwan are using social tools to express and reshape their sexualities. She proposes that the pop star Vivian Hsu’s photo album *Venus*, produced in 1996, provides visual material for teenage girls to create a type of ‘innocent yet sexy’ image of themselves which is widely popular and accepted in Taiwan (p.326). Even though one can argue that the production of these young women’s images is an indication of

sexual exploration and expression, I ask: why is this combination of innocence and sexiness so prevalent, and whom does it serve? One possible answer can be found in Chen Mei-Hua's (2008) study of female sexual workers' experiences in Taiwan. She argues that women sexual workers have to *perform* a type of embodied femininity in which they represent themselves as not 'real whores' – prostitutes who are sexually inexperienced – in order to turn on their male clients. This is because these clients tend to eroticise innocent girls, and they enjoy being in a knowledgeable – hence dominant – role to teach young women 'how to do it'. Indeed, the representation of an 'innocent sexy girl' caters to heterosexual Taiwanese men's desire; however, I wonder if this successful sexual performance can symbolically destabilise the cultural imagination of a 'passive, innocent' woman – after all, it is just a show that she puts on.

Finally, women's sexual subjectivities can be reconstituted as they move across national borders, both literally and metaphorically. In her study of women migrant workers in Taiwan, Lan (2008) suggests that migrant women negotiate with constraints in various social settings, thus their sexual conduct is situational (p.48). In her PhD thesis, Juhyun Woo (2007) reflects on her personal journey towards finding a language to comprehend her sexual identity. Coming from a South Korean background, Woo could only understand homosexuality as a 'cultural difference' in the Western world because heterosexuals were the *only* visible people in South Korea. When she first studied in the UK as an international student in 1995, she did not know how to describe her intimate relationship with a woman without using unintelligible metaphors, even though she had started reading coming-out stories in Britain to search for something that could help define her own experiences. After she moved back to South Korea, the only available method to 'be a lesbian' for her was to live a double life: with her family, old friends and colleagues, she was Juhyun; and in the lesbian community she inhabited, she was Parang. Her journey of negotiating her two identities continued, and in 2003 she learnt about 'sexual citizenship,' a Western concept that allowed her to *incorporate* Parang as part of Juhyun; that is, rather than defining Parang as a sexual other, she could interpret herself as a sexual citizen.

From my participants' materials and my own experience, I recognise that moving from one country to another – in my study, from 'East Asia' to the 'West' – requires an individual to learn, and to negotiate with local scripts in order to perform what is culturally acceptable

and personally preferable; hence, one's sexuality is in transit as the social agent moves on. I personally find it more comfortable to talk about my sexuality – and to conduct research on women's sexual desire – in the UK than in Taiwan. Additionally, one participant acknowledges that both her sexual practice and her understanding of sexuality have changed since she moved from China to the UK. Similar negotiations and fluidity can be observed in participants whose parents were the ones to embody that cross-national movement. Born and raised in the UK, one participant has ideas of desire that she is willing to share with me but which need to be kept completely confidential from her parents. This act of being a 'double agent' is not unfamiliar to many participants, who also shift to another (sexual) 'identity' when they are with different people in different social settings. This performance takes practice and it is an important skill for participants to learn in order to manage their micro-politics. But what role does this micro-politics play in a broader feminist battle against patriarchal norms and within feminist debates?

### **Sexuality – at the Heart of Feminist Debates**

A research project focusing on women's sexuality cannot ignore the feminist debates and theorisations around this subject. On one hand, feminists have long been concerned with how women's sexuality is subordinated to men's in patriarchal societies. On the other hand, many feminist studies on sexuality focus on women's lived experience and aim to overturn the social inequality constructed around gender. The feminist debates that began during the second-wave movement<sup>34</sup> brought up the political necessity of rejecting heterosexuality in order to deconstruct patriarchal norms; meanwhile, some feminists propose versions of sexual liberation as a way to reclaim women's subjectivity and equal rights. These debates, as I discuss in this section, indicate the dilemma of *choosing* between women's collective endeavour to battle against institutionalised heterosexuality and individual women's pursuit of reclaiming desire and pleasure.

The heated debates between feminists on the subjects of sexual liberation, pornography and sex work are commonly believed to have started during the 1970s as part of second-wave feminist movements in the United States. However, the feminist concern about

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<sup>34</sup> As part of the first-wave feminist movement, sexual purity was advocated to resist men's sexual domination and exploitation of women. Sexual purity emphasises the abolition of prostitution and demands equal morality from men and women.

women's sexuality in relation to that of men's had already revealed itself in the nineteenth century, when feminists proposed using 'asexuality' to challenge male sexual privileges (Vance 1984). In fact, sex has long been regarded as a possible political tool. I am immediately reminded of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, a Greek comedy that was originally produced in 411 BCE which depicts women using a collective sex strike as a way of putting an end to a war initiated and fought by their husbands and lovers. From the late 1970s, radical feminists, who were critical of male-dominated heterosexuality, such as MacKinnon (1982, 1989) suggested that (hetero) sex in patriarchal societies *is* the male pursuit of control over women, hence sex cannot be liberating for women. To stand against the institutionalised heterosexual norms and patriarchal control over women, Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon dedicated themselves to calling for the censorship of pornography, as they argued that the whole pornographic industry is based on the exploitation of women, and its products reduce women to sexual objects. On the other hand, sex-positive feminists such as Nina Hartley – who works in the pornographic industry herself – Amber L. Hollibaugh and Josephine Ho argue that sexual freedom is essential to women's liberation and that, by pursuing sexual freedom, women can disrupt the gender norms and develop a sense of sexual agency.

These two irreconcilable views on what women should do with their sexualities, I argue, are based on their fundamental epistemological differences in tackling gender inequality. On one hand, radical feminists target heteronormativity as an *institution*, proposing that women need to act as a *whole* – presumed as a homogeneous category, or a political collective – to reject male oppression. However, their assertion that all women are victims of male perpetrators is unwelcome to many people because of its hostility towards *all men*, many of whom would be women's family and friends who also hold gender equality dear to their hearts. This assertion also assumes an aggressive male sexuality, reproducing a sense of female passivity in which women are 'fallen victims'. In her study of school education and teenage girls' sexuality in the United States, Michelle Fine (1988) argues that the rhetoric of a victimised female sexuality can prevent young women from developing sexual subjectivities and responsibilities; as a result, these teenage girls are exposed to dangers such as unwanted pregnancies and experiences of sexual victimisation which, in turn, make them more vulnerable.

On the other hand, the sex-positive feminist approach relies on individual women to express their sexual desire, obtain sexual knowledge, and put their fantasies into practice in order to confront the patriarchal order that silences women's sexuality. It is reliant on the individual's endeavour to reconstitute women's sexual subjectivity and to renegotiate the sexual relationship between men and women, in order for women's autonomy and an equal gender relationship to be possible. As Dimen (1984) argues, the creation and discovery of one's own sexual pleasure is very much an individual journey, and it is a result of both personal desire and cultural forces. With the aim of sexual autonomy, Hollibaugh (1981) suggests that feminists should encourage women to explore their sexualities. She points out that the problem of radical feminism is that, by claiming pornography and BDSM fantasies as violence against women, these feminists are saying that these various desires are 'imposed upon' women, ignoring the fact that women can, and do, explore their sexualities. Furthermore, radical feminist criticisms themselves become moral judgements that regulate women's sexuality in a manner reminiscent of patriarchal norms. This forces women to face a double dilemma: either they return to conformity with heteronormativity and silence their desires, or they are judged by feminists for being open about their desires and fantasies (Hollibaugh 1984).

*Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* edited by Vance (1984) is an iconic collection of writings which represent the feminist struggle to negotiate between the pursuit of sexual agency and the continuous battle with the patriarchal structures within which women act. Vance's introduction to the book, as I read it, is an exploration of ideas such as Foucault's discursive power, a symbolic interactionist approach to sexuality, and a trait of queer theory. In Vance's narrative, 'woman' is a taken-for-granted identity that is fixed. She argues that, even though some might regard sexuality as organised and polarised in accordance with gender dichotomy, it is actually dynamic and unsettling. As it is constituted through discourse and meaning, *sexuality* – one's identity, desire, erotic practices and as a concept itself – changes when it is located in a different cultural and historical context where the local discursive framework would reshape the meaning of sexuality as well as the knowledge constructed around it. As such, sexuality is reconstituted every time it is theorised – by Vance's work or in my project – and experienced by individuals. Thus, this is a further argument that one should understand sexuality as being shaped both within social webs/environments and in personal life. Vance

further proposes that women are agents who embody diverse interpretive frameworks; hence, they are capable of producing various sexual meanings. Since there are so many possibilities for interpreting sexuality, its meaning must be multiple, ever-changing and hence impossible to regulate.

In her article, Vance (1984) proposes that feminists should not make generalisations about women's experiences to construct 'woman' as a homogeneous *whole*. She emphasises the diversity of women's experiences and argues for the complexity of women's sexuality as it encompasses age, class, religion, cultural values, ethnicity and many other aspects of life. However, Vance does not call into question her own assumption of the predetermined gender identification: 'woman'. After all, the power of collectivity cannot be ignored, either. Perhaps a good strategy is to find a way to incorporate the individual and the collective women's experiences in the pursuit of gender/sexual equality. Practising 'the personal is the political', Vance suggests that women should study our sexual stories and explore which elements play into women's pleasure and displeasure individually and together, and seek to make pleasurable experiences occur more frequently for us (p.6).

The book *Jane Sexes It Up: True Confessions of Feminist Desire* is exactly one example of a collective endeavour with contributions from individual women. Almost two decades after Vance's book, women still face risks for telling their sexual stories, and the editor Merri Lisa Johnson (2002) points out that all the contributors are publishing their stories to confront a world that is hostile to women who are brave enough to share their sexuality:

Before going all out – balls to the wall, if you will – I want to acknowledge what we are up against. Each contributing essayist puts herself out there in the world, naked and exposed, not because she thinks it's safe to speak frankly about sex, desire, bodies, and personal histories, but because she knows it's *not*. The fact of living in a rape culture underlines the bravery and seriousness of essays that might otherwise be taken as flippant, a-historical, privileged post-feminist play. Our writing *is* play, but it is play *despite* and *in resistance* to a context of danger and prohibition, *not* a result of imagining there is none [emphasis in the original] (pp.1–2).

The bold words and sexual metaphors in these essays challenge readers – including myself – who have embodied patriarchal ideas of an *appropriate* sexual expression. From my perspective, this form of collective individual endeavour serves several political purposes.

Firstly, by sharing these stories, women can learn that they are not alone with their individual experience, even though each story is also personal and distinct. I recall one time when I was teaching in an undergraduate seminar. In order to demonstrate how people can potentially be connected with one another across identity categories – such as gender, age, ethnicity – I asked students to write a short piece about the body. The result was quite fruitful. Some students revealed the same concerns about their bodies, which they had previously thought was ‘just me being weird’. These short stories that people share connect us together regardless of our age, gender or ethnicity. Additionally, these *pioneer* stories provide a window onto diverse experiences that were probably unheard before. By reading these stories, we learn about how people live and negotiate their identities in various social locations. These personal stories can become one form of the cultural materials that encourage more contributions and exploration. One might become curious and ask ‘what else is out there?’

In contrast to Johnson’s highlighting of the risks women face when sharing sexual stories, popular culture seems to be claiming that, nowadays, women can be sexually empowered. This leads many women in Western cultures to think that feminism is no longer needed. However, the sense of empowerment that popular culture generates for women does not mean that women are ‘liberated’ from patriarchal values; rather, it implants the *feeling* of being sexually empowered in individual women. In her study of female sexual agency in advertising, Rosalind Gill (2008) suggests that the constructed sexual subjectivity becomes a form of regulation because of its focus on female sexual attractiveness, which is predominantly represented by a young, aesthetically pleasing woman’s body. Furthermore, Tolman’s (2002) research suggests that there is still a lack of sexual desire and pleasure in young women’s accounts of why they participate in sexual activities. While I agree that a personal feeling of empowerment is important for women in order to explore and interpret their desire – after all, the personal *is* political – one should not dismiss the necessity of feminism in societies where patriarchal norms and heteronormative discourses dominate the shaping of women’s sexuality. To further explore how the personal and the cultural are negotiated, both in constituting women’s sexuality and in generating a possible political movement, I propose that auto-photography is an effective method which illuminates women’s more personal, diverse sexualities as well as drawing attention to the potential connections between ‘women’.

## **Auto-photography: Personal Desire within Cultural Construction**

In the previous sections, I touched upon how queer theory and symbolic interactionism can inform the use of auto-photography in my research on women's sexuality. Butler's ideas about gender performativity and the fluidity of desire (1990, 2004) indicate that gender is not intrinsic but is reproduced through its constant making *of*, and *on* the body, whereas desire cannot be dictated by gender, and is beyond comprehension because of its fluidity. The photographs of women's desire in this project indicate that women often make images of their bodies. When presented with these photographs, one might think that most of the images are not expressions of sexual desire – the meanings of desire are only indicated through the signs in these pictures. The symbolic interactionist focus on individual agency within a cultural context illuminates the *subtle differences within resemblance* in participants' photographs which reveal the process by which women negotiate their personal sexual interests within the broader social influence. In this section, I discuss how auto-photography – particularly the process of making images – can reveal desire as multiple and individual by reading Donna Haraway's (1988) theory of situated knowledges.

In order to challenge scientific claims to 'objectivity', Haraway proposes the idea of 'situated knowledges', through which researchers, particularly feminists, are made aware of their own position and the local context within which studies are conducted. In particular, Haraway suggests that the metaphor of 'vision'<sup>35</sup> can best challenge the claim to objectivity and the academic tradition that constructs our dichotomised understanding of the world. By using 'vision', feminists can now reclaim the gaze, which is as powerful and conquering (Haraway 1988) as knowledge. Vision allows one to perceive and interpret; however, the scrutiniser – as well as the scientist who constructs the 'truth' of the world – was once nowhere to be seen. The metaphor of vision illuminates the scrutiniser, who previously remained in the dark: that is, it reveals that knowledge, just like vision, is about the location from which one views. As individuals do not embody the same viewing positions, their visions of the world must be subjective and multiple.

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<sup>35</sup> To address an interesting and important question that my supervisor raised: even though 'vision' is a metaphor, what if a person is physically blind? I think vision is only one of the senses that can be used as a metaphor to illustrate how human beings perceive and understand the world. However, 'vision' seems to be more helpful than other sensual metaphors because the term also refers to the ability to imagine and plan for the future. This question also brings me to recognise a potential limitation of auto-photographic methods when I discuss the 'vision' metaphor.

To make it more concise, Haraway tells an anecdote about walking her dog. While they were walking, she wondered how different the world would be if a person saw and sensed it from a dog's perspective. The view that dogs perceive must be very different from what humans see because of the diverse perceptive systems we embody. Furthermore, human beings possess technologies which can manipulate images to create meanings – just think how a 4D ultrasound picture of a foetus is coloured<sup>36</sup>. Human beings are active viewers: we *see*, and our ways of seeing are shaped – not dictated – by our organs and technologies, including those of social order, norms and practices. Furthermore, our diverse ways of viewing lead us to create different kinds of vision: there are no identical representations of desire, but only partial resemblances which build up 'webs of connections' (Haraway 1988, p.584) that give us a taste of what *women's sexualities* are. Haraway's proposition suggests that there cannot be a comprehensive theorisation of 'women's desire' because a homogeneous women's sexuality simply does not exist. Additionally, the metaphor of vision is not only inclusive of all diversities but also suggests that there exist other desires that are not yet *seen*, not yet researched, and hence incomprehensible. The metaphor of vision signifies the ways in which auto-photography can reveal women's desire, both in the sense of individual diversities and the cultural resemblances in participants' photographic creations.

Putting together Haraway's metaphor of vision with Gagnon and Simon's scripting theory, I argue that, although auto-photography might not be able to reconcile the feminist dilemma between macro- and micro-politics, it certainly can bring to the fore women's negotiations between personal choice and the cultural shaping of sexuality. Participants' photographs embody multiple and complex meanings of desire. These meanings do not reveal themselves directly; rather, the interpretation of desire comes from many sources. It certainly relies on participants' subjective understandings and experiences, which are constituted within social interaction. It also depends on the viewers' reading, which is shaped by dominant discourses. Furthermore, photographic representations are full of symbols which open themselves up for multiple interpretations. It is important to note that participants and researchers are all *situated*; hence, it is not possible to 'discover' a unified women's desire, or to construct a universal theory of sexuality. Rather, I am presented with

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<sup>36</sup> The 3D/4D ultrasound images do not reflect the 'actual' appearance of the foetus; rather, the representation is manipulated – coloured and smoothed – for viewing (see Roberts 2012).

fluid webs of scripts which are constantly changing, intersecting with and diverting from one another in the process of making sense of desire. These webs reveal connections between individual women's sexuality, such as it being shaped by popular cultural representations of sexual attractiveness, or that it has to be kept under cover to avoid conflicts with family or with social values. The webs also demonstrate that each woman's experiences and emotions, which weave her interpretation, are uniquely *hers*. Haraway's concept of 'webs of connections' offers a conceptual method to bring women 'together' while emphasising the multiplicity and diversity of *women's* desire.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have explored webs of knowledge which illuminate the interpretation of women's desire. The concept of a 'web' is particularly helpful in signifying the fluidity of knowledge and how theories intersect with each other in the shaping of human sexuality. Unlike 'layers', webs do not indicate priorities or bases. Rather, *webs* suggest a way to think about how ideas are interwoven to co-construct our desire. These webs are not fixed but are constantly changing as new and conflicting discourses come into play. Although popular discourses and cultural norms are powerful in constituting women's sexuality, they cannot dictate a homogeneous form of sexual desire because every woman has access to diverse discursive threads from which she can pick up or abandon the meaning of desire. Hence, *webs* are particularly useful for understanding women's desire – both in terms of the conceptualisation and the representation – as negotiated between individual choice and cultural constitution.

The theoretical webs I have discussed illuminate women's desire from three perspectives: the popular discourses and social norms which shape how women understand the meaning of desire, a feminist symbolic interactionist approach which gives insights into women's conceptualisations of their sexuality, and the feminist theories which inform my research and investigation in this project. Using Foucault's concept of discursive power, I suggest that, although psychoanalysis is quite distant from women's lived experience, its ideas have slipped into popular sexual discourses and are influential in shaping how women make sense of desire. In Taiwan and China, social conventions constructed around Confucianism are particularly restrictive for women attempting to explore their sexuality in patriarchal societies, let alone constituting a sense of sexual subjectivity – although this

phenomenon is changing. Sexual scripts incorporating a feminist theory of embodiment illuminate the ways in which women justify their sexuality, demonstrating their understanding that desire is shaped by cultural scenarios and experienced within interaction. This approach also indicates the process by which women make sense of their desire through reflection. Finally, feminist academic discussions such as queer theory, sexual debates since the second-wave movements, and Haraway's proposal of situated knowledges inspire me to think about the multiplicity of desire, and how negotiation between the personal and the collective has always existed regardless of how subtle it seems. These feminist discussions focusing on women's lived experience and the heterogeneity of sexualities inspire me to think of sexual desire as full of opportunities for change.

## Chapter 3

### Auto-photography: Critical Context and Practicality

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One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. 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. [emphasis in the original] (Berger 1972, p.47)

When I first read this passage several years ago, I felt a bit mortified. Having been an amateur photographer for a few years, I thought that surely my photographs – with or without myself in the composition – were expressing *my* perspectives rather than those of a man? I understood that Berger's comments are based on a Western context in which images of female nudes – traditionally produced for male spectators – are so prevalent that they shape both men's and women's viewing *and* subjectivity. Still, I wondered, what does a woman *see* when she thinks about *her* desire? How does a woman represent and communicate her sexuality when she becomes an active photographer rather than a sole appearance? Hence, I asked women, including myself<sup>37</sup>, to take up cameras to photograph 'our' desire.

But first, what are auto-photographic practices? In short, they are ways for individuals to employ photography as a method of exploring their experiences and perceptions, often about a specific topic or event, in order to generate and communicate meanings for themselves and/or their viewers. Auto-photography (Ziller and Lewis 1981; Kaloski-Naylor with Broughton 1999; Burke and Dollinger 2005; Noland 2006; Johnsen et al. 2008; Hensel et al. 2011) is a hybrid genre whose boundaries are not easy to map. My definition is that auto-photography is self-imaging with the addition of some form of self-analysis which can be written, spoken, or visual. This demarcation excludes casual snapshots unless, perhaps, the photographs are later revisited and analysed by their producers. The characteristics of auto-photography can also be found when individuals analyse and remake portraits of themselves which were previously taken by others, such as those produced as family photos (Spence 1988; Kuhn 1995; Sligh 1995; Solomon 1995).

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<sup>37</sup> See my discussion about why I did not include my own materials in this thesis on page 95.

Therefore, auto-photographic practices are not restricted to producers making photographs from scratch for self-exploration. Producers can use existing images – by examining, re-staging or remaking photographs – to generate profound reflection on personal experiences and feelings. Auto-photography differs from the photographic methods used in anthropological studies where researchers record and represent the lives of the researched as part of the ethnographic data (see, for example, Radcliffe-Brown 1922; Carmichael 1985), because the research subjects do not use those researcher-generated photographs to carry out self-analysis.

This is a long chapter, and I have divided it into two parts to tackle the complexity of auto-photography: the critical context of my methodology, and my practice. Auto-photography, as I explained above, is not a well-defined genre. Hence, in the first part, I examine different sites to demonstrate how auto-photography has been practised and, by doing so, I show the breadth of these practices. I consider auto-photography to be an innovative method which initiates *material*<sup>38</sup> *generation*. The active making of photographs and self-analysis encourages me to rethink the ‘roles’ that auto-photographers play in my research as well as in a broader context. In part one, I explore what the implications are of ‘women’ using auto-photography: does it raise the consciousness of practitioners? Can auto-photographers produce images that challenge dominant representations? How do researchers involve practitioners in participatory projects; and by doing so, gain fuller, more insightful stories? My methodology is informed by two key areas in which auto-photography is practised: art and social research. For both practitioners and artists<sup>39</sup>, auto-photography can be used to explore and communicate their ideas; and for researchers, it can be applied to engage participants<sup>40</sup> in creating materials in response to the research questions.

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<sup>38</sup> I prefer to use ‘materials’ rather than ‘data’ in this project, because the images and words my participants contributed are richer and more in-depth than the term ‘data’ suggests.

<sup>39</sup> At times, it is not easy to choose an ‘appropriate’ term to address the auto-photographers, as they inhabit multiple roles. Mainly to avoid repetition, I use ‘producers’ and ‘practitioners’ interchangeably to refer to individuals who practise auto-photography in order to produce photographs and generate self-analysis. I refer to those whose work is widely recognised as artistic contribution as ‘artists’. The artists I discuss in this chapter are people who have created artwork in ways that inform auto-photographic practices, although the boundaries between creative practitioners and artists are inevitably blurred.

<sup>40</sup> I explain the particular meaning of ‘participants’ – instead of research subjects – in a later section.

The underlying theories and practices of self-photography are already complex, and I further add journaling and semi-structured interviews to this project. In the second part, I reflect on my own practice and the difficulties I encountered throughout the process. I consider my methodology to be a feminist one which engages participants in the co-creation of knowledge; however, it is challenging to represent participants' narratives as valid knowledge itself as well as to examine their accounts critically. Furthermore, using auto-photographic methods to research sexual desire raises complex ethical concerns as it touches upon a subject matter that is conventionally perceived as 'sensitive'; therefore, I have to decide whether and how to use some photographs, considering both participants' contributions and the viewers' perceptions. The aim of this chapter is thus to outline the theories and practices of auto-photography, to consider where my project is located in this methodological matrix, and to offer the story of my research.

### **Part One: Auto-photography**

In this section, I offer an overview of auto-photographic practices, focusing specifically on three interconnected methodological issues: the function of raising awareness of auto-photographers, challenging predominant popular representations, and my reflections on the benefits and implications for researchers who adopt auto-photography as their research method. Although approaches may vary, the process of self-photography and self-analysis are able to raise consciousness about producers' own living conditions. When producers publish and share their materials in various ways – such as via zines, books, blogs and group discussions – auto-photography becomes an activist practice which reveals the diversity of people's lived experience. As a social research method, auto-photography produces knowledge based on participants' empirical data, offering them a chance to explore and articulate the meaning of their lives to a greater degree than with interviews alone, which is a more usual method of encouraging people to open up parts of their lives for a research project. Auto-photography also challenges researchers to re-examine their relationship with the researched, and to consider how participants' materials are interpreted within the researchers' purview. I argue that auto-photography is a form of activism as well as a strong methodological impetus for social researchers, including myself. The aim of social research is to propose changes in society, but not every single project is directly concerned with the people who contribute research materials. Compared to methods such as surveying, for instance, auto-photography has the potential to raise the consciousness of

participants and therefore bring changes to their lives. Auto-photographic practices are a form of activism in two distinct ways: a) they offer, and often encourage, access to more ‘personal’, ‘private’ or ‘hidden’ perspectives and feelings that are hard to articulate and identify through words and outsider analysis alone, and b) the methodology seeks not only to investigate an aspect of society, but also to bring changes to the producers – in activism, the practice is as important as the research or artistic outcome<sup>41</sup>.

As a social research method, auto-photography has been practised under different names, often related to specific methods of data production or to theoretical models. For instance, auto-photography is sometimes referred to as photo-elicitation (Radley and Taylor 2003; Frith and Harcourt 2007; Clark-Ibáñez 2007; Samuels 2007; Croghan et al. 2008; Allen 2008) or photo-interview (Kolb 2008) because participants’ photographs are used to elicit responses in interviews; while Wang and Burris (1997) named this method ‘photovoice’ because it elicits participants’ sharing of their expertise. Researchers argue that this type of participatory visual method can give voice to participants (Samuels 2007; McIntyre 2003; Radley and Taylor 2003; Luttrell and Chalfen 2010; Luttrell 2010) and allow them to reveal significant aspects of their lives in response to research questions. However, none of these names – photo-elicitation, photo-interview or photovoice – clearly addresses who the photographers are. Tinkler (2013) uses ‘autobiographical methods’ to refer to self-exploration initiated by researchers themselves, who reflect on their old photographs through words and/or remaking the photographs. Part of her ‘autobiographical methods’ fits into my definition of ‘auto-photography’. I decided to adopt the term auto-photography to emphasise that the photography – both creating new photos and remaking images – conducted by practitioners carries autobiographical narratives. The multiple meanings of photographs are contextualised using practitioners’ written and/or spoken accounts, and are open to interpretation by viewers.

However, when the term ‘auto-photography’ was first used by Ziller and Lewis (1981) in their research into young adults’ self-conceptions, they adopted a very different methodological approach. Ziller and Lewis provided each *research subject* (their own words) with an Instamatic camera and a twelve-exposure film to take pictures of ‘who you

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<sup>41</sup> Lucy Lippard is an advocate of activist art. In *Get the Message?: A Decade of Art for Social Change* (1984), she argues that artists can make their work directly involved in social change, and she uses examples to demonstrate how art is involved in political activism.

are', and asked each subject to number the photographs from one to twelve; one being the photograph that describes them best, and twelve the least. Ziller and Lewis then used content analysis, coding and categorisation of the photographs to investigate their subjects' self-conception. For instance, photographs of books were categorised as academic achievement orientation; while those of natural scenes and art objects were categorised as aesthetic. Their methods did not allow the young adults to discuss their photos – there was no self-analysis and the contexts of images were missing; as a result, the meanings of these photos were reduced to Ziller and Lewis' coarse categorisation and, ironically, each of their research subjects' self-perceptions is lost in their studies.

Methods and ideas of auto-photography have developed in the twenty years since Ziller and Lewis' research. Since the 2000s, many research projects which engaged others in auto-photographic methods have focused on the active participatory aspects of their research subjects, thus the use of the term *participants* (Bolton et al. 2001; McIntyre 2003; Radley and Taylor 2003; Burke and Dollinger 2005; Noland 2006; Frith and Harcourt 2007; Clark-Ibáñez 2007; Samuels 2007; Croghan et al. 2008; Johnsen et al. 2008; Kolb 2008; Allen 2008 and 2009; Luttrell 2010; Hensel et al. 2011; Richards 2011; Haaken and O'Neill 2014). Participants were invited to get involved in auto-photographic practice, a process which enabled them to craft images in response to research questions, and to work with researchers in reading their pictures. This development suggests that the research materials participants provide should not be subject to an oversimplified categorisation set up by researchers, as in Ziller and Lewis' project; rather, researchers should use these materials to generate more in-depth investigation into participants' self-analysis and identities (Noland 2006).

Participants' spoken and/or written accounts assist researchers in accessing their self-exploration and the messages they intend to deliver in their photographs. The meanings of a photograph are not fixed (Solomon 1995); they change as viewers interpret the visual signs depending on the diverse cultural and historical conventions which constitute personal perceptions. For instance, I learnt that the colour red signifies love and passion in English culture; whereas 'red' indicates good luck and celebration in Taiwanese tradition. Thus, photography is not a 'universal language', as claimed by Ziller and Lewis (1981), although it can certainly be used to elicit conversations in international and cross-cultural

studies. Participants' *words* are important in contextualising their photographs for researchers as the visual meanings might not translate due to gaps in cultural understanding<sup>42</sup>. In my opinion, once researchers learn the background story of participants' photographs, they will be able to read the images responsibly in order to further explore other possible meanings subtly embedded in the pictures.

While auto-photographic practices appear to be based on the individual's exploration of experiences and perceptions, their scope extends far beyond the personal. Tinkler (2013) argues that, by analysing personal photographs, one can observe and explain wider social and cultural processes. For instance, she suggests that, as an individual analyses a family photo, she explores not only her personal familial relationships, but also the dominant ideology of family – which is socially and culturally variable (Tinkler 2013). In her own project, *Family Secrets*, Kuhn (2002) employs 'memory work' to analyse her family photos. She argues that when an individual reflects upon a family photo she constructs, in the present, a memory of the past (see also Kuhn 2000, 2007). The construction of memories is based on one's social and cultural understanding of a family and familial relationships. Memory is therefore approached from a cultural perspective in that it associates the personal with social and cultural phenomena. Focusing on auto-photographic projects of the 1980s and 1990s, which explore memory, family, identity and subjectivity, Tinkler (2013) suggests that these projects are usually underpinned by feminist agendas, aligned with the notion that 'the personal is political' (p.62). Hence, I start by discussing the ways in which auto-photographic practices, through generating self-analysis, can raise the consciousness of practitioners and enable them to take control of this means of self-expression.

### Raising the Consciousness of Auto-Photographers

I consider auto-photography to be an effective method to approach women's experiences and perceptions of sexual desire, because its practices encourage participants to explore their ideas, generate research materials, and tell their stories. Another factor in my methodological decision is that I used to think dominant theories of sexuality – such as

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<sup>42</sup> I am not suggesting that the meanings of words are stable; however, I think *words* are helpful as they constitute the primary method by which human beings communicate knowledge.

psychoanalysis and queer theories – were not embedded in women’s lived experience<sup>43</sup>; hence, I wanted to construct a theory of women’s sexual desire that was based on empirical research. Auto-photography provides me with a method to investigate how women participants themselves experience and make sense of their sexuality. As my project developed, I came across other auto-photographic projects which seemed to suggest that auto-photographic practices *empower* producers. By ‘empower’ these researchers meant that auto-photography has the potential to raise consciousness (Radley and Taylor 2003), allowing producers to become aware of their living conditions and to act upon this awareness. Although I first found this a seductive theory, my thoughts have since changed. Even though auto-photography allows practitioners to have some control over their self-representations, which can bring *a sense of* empowerment to practitioners, this does not necessarily mean that the broader cultural environment can be rapidly reshaped to emancipate marginalised people. Still, practitioners can use auto-photography as a form of activism in that the generated photographs can reveal experiences and emotions that are underrepresented, or can be used to challenge dominant portrayals in mass media.

To suggest that one can use auto-photography as a form of activism is to assume that the producer has control over the means of expression: in the process of taking pictures and self-analysis, the producer might make photos with the intent of communicating messages to the audience, including to researchers such as myself. Although the idea of my participants being able to deliver their messages directly to me is tempting, this raises two issues. Firstly, some researchers argue that auto-photography allows participants to express their experiences and perceptions in the ways *they prefer* (McIntyre 2003; Noland 2006; Frith and Harcourt 2007); however, this assumes that participants are always aware of what and why they are photographing, and that the meanings of their photographs can be unmistakably delivered to viewers. This claim ignores the fact that participants can take a chance with snapshots, experiment with photography to explore what they can create, or still be developing their ideas while they are taking pictures.

The other issue responds to McIntyre’s (2003) suggestion that, by having control over the image-making, participants in social research get to represent themselves in the ways they choose, and that this practice enables them to identify the significant aspects of their lives.

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<sup>43</sup> My theoretical understanding has changed; and I discuss how theories of sexuality *become* part of individuals’ lived experiences in Chapter 2.

The difficulty with this is that, even though auto-photographers get to decide how they are producing their photographs, they cannot control how viewers will interpret their representations even when images are accompanied by their *words*. Although participants are able to identify crucial elements relating to the research questions through the process of decision-making – including what subjects are to be photographed, the set up and the framing of the images, and the choice of which photographs to submit to the researcher – researchers should acknowledge that there might still be slippage in terms of which meaning in participants' representations are deemed more significant than others.

Still, with auto-photography as a tool of expression, some producers make photos to disclose aspects of their normally unseen or unrecognised lives, which may be within or without their intent. For instance, auto-photographer Dennett (1995) took pictures to reveal the often-hidden lives of working-class pensioners – including her own – as a record of her family history. Her practice indicates a realist approach in that the photographs became 'proof' of her life. The actual images are materials that can be passed on in her family; at the same time, they can be a representation of her intention to unveil a lived experience that is under-portrayed in mass media. Practitioners use auto-photography to produce images with the intent of having their experiences understood and valued; however, images as *records* represent more than just the photographed subjects. A picture embodies aesthetic and material values which are historically and culturally contextual; additionally, there are broader social conventions and symbolic meanings embedded in an image. For instance, a 'family photo' not only shows who 'exists', but also demonstrates the social convention of a 'family' and might also indicate the power relationships between the subjects: Who gets to sit down and be in the centre of the frame? Who is excluded from the photographs? Hence, photographs serve as representations that can be investigated in order to understand cultural lives.

Nevertheless, having control of the camera and the process of auto-photographic practices is still a crucial aspect of self-exploration and self-analysis. This not only means that producers have time and space to develop their ideas, but it also suggests that they have autonomy in creating their images. Clark-Ibáñez (2007) adopted self-photography with interviews to study the lived experiences of children in poverty in California. She argues that auto-photographic practices provide an engaging method which gives children agency

in the research, encouraging them to take photos and then talk about their images – and thus their lives – with the researcher. In my own project, I gave participants a flexible time frame and space to develop their ideas. This flexibility allowed them to develop their ideas and make photographs in many active, creative ways.

In different research circumstances, projects involving others in auto-photographic practices might not be able to provide as much ‘freedom’ as was possible with my project. For instance, in Radley and Taylor’s (2003) research, which investigates patients’ recovery experiences in hospital wards, the hospital requested at least one researcher to be present when their participants took photographs. Radley and Taylor argue that their presence gave them an advantage as they were able to learn the context of the photographs (p.82). When I presented my auto-photographic project at the *Gender, Sex & Power Conference* (2012) at Hull University, I received a similar suggestion that I should consider being *there* when participants take their photos. Indeed, a researcher can decide to be present during the self-photographic process in order to take ethnographic notes and interact with participants. However, considering my subject of ‘sexual desire’ and my earlier expectation of finding participants in both Taiwan and the UK – cultural contexts in which sexuality is deemed a *personal* matter – I decided that my presence could make participants rather uneasy, which might result in preventing them from experimenting with the practice or taking photographs in more private settings. Particularly in research on women’s sexuality, I argue that, when possible, a researcher should allow participants to practice auto-photography on their own. By letting participants take cameras into their ‘private’ lives, there is a greater opportunity for auto-photography to bring out the usually ‘hidden’ aspects of women’s sexuality.

Given the time and space, there are several ways in which participants might generate profound self-analysis with auto-photography. Practitioners can stage scenes and manipulate their photographs to express their ideas, and this process can trigger a deeper investigation of their experiences and interpersonal relationships. An example is Edmeades’ (1995) project, in which her photographs are a diary of her exploration of herself as a woman with illnesses. She re-photographed, photocopied and manipulated her images, using the whole process as a therapy to gain a sense of control in her life. When she re-examined her childhood interactions with her parents, she realised that she was

perceived as an invalid, and consequently over-protected. She therefore set out to use photography to fight against this perception and build up her confidence. Having been a life model and then fallen ill, Collison (1995) felt that she was 'reduced to an abstract female form' (p.39) so that she barely recognised herself. She staged scenes and put herself in her photographs to take control of her own images; and by doing so, she became the subject of her photos and of herself again. Also by staging photos, Williams (1995) explored her identity and her role in the family. She attempted to make images that revealed the 'inside work' of her family, such as the relationships between family members and their gendered roles, rather than presenting an 'ideal' version of a family (p.81). By taking active control in making their own images, these auto-photographers were able to generate in-depth analyses of their lives and create a different sense of self.

There is also the possibility that when participants review their photographs, their memories may be re-enacted, and inner feelings that were previously hidden even from themselves could be developed. I found examples from auto-photographers who recreated and reworked their family photos. Upon the death of her father, Martin (1995) staged fragments of her memories in an attempt to uncover emotions that had long been repressed, and thus to tell her story from her own point of view. Spence (1995b) also practised auto-photography as therapy in order to gain access to buried memories and suppressed feelings. Through the process of re-staging the past and making photographs, she was able to uncover secrets about her emotions and gain a sense of control. This method of recreating photographs to re-enact memories is not limited to exploring family relations. It can also be used by auto-photographers to revisit and make images representing the past, enabling them to construct narratives which illustrate their present perceptions of past events.

Depending on the subject matter, such auto-photographic practices, by re-enacting memories as a therapy, can evoke a very emotional process of self-exploration. Richards (2011) suggests that if one wants to set up a photo therapy workshop, one needs to hire a trained therapist with facilitation skills, as she has done for the *Representing Self - Representing Ageing* project (p.2). Since my own project researching women's desire does not employ 'therapy' as a method, I did not expect participants to disclose traumatic experiences in their materials until one participant wrote about the sexual abuse she went

through in her childhood. After that, I became conscious that auto-photographic practices, which stimulate self-exploration, can bring back sensitive and even distressing emotions, particularly in a project that requires participants to reflect on their past sexual experiences. Therefore, I collected contact information for organisations that provide consultations – such as Open Door at the University of York and Women’s Aid – in case participants needed it.

By using auto-photographic methods, practitioners gain the opportunity to communicate their ideas with their own images, contextualised by their spoken and/or written account. These photographs embody meanings that are open to interpretation; however, I propose that to explore the multiple meanings in these photographs, viewers – particularly researchers – should read responsibly by acknowledging their own cultural locations as well as the context of image production. The materials that auto-photographers produce during their course of self-analysis can reveal their inner emotions, creative output and marginalised aspects of their lives – such as experiences of illness – that are usually underrepresented in popular media. These practices and research, when published, not only offer insights into diverse human experiences, but also have the potential to counter dominant images in popular media. In the next section, I discuss the potential for auto-photographic *artwork* to challenge popular images – particularly representations of conventionally feminine women.

### Challenging Dominant Representations

Since auto-photographic practices raise the consciousness of the producers, either as part of an individual exploration or as a group effort, I wondered whether my participants could use auto-photography as an activist method to challenge dominant and biased media portrayals of women’s sexuality. For instance, I read that in 1985, the Cockpit Art Project (Grey 1995; Dwedney and Lister 1986) engaged young homeless people in London to create images of themselves in order to counter the stereotypical pictures presented by mass media at that time. The project coordinators set up a studio with a darkroom and cameras to teach these young people how to use the equipment with the aim of helping them to acquire some skills and engage in new interests. Cockpit encouraged these teenagers to be the subjects of their photos as well as the photographers. Grey (1995) suggests that this method helped these young people to ‘assert their sense of identity and

place' (p.144), and their photographs presented positive images of 'self' that were distant from their traumatic experiences<sup>44</sup>. This method, which encouraged young producers to have control of the cameras for self-exploration and to create images of themselves that they were satisfied with, made it possible for them to become more confident about themselves.

Art is one of the two key fields that have informed my thinking about auto-photographic practices. The boundaries between auto-photography, photography and art are blurred. I initially intended to identify these boundaries in order to explore my definition of 'auto-photography' but it was a very difficult task. Nevertheless, I came across artwork which inspired me to think about the potential of auto-photographic practices to challenge the predominant portrayal of women and the limited, unequivocal view of women's (hetero)sexual desire in mass media. Art photographers who particularly inspired me, such as Cindy Sherman and Deborah Bright, have produced photographs which explore and challenge popular cultural images of women. In *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80), Sherman put herself in the photographic frame by re-enacting female film characters, while her other portrait-style photographs depict her wearing dramatic make-up and posing in ways that disrupt the viewers' perception of gender, sexuality and the body. Sherman's work was created during the contemporary US feminist art movement<sup>45</sup>, which focused on consciousness-raising and expressing female perspectives. Hence, critics suggest that Sherman produced an exaggerated and fake femininity to confront the ways in which women and their bodies were depicted by mass media (Jones 1997; Marien 2002; Bright 2011) even though Sherman insists that her work was intuitive<sup>46</sup> (Sherman 2003). A decade later, Deborah Bright (1989) used existing film images to create montages in *Dream Girls*, a series that disrupted the heterosexual relationships in several Hollywood films. By

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<sup>44</sup> Grey seems to suggest a causal relationship between asserting self-identity and producing 'positive' images in The Cockpit Art Project. However, this is not always the case. I discovered in one photographic project (*Clothing Dis/Embodied: The Relationship Between Women's Clothes, Identity and the Body*, presented at *Researching Feminist Futures Symposium*, University of Edinburgh, 2011) that one participant decided to be photographed in an outfit she 'hated'. She told me that she used the outfit in her artwork to constantly remind herself of her mistake. This is an example of a participant who asserted herself with an image that is not necessarily 'positive', but in a way that strongly stated 'who I am not'.

<sup>45</sup> The feminist art movement started in the late 1960s in the United States. Artists participating in this movement sought to challenge the male-dominated art canons, and to engage art viewers in political acts, including those that confront the meaning of art. See, for instance, *The Lilith eZine* (n.d.), and DiTolla (2015).

<sup>46</sup> In an interview conducted by Berne, Sherman expressed that her work is 'what it is', and 'hopefully it's seen as feminist work, or feminist-advised work, but I'm not going to go around espousing theoretical bullshit about feminist stuff.'

adding a lesbian subject, Bright altered the still images to suit her own purposes, playing from one fantasy to another. According to Bright<sup>47</sup>, with this set of queer photographs she also intended to challenge feminist theorists of the 1980s, who regarded sexuality as fixed rather than fluid. Here I see the potential for auto-photographers to create images that mimic and challenge popular representations of women's sexuality – this means that their materials will demonstrate their understanding of cultural conventions with elements that are disruptive of the norms.

Some female artists who turned their camera lenses on themselves challenged not only dominant representations, but also habitual viewing. At the start of this chapter, I quoted Berger (1972), who suggests that both men and women embody viewing as a male surveyor. He proposed that if a reader has any doubt about this inhabited 'male gaze', one simply needs to transform the subject of a traditional nude from a woman into a man to feel the effect (p.64). Berger's proposal is intended to prove his point about the gender dichotomy of the male spectator and the female object; however, this 'experiment' also confronts one's perceptions of gender, sexuality and beauty<sup>48</sup>. For instance, Jenny Saville and Glen Luchford's (1995–1996) collaborative *Closed Contact* is one of those photographic projects which challenge viewers' perception of female nudes. Saville directed the photos and used herself as the model, distorting her body against a pane of glass in the portraits. The artwork was inspired by her observation of plastic surgery (Gagosian Gallery 2002), and the images were created with an extreme level of manipulation (Rippon 2011). The project presents an uncommon representation of a woman's body with the intent of communicating the pain inflicted by such surgery.

Analysing artwork and its possible meanings poses a difficult task for me. Sometimes, without the artists' own remarks, or comments by critics, I find it almost impossible to comprehend the messages they *might* be delivering through their work. Saville's work provided me with a very different image of female nudity in art, and I related this experience and my thoughts to the comments of Rachael, one of my participants, on the lack of visual references for her to make photographs which represent *her* heterosexual

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<sup>47</sup> This is a reference to the undated website of Deborah Bright at: [www.deborahbright.net](http://www.deborahbright.net). Direction: Portfolios, Dream Girls 1989–1990, Statement.

<sup>48</sup> In 2011, photographer Rion Sabeau created a series *Men-Ups!* in which men pose in conventional pin-up 'girl' style while performing popularly conceived 'masculine' activities. Even though this project is not an auto-photographic one, it nevertheless questions viewers' perceptions of gender stereotypes.

woman's desire. She felt that most of the nudity in art, be it male or female, was made to cater to heterosexual men's desire<sup>49</sup>. This leads me to ask: what are the visual traits in female nude paintings that are sexually arousing to, perhaps, male voyeurs? In cultures where sexualised images of women prevail – and are generally perceived as catering to heterosexual men's desire – is it ever possible to create a visual representation of *women's* sexual desire? However these questions are answered, the experience of attempting to analyse artwork was quite challenging to my own viewing 'habit' and skills, particularly the way in which I had been taking a conventional portrayal of women for granted<sup>50</sup>.

Just as these works of art stimulated my personal introspection, I also wonder whether and how they can be 'activist', and in what ways this thinking relates to my own project.

Mullin (2003) identifies three features of activist art. Firstly, activist art is 'political art' plus social action; that is, activist art is not only concerned with political issues, it is also socially involved. Secondly, activist art engages with political concerns as well as the art-making itself, including the creation and perception of art. Thirdly, activist artists seek 'public participation' in the areas of both politics and art-making, and therefore the process of creation and the production of artwork are not sharply differentiated (p.191). Mullin's definition is clear, and helpful to my thinking about the relationship between activism and my project. From the researcher's point of view, my aim was not only to produce knowledge, but also to raise the consciousness of the participants and myself. To achieve this aim, I called for participants to engage in auto-photographic practices to explore and communicate their ideas by creating images, which potentially makes my research an activist work. Although my participants were not all artists<sup>51</sup> – they were not involved in art-making – there existed the possibility for my participants to use photography as a tool to create activist work that makes visible women's diverse experiences of desire.

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<sup>49</sup> Bearing this comment in mind, I went to an exhibition of Sylvia Sleigh's paintings at TATE Liverpool in May, 2013. The exhibition introduced her as 'particularly well-known for her explicit paintings of male nudes, which challenged the art historical tradition of male artists painting female subjects as objects of desire' (TATE 2013). Looking at Sleigh's paintings of both male and female nude portraits, my attention was drawn to the body hair, bikini suntans and a male sitter's uneasy gesture. I could not relate those paintings to sexual desire myself. This experience raises more questions than answers for me: what is the relationship between representation, artists and viewers? Who has the authority to 'interpret' artists' work?

<sup>50</sup> This is related to my reflection (Chapter 1) on my commonsensical understanding with which I equated popular portrayals of a 'sexy woman' with women's sexuality.

<sup>51</sup> Rachael arguably made images that demonstrate her creative skills and counter dominant representations; hence, I consider some of her work to be 'artistic'. I discuss her photographs in more detail in Chapter 6.

Some of the participants' photographs bear visual traits similar to those depicted in popular cultural representations of a 'sexy' woman; however, many images also surprised me with ideas of desire that are relatively unseen in mass media. Since auto-photographic practices allow producers to reveal the underrepresented and dynamic experiences of their lives, they also have political potential. For instance, Mikki Ferrill's (1991) *Portraits* visualises and celebrates diverse images of people who joined a gay pride parade. Photographic images deliver messages that 'shape our concepts of what is real and what is normal' (Spence 1995a, p.31); therefore, to visualise these diversities through photography is to publicly proclaim and appreciate different lifestyles and sexualities, to reject labelling, and to dismiss one single imposed standard of femininity and heteronormativity. In auto-photographic projects initiated by researchers to engage participants, the practices correspond to the idea of giving voice to and recognising participants' experiences that would otherwise be ignored or taken for granted (Radley and Taylor 2003; Clark-Ibáñez 2007; Luttrell and Chalfen 2010; Luttrell 2010). For instance, Luttrell's (2010) study focuses on how working-class immigrant children perceived social diversity at school. She argues that participants may deliberately choose ways to represent themselves and others, sometimes with an effort to speak back to the dominant or stereotypical images in mass media. These practices make me wonder: can my participants develop this activist work with their auto-photographic practices? Can my method possibly encourage participants to create activist work? These are the topics to which I return for my discussion in the concluding chapter.

### Benefiting Social Research

In this section, I outline the advantages of applying auto-photography to the study of 'others' by reflecting on several social research projects. I engage with three methodological issues: I first discuss how using self-photography is appealing to participants. Then I examine the ways in which auto-photographic methods provide insights into participants' experiences and perceptions that are not available via standalone interviews, and consider how self-exploration and multiple methods enable researchers to get a fuller 'picture' of participants' stories. Finally, I discuss the implications for researchers who adopt auto-photography in their projects, in particular how participants' materials can potentially reshape the research agenda, and lead to rethinking the relationship between the researcher and participants.

One benefit of employing auto-photography is that it appeals to people, one of the reasons being that this method can be approached by participants across linguistic levels, language and age<sup>52</sup> (Noland 2006; Clark-Ibáñez 2007). Self-photography serves as a ‘first step’ for participants to respond to research questions without having to worry too much about their linguistic abilities. Participants are then able to make further remarks relating to the images in whatever ways they can. It is therefore less intimidating to children and people who do not speak the same language as the researcher. In her study of sexual cultures in schools, Allen (2009) argues that auto-photographic methods were successful in attracting underrepresented young participants to join her project, including those whose cultural and religious backgrounds prohibited them from talking about sexuality.

My own findings, however, suggest otherwise: my participants already had ways of communicating their sexuality, and some of them wanted to bring these ideas into academic research. Nevertheless, my method attracted women who already had an interest in photography and those who considered auto-photography an interesting approach to women’s sexual desire. Compared to interviews, auto-photography is still not a ‘mainstream’ research method. However, with the popularity of making and sharing images online, auto-photography might become a trend in researching social lives. The use of this visual method in my research has aroused some people’s curiosity, making them wonder how it might work in generating research materials. It is a playful method that encourages participants to explore and experiment with their own cameras, and it provides the possibility for them to make photographs in ways that give them pleasure.

For researchers, auto-photographic methods can be more beneficial than interviews alone for several reasons. Firstly, participants might feel more comfortable talking about their own photographs as those images provide contexts of their choosing for discussion. In projects where participants get to select which photos to submit to researchers, participants might have prepared themselves on the major themes to discuss in interviews. Participant-generated photographs also elicit lengthy responses because people get to talk about their pictures rather than worrying about having to provide a ‘standard’, ‘correct’ answer (Clark-Ibáñez 2007; Samuels 2007), although some might still be cautious about their responses.

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<sup>52</sup> This is not to assume that vision provides a universal means of communication, and I do wonder whether a kind of ‘visual knowledge’ is essential for auto-photographers to produce images.

In addition, photographs can also be used by both researchers and participants to raise questions, reframe conversations, and to communicate dimensions of their lives in a unique way – such as discussing the details of images and the process of making photographs. This method opens up more space for conversation between participants and researchers, making it less intimidating for participants to talk about their experiences, especially in cases such as engaging children or investigating aspects of lives that are hidden and secretive in the greater cultural and social settings.

Researchers might also consider auto-photographic methods because they can provide a more detailed insight into participants' perceptions and experiences than standalone interviews. When participants are involved in the auto-photographic process, they need to take action and decide what content is significant and meaningful in response to research questions<sup>53</sup> (Ziller and Lewis 1981). This is especially difficult when participants have to visualise sexual desire, which has been considered an emotion, a drive or a concept – none of which is easy to represent in photographs – by my participants. Then, in projects such as mine where participants were asked to assess their pictures and decide which ones they were happy to use in the research, they must 'prioritise' their thoughts and choose what they want to share with the researcher. As a result, the photographs participants made, and the decision-making process they went through, are both valuable for the research as these materials reveal participants' perspectives, an aspect which is central to understanding broader social and cultural phenomena (Kolb 2008; Allen 2009). For these reasons I asked my participants to keep a journal during the auto-photographic process. The journal helps me to identify the significant aspects of their decision-making, including what photographs and stories they decided to submit or omit; it also informs me of the contexts of the photographs, including whether they were staged, snapshots, or part of a playful exploration.

Samuels' (2007) reflection on his two research projects supports the notion that auto-photographic methods are more effective in gaining insights into participants' experiences than those without self-photography. His auto-photographic project adopted interviews to understand the lives of child Buddhist novices in Sri Lanka in 2003 and 2004. He

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<sup>53</sup> Although one may argue that participants also need to decide what to respond to in interviews, auto-photographic methods require participants to first take the initiative in producing images, then actively reflect on these images they have made.

compared this experience to his previous research which employed observation and interviews without photographic methods. Samuels recorded that, in his earlier research, he had already observed that one of the major activities for these Buddhist monks was floor sweeping, and his participants agreed with this. When he later employed auto-photographic methods, the monks revealed that the act of sweeping, especially around the Buddhist statues, was powerful in relation to spiritual merit. This relationship of act to space was only revealed when participants themselves explored the central meanings of their lives as monks, as ‘insiders’ in their own research.

Samuels (2007) argues that, with auto-photographic methods, participants are more likely to engage in constructing meanings and expressing their perspectives (p.28). In particular, participant-generated photographs are a visual record<sup>54</sup> which is a representation of participants’ culture rather than *about* their culture (Bolton et al. 2001); that is, these photographs not only *show* objects surrounding participants’ lives, the pictures *embody* the multiple cultural meanings in which participants’ lived experiences are embedded. Hence, photographs produced by participants are ‘first-hand’ representations informed by their emotions and ideas, which are both personal and culturally constructed. The images thus provide insights into participants’ subjective understanding of their experiences and perceptions (Clark-Ibáñez 2007; Croghan et al. 2008), and the way in which they perceive themselves (McIntyre 2003; Noland 2006) as cultural beings. Using auto-photography in my research thus emphasises participants’ authoritative voice to speak for themselves about their sexual desire, while recognising that their narratives and desires are both constituted under cultural influences.

Besides gaining insights into participants’ perceptions, auto-photography also helps access a fuller story of participants’ experiences because it facilitates multiple methods. Auto-photography is intrinsically self-photography plus other methods, and a variety of materials allow the researcher to investigate one issue with multiple approaches. As I mentioned earlier, participants’ spoken and/or written accounts are important as they contextualise the images for viewers. This is not to suggest that participants are always conscious of the reasons why they take certain photos, nor does it claim that participants

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<sup>54</sup> I use the term ‘visual record’ here to indicate that participants’ photographs are physically part of the ‘records’ – evidence of the data – in a research project, just as interview transcripts and journals are also records in this sense. This does not dismiss what I have discussed about photographs not being taken at their surface value.

give ‘honest’ responses all the time; but it is important to provide an opportunity for participants to talk about their photographs and present their stories. In addition, the images and the words are both material that a researcher can analyse for the project. Frith and Harcourt’s (2007) research, for instance, uses auto-photography to generate narratives and photographic records of women’s experiences of chemotherapy. They suggest that participant-generated photos can represent experiences in various symbolic, abstract or more concrete forms; and interviews allow participants to tell their stories as well as contextualising the photographs. Thus, researchers can read the photographs and interview transcripts to analyse the multiple meanings in participants’ narratives.

The multiple methods initiated by auto-photography can reveal underlying meanings within participants’ experiences that may otherwise remain hidden. Bolton et al. (2001) adopted self-photography with interviews, focus groups and written diaries to investigate children’s part-time job experiences in Britain. They argue that auto-photography allows them to uncover details of children’s working conditions from these young participants’ subjective dimensions; furthermore, the multiple methods enable an understanding of several layers of meaning in participants’ photographs – including the physical setting of the workplace, the children’s job details and responsibilities, and the relationships between children and their employers – some of them not obvious at first glance. For instance, the children’s snapshots of empty workplaces indicate their relative powerlessness at work, in that they were not able – or not allowed – to take pictures when it was busy. This information was gathered in the interviews when participants discussed what happened when the photos were taken. With the photographs alone, researchers may not have been able to discover the underlying meanings in the images. Likewise, with interviews alone, researchers may not have been able to ‘picture’ the physical environment of these children’s workplaces; in addition, the power dynamics between the employers and the child workers were revealed in deeper ways.

The choice of which methods to use as part of auto-photography depends on the aim of the research and what sort of materials researchers seek to generate. I adopted self-

photography with journaling and semi-structured interviews<sup>55</sup>. With journals, participants kept a record of the photographic process and wrote down the part of their self-analysis that they were happy to share with me. This is a record that participants could revisit to add, delete or revise as they wished. The written diary is like ‘a letter to the researcher’ that consists of participants’ self-reflections. An interview, on the other hand, is a conversation (Berg 2007) between the participant and the researcher. During the conversation, both parties can raise questions and exchange ideas; and with this interaction, more materials can be generated for the researcher to approach participants’ emotions and conceptualisations of an idea.

Auto-photography as a ‘multiple method’ in itself can generate rich research materials in two ways: eliciting memories and eliciting responses. A photograph can be a captured past that is explored in the present (Frith and Harcourt 2007, p.1345); and in interviews participants’ images can be used to spark memories (Clark-Ibáñez 2007; Samuels 2007; Croghan et al. 2008). The discussion of photographs in interviews, in my experience, can elicit three levels of memories, all of which are crucial materials for research: memories of the event the participant intended to represent in the photos, if any; memories of the circumstances in which photographs were taken, and memories of the decision-making process. This detailed information can help researchers gain a more thorough understanding of participants’ perceptions and self-analysis. In Clark-Ibáñez’ (2007) study – which investigates children’s lives in poverty in inner-city schools in California – she utilised photographs taken by her participants to elicit memories in interviews. Clark-Ibáñez argues that photography stimulates children’s memories; and it provides a friendly interview experience for child participants via a nonlinguistic prompt. Auto-photographic practices and participant-generated photographs can both stimulate participants’ memories, revealing their present interpretation of past events and how their perceptions might have changed over time.

As photographs elicit participants’ memories, they also elicit a narrative response.

Photographs are a ‘visible fragment’ of particular experiences (Radley and Taylor 2003, p.

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<sup>55</sup> I could have used focus groups as part of my methods. Focus groups can be an effective method in auto-photographic projects which are concerned with participants in certain communities, engaging participants in exchanging their opinions on specific issues from their subjective point of view; by doing so, there is the potential for participants to provide each other with support or propose changes to their lives (see McIntyre 2003; Richards 2011). However, I decided not to use focus groups because I anticipated that the idea of talking about sexual desire with a group of strangers would be off-putting for potential participants.

79). When participants look at their photographs, they are often able to describe the content of their images as well as tell a story about their intention. Their responses can be multi-layered, revealing their thoughts, emotions, and their understanding of the topic in question (Samuels 2007; Croghan et al. 2008). Croghan et al. (2008) examined young people's construction of self by asking participants to take snapshots of consumer items that are important to them. They argue that photography brings about a discontinuity between the moment recorded and the moment of looking; and photo-elicited interviews allow participants to bridge this discontinuity by 'inventing' stories that explain the photos. However, this argument is only valid if based on a process wherein participants take snapshots that they are not able to revisit until the interviews. I consider my research practice which requires participants to take digital photographs and keep a journal of the photographic process. Both reviewing and writing about photos allowed participants to continuously reshape their stories. As a result, my participants *might* provide a more comprehensive narrative of their sexuality when they talked about their images in the interviews. That said, participants' photographs still elicited narrative responses in both research projects, but with different approaches.

What are the implications for social researchers of involving 'other people' – participants – in auto-photographic methods? One is that participants are given more 'freedom' in what materials to contribute to the research; hence, auto-photography can bring in significant aspects of participants' perceptions that might be outside of the researcher's purview (Clark-Ibáñez 2007; Samuels 2007). There is potential for participants to add new themes to the research and, by doing so, to reshape the research agenda (Kolb 2008; Allen 2009). Allen's (2009) research applies auto-photography with diary entries and interviews to investigate sexual cultures within schools. Her study found that young participants, through the process of selecting photographs for the research, chose what they wanted to talk about and then focused on that topic. This participant-orientated material therefore has an influence on what scenes might appear in the analysis. In my project, it might not be surprising to learn that 'a sense of freedom' is seen as a positive element of sexual desire; however, I discovered that participants who talked about freedom commonly used outdoor scenes of 'nature' to represent this idea<sup>56</sup>. This is one of the themes that I had not thought about before I received participants' photographs, but it brings me into contact with

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<sup>56</sup> I discuss this part in the section 'The Underrepresented Desire – "Other" Cultural Scripts' in Chapter 6.

participants' materials in a specific way, which allows them to lead me into interpretations of the relationship between desire, freedom and nature.

Since auto-photography enables participants to reshape the research agenda, I again rethink the theme of *empowerment*, as this method potentially reconstitutes the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched<sup>57</sup>. Instead of purporting to already know participants' understanding and experience, I designed a visual method that helped me to access participants' lives, engaging them in a profound analysis of their sexual desire. Hence, for a while, I thought I was collaborating with participants to reveal *their* sexuality and *their* conceptualisations of desire through my methodology. I presented this thought in an oral paper at the *Transformative Feminist Methods Conference* at Durham University in 2014, and I was challenged by a professor to think about who was leading this project and how participants' material would be analysed and represented. Indeed, my methodology encouraged participants to take a much more active role in creating research materials rather than simply being 'responsive' to interview questions; furthermore, it generated profound reflections from both my participants and myself. Nevertheless, it was ultimately *me* who initiated this project for *my* personal interest in sexuality studies; whereas collaborative research should allow participants to lead the project with the analytical skills researchers bring in. Additionally, Burck (2005) suggests that collaborative projects should enable participants to add comments to transcripts and analyses; however, this was beyond the scope of my research: I was the one who decided the analytical themes and interpreted their materials. Even though I worked with my participants to ensure that I complied with their wishes – including which images not to publish, and to share my research 'findings' upon request – to claim that my research is a *collaborative* project would be ill-judged and untrue. This experience prompted me to re-examine my position as a researcher in this project; more importantly, it questions to what extent – if any – my project *empowers* participants.

In conclusion, auto-photography is a 'multiple method' which engages photography and other methods of self-analysis in written, spoken or other visual accounts. The practice

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<sup>57</sup> The 'empowerment' I discuss here is contextual to the research practice in which participants' auto-photographic materials might reshape the research agenda, hence changing the power relationship between researchers and the 'researched'. I still question whether a change in the broader social climate can be achieved through auto-photography. I am aware of the potential contradictions, and I return to this topic in Chapter 7.

itself raises consciousness and empowers producers as they create images as a form of activism to counter dominant media portrayals of people's lives. The auto-photographic projects I have discussed foreshadow the possibility of participants in my research gaining a sense of empowerment; however, there were many challenges. I wonder, in what ways can I regard my research and my participants' input as activist work? To what extent am I involving my participants in the co-creation of knowledge? While my auto-photographic method generated rich materials from participants, and thus provided me with insights into their understandings and experiences of sexuality, it also raises particular ethical concerns. In Part Two, I discuss my own research practice, telling the story of the practical element of my research, addressing the process of recruiting participants, material generation and analysis, and the ethical issues that arose in this 'sensitive' study of women's sexual desire.

## **Part Two: My Research Practice**

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, 'photographing desire' originated from the idea of combining my two research interests – exploring women's sexual desire and photography – into a single project. By doing so, I am not assuming that desire is aroused exclusively by the visual, although vision, being one of the senses, can be part of the sensation that leads to sexual desire. Reflecting on my choice of using photography – rather than any other possible sensory construction or medium – I am aware that my decision stemmed partly from being accustomed to the prevailing sexual images in popular culture. I did not intend to compare participants' photographs with popular sexual images, although I understand that the participants themselves and their generated materials are embedded in cultural norms which shape the meanings of visual signs. This means that participants can use their cultural knowledge to construct an image that either fits in with or challenges dominant media portrayals of women's sexuality. I facilitate journaling and semi-structured interviews as part of the auto-photographic project in order to approach women's diverse experiences and feelings associated with their sexual desire.

I describe the methodology in this project as *innovative* not because using visual methods is new or uncommon. While diverse photographic methods have been used in social research, as I have already discussed in this chapter, this project offers a space for participants to be creative in expressing themselves, and it initiates material *generation*. Additionally, auto-photography motivated my participants and me to think about what

sexual desire meant to us, and how to represent it in photographs. Using auto-photography to investigate women's sexual desire is not in itself an original idea (see, for example, Hensel et al. 2011; Allen 2008, 2009), although it is still quite rare; however, I hope that my project can inspire other social researchers to explore this method. I propose that the self-analysis generated by auto-photography can provide researchers with profound insights into how participants negotiate their personal preferences by using cultural conventions. In this project in particular, participants had the autonomy to develop their ideas and choose what materials they wished to contribute. By examining the reasons for their decision-making, I was able to uncover how participants' social relationships shaped their personal choices.

This project adopts feminist epistemology to explore women's sexual desire. Feminist epistemology is not a coherent way of understanding but, on the whole, it takes seriously women's own interpretations of their experiences. This research appreciates the multiplicity of women participants' stories because 'woman' is not a unified category. Women come from various social and cultural backgrounds, have different interpersonal power relations with each other, and have diverse experiences (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002). The project avoids generalisation so as to avoid silencing participants' stories. Furthermore, my methodology encouraged participants' active engagement, a feminist move which turned my research 'objects' into active subjects (Acker et al. 1983), not only in the production of research materials but also during self-analysis and conceptualisation. Although the project aims to investigate women's sexual desire, this does not mean that gender is taken as an unchallenged, unproblematic social concept; rather, it examines how each participant conceptualised desire as a self-identified woman from her own unique social location.

Feminist research should allow participants to have *autonomy* in articulating themselves in their own words, rather than to be spoken of by the researcher (Reinharz 1992). Margrit Shildrick (1997) theorises two aspects of autonomy: passively, it means freedom from interference; and actively, to do something (pp.86–7). To state that participants have autonomy in expressing themselves suggests that they have both the *will* to do so, and the means to put their thoughts into *action*. However, I do acknowledge that participants, as cultural beings, can never be completely 'free' from social norms in the process of

producing and selecting materials for research. Still, I hope that with this methodology women are able to express their thoughts, experiences and emotions in their own voice, even though their subjectivities and narratives are undoubtedly shaped by social norms and cultural discourses. As I invited participants' active engagement and input into this project, I also invited them to co-create themes and ideas for it. Auto-photography provided some flexibility for participants to explore the question 'what is (not) sexually desirable to you?' while the interviews I conducted are conversations with participants, in which we exchanged and generated ideas. As a result, new themes, ideas-in-development and reflections all form part of the research materials generated.

I now move on to discuss my research practice. I begin with my recruitment strategies, followed by details of the three-phase material generation, and then discuss the ethical concerns that arose in this project.

### Recruiting Participants

Because of the highly participatory methods I facilitated in this project, and the sensitive subject of 'sexual desire', I expected that recruiting participants would be a challenge. It required me to explore various options and consider possible online recruitment methods, and also demanded flexibility in modifying part of my project. This section thus reflects on shifts in the research process, focusing on the participants' required age-range, the challenges of using online recruitment, and the difficulties of finding participants living in Taiwan.

When the project began, my plan was to recruit about 16 women – 10 living in the UK and 6 living in Taiwan – aged between 20 and 30. I originally set it up like this because these were people 'like me': I have personal experience of living in the two countries and am in this age group. I wanted to explore, within this 'sameness', what were other women's experiences and ideas of sexuality? I also hoped to conduct some form of cross-cultural analysis. However, right from the start, I encountered difficulties recruiting participants for the pilot research. It appeared that only women who were passionate about this topic and highly motivated were prepared to commit to their participation. Furthermore, a pilot interview I undertook with Celeste made me wonder if the age limit was useful. Celeste was a fifty-year-old British woman who shared with me ideas about how her desire has

changed over the years, including how her menopause has made her feel undesirable. She reflected on her life trajectory and decided that her sexuality could best be described as ‘currently in a same-sex relationship’. After this interview, I thought about how many important stories might be missed out if I restricted the upper age-limit, and I did not want to stop women from expressing their ideas in this project simply because of their age. Eventually I opened up the age range to ‘over 18’, after considering the age of consent in both the UK and Taiwan<sup>58</sup>.

I adopted several methods to recruit participants, and found the Internet efficacious. To begin with, I started a blog called ‘Photographing Desire’ (<http://photographingdesire.wordpress.com/>) to provide details of the research, information about how to take part, and some examples from the pilot participants. There are posts in both English and Taiwanese Mandarin, the main languages used in the two focus countries. Secondly, I sent out an e-mail call for participants (Appendix 1). This contains the project outline and a link to the blog. It was not long before I realised that e-mail was not very effective for recruitment. At the same time, my personal experience of social networking gave me the idea of creating a Facebook event (<https://www.facebook.com/events/392196510837307/>) to spread the news. Facebook offers several advantages over email. When using the e-mail call for participants I could not readily follow the spread of the information, and my friends and colleagues could be a potential ‘filter’ because they had to choose who was ‘appropriate’ to send the e-mail to, as this particular mode of communication is still a relatively private exchange of information between people.

Sharing a Facebook event is different from forwarding e-mails, and there are two ways people can spread my call for participants on Facebook. They can either share the event on their profiles – which is less private than a personal message – or ‘invite’ friends to the event to draw specific people’s attention. Since Facebook notified me of the invitees and whenever someone shared the event, I could get an idea of how many people might have heard about the research. In addition, Facebook is the way I keep in contact with the majority of my friends in Taiwan; hence, I expected that networking – both through my own and my friends’ pages – should be an effective method for me to find Taiwanese

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<sup>58</sup> The age of consent is 16 in both the UK and Taiwan; however, the laws in Taiwan prohibit people under 18 years of age from viewing sexually explicit materials. Considering that participants in this project might *produce* sexually explicit materials or discuss their sexual encounters in order to discuss desire, I set a minimum age of 18 to comply with the laws in both countries.

participants. The event page also provided a platform for interested audience members to ask questions about my research. Using a Facebook event to call for participants meant that I depended largely on my friends to share the event to a wider audience. Yet, one risk of using Facebook event recruitment is that I worried about participants' identities being exposed. My strategy was to encourage whoever supported this project to click 'join'; and to emphasise that provisional participants should contact me via e-mail or private messages.

I was approached by 30 women. 19 of them agreed to take part, and 4 dropped out before they could finish the photographs. Including the 3 women in my pilot studies, 18 women in total participated in this project (see Appendix 2). As pilot participants put as much effort into their materials as later participants, and their materials were inspiring to me, I decided to include them in this project. Although several women living in Taiwan contacted me during the early stages of recruitment, none of them decided to join the research. I originally scheduled interviews in Taiwan for after I had finished the material generation in the UK. Provisional participants in Taiwan all agreed to wait for further notice of the dates and confirmation of participation; however, when I tried to contact them again, many simply did not respond. Eventually, only one Taiwanese woman, who was studying in the UK at the time, joined this project. It is difficult to know why there was a lack of ultimate involvement from participants living in Taiwan. It could be that it is unconventional for women to talk about their sexualities in Taiwan, and that the time gap and geographical distance only made them feel more uncertain about participating<sup>59</sup>. Although I was keen to find out why these women had changed their minds, I could not know as they did not respond to my requests for information. As a result, the 18 participants who took part in this research were all living in the UK, although they span seven<sup>60</sup> nationalities. The following section explains how we proceeded with material generation.

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<sup>59</sup> Participants living in Taiwan would have started their self-photography and journals in early 2013, as I planned to conduct interviews in April/May 2013.

<sup>60</sup> As one participant identified her nationality as 'Scottish', I am classifying Scottish as a separate nationality to British.

## Material Generation: The Three Phases and Beyond...

My methodology facilitated the generation of material in the following order: firstly, a preliminary meeting/Skype video chat; secondly, the self-photography and journaling process; and thirdly, the semi-structured interview. A guide to each phase was described on the research blog, linked to the ‘call for participants’ message. The three phases were designed to ensure that participants were given enough information about the project, and that they had some time and personal space to develop their ideas.

### *Phase 1: Preliminary Meeting/Skype Video Chat*

I learnt from my master’s project that participants could feel awkward and nervous when they disclosed personal information to a researcher whom they barely knew. Hence, in this project, I considered it more appropriate to arrange an early individual meeting with each participant. The purposes of this meeting were for participants to learn more details about the project, to have their questions answered, and to fill in the demographic and consent forms. The preliminary meeting was also a good opportunity for participants to get to know me better. In fact, as it turned out, many participants were keen to know more about the origins of this project, including how I composed the methods and why the research is important to me. I met most of my participants in person in cafés in York, while I Skyped with those living in more distant locations.

A word about Skype. It is an online communication software application that one can download for free. If two Skype accounts are connecting to each other through the Internet, it is free to use typed messages and live chat with or without a webcam. One can also pay at different rates for the computer to access phone services. Skype is a cost-effective tool for interviews (Cater 2011) as it saves time and money by removing the necessity for long-distance travel. It is also very convenient to send digital documents to participants through the software as we chat. Although it is slightly more limiting to interact via Skype than in ‘real life’ meetings – as the latter allows physical contact and the observation of more body language – it is an effective medium for interviews when meeting in person is not convenient, especially if one uses the video chat facility. I therefore arranged to ‘meet’ several participants on Skype to talk about the research. As well as the technological advantages, video chat engages our emotions in interpersonal communication. Firstly, the

video function creates a ‘closer’ form of interaction than a telephone call can offer. Participants and I were able to see each other’s facial expressions and some body language through the live video. The use of Skype video chat can also be quite ‘intimate’ because of the close-up shots that focus on the face, and habitually many users prefer to use Skype chat in a more personal setting, such as talking to friends and families. Many users, including me, also prefer to chat on Skype in a quiet, closed environment to make sure conversations are not interrupted. These elements altogether have brought me closer to my participants as we exchanged information *on Skype*. We observed each other and ourselves through the windows on the screen, we apologised for our messy hair and untidy bookshelves and then laughed together. In general, these preliminary meetings reassured us, and developed positive feelings about the research.

For the preliminary meeting, I prepared a package of three documents for participants to read and sign. The package contained an information sheet (Appendix 3), a consent form (Appendix 4) and a demographic form (Appendix 5). The information sheet describes the three phases, provides guidelines for the auto-photography process, and gives contact information for me and my supervisor. The consent form is a checklist for participants to confirm how their data will be used, that they agree to take part in this research, and that they understand their right to withdraw. The demographic form asks about participants’ backgrounds, information which might be useful in my analysis. I emphasised that they could leave certain sections blank, or be creative with their answers if they wished. I believe this ‘flexibility’ gives participants space to express how they see themselves, and importantly what they identify with, in line with their own epistemology. There is an additional space for participants to write down other information that they would like to be in the record. This allows them to add items that are important to their lives that I might have ignored. Josephine, for instance, was very surprised that I did not put ‘religious belief’ as one of the demographic questions, and she used this space to state her identity as a Pentecostal Christian – as religion plays a crucial role in her life and the ways in which she approached ‘desire’ in this project. At the bottom of the demographic form there is a section where participants can confirm if they want to be anonymous or not; and if relevant to choose a pseudonym. The anonymity and the choice of personal pseudonym have ethical implications which I address later in this chapter.

After the preliminary meeting, I suggested that participants keep in touch with me, and take about three weeks for the photography and the journaling. This process is what I framed as ‘the second phase.’

### *Phase 2: Self-photography and Journaling*

In this phase, participants were given time and space to take photographs of props and/or their bodies, representing what they find sexually *desirable* and *undesirable*. To decide what ‘key terms’ to use in the guidelines for self-photography, I had quite detailed discussions with native English speakers. The language around sexual desire is complicated, and I found it challenging to find the most appropriate terms. I needed terms that were clear enough to guide participants; also they needed to inspire and not limit participants’ photographic explorations<sup>61</sup>.

In terms of what subjects to photograph, I discounted terms such as *sexy* or *desiring*. Prior to the material generation, I had a discussion with some fellow PhD students about the terms I was using. One of them told me that she would describe chocolates as ‘sexy’ but not ‘sexually desirable’. (I jokingly replied that maybe chocolate half unwrapped would be even sexier.) ‘Sexy’ seems to suggest an objectified, sexualised image; Schwarz (2010) describes the term as a ‘standard for visually exciting objects’ since the visualisation of sex became more common during the 1950s in Western cultures (pp.638–9). I was investigating how women participants engaged with their sexual desire as active agents, particularly how they experienced sexual desire and what they felt about it, rather than looking at what participants might objectify in their representation of sexual desire. In the pilot studies, I used the term ‘sexually desirable’ in the instructions for participants to take photographs. I considered changing it to ‘sexually desiring’ and consulted with Celeste, who told me that this alteration would not make much difference. After much consideration, I decided to ask participants to take pictures of subjects that represent (a) what is sexually desirable and (b) what is not sexually desirable. I am aware that the term ‘desirable’ may lead participants to think of ‘desirability’, which suggests the ‘attractiveness’ of the objectified body rather than the women’s subjective sexual desire (see Jackson and Scott 2010b, pp.144–5). However, I also explained the aim of my research to participants through a written description and discussions, which helped to

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<sup>61</sup> I also discussed finding appropriate terms in Taiwanese Mandarin in Chapter 1.

establish an understanding that I intended to investigate their emotions and experiences of desire. The use of ‘sexually desirable’ enabled participants to engage with the various aspects of their desire via photography, which may still include the objects of their desire, but not exclusively so.

I encouraged participants to take as many pictures in as many ways as they wished; alongside this, I asked them to keep a record of how they chose the subjects, focusing on their feelings and any related stories. Then participants were asked to choose about 10 pictures – five of the desirable, and another five of the undesirable – and send them to me along with the journals. I let participants know that if there was any photo that represented their desire in a useful way, but they did not feel comfortable sharing, they could describe the image in journals for later discussion. Furthermore, the setup of ‘5/5’ pictures was more of a guideline than a definite rule. There was no specific format for the journal. I suggested that participants write in any style they preferred that would help me understand their photographs. A photograph itself can represent multiple ideas, memories, emotions or imageries that are personal to the participant. The journal, thus, offers a context for me to understand what participants wanted to express with their pictures. Most participants also wrote in order to develop their thoughts and interpretations of sexual desire.

These two methods are complimentary because there are some meanings that photographs by themselves cannot express, while there are also messages that photographic images communicate better than words (Berger and Mohr 1979–80). For instance, pictures of suffering animals can be more powerful than words alone to raise people’s consciousness about animal testing; while, in this project, words were used to provide contexts for the photographs. Using both photography and journaling during this phase made participants feel that they could tell a fuller story; as Celeste said in interview:

I quite like doing the, I like the style of it, doing the photo journal. Because I think having the opportunity to take a photograph and write something, it helped you to kind of...I think if you would have just one or the other, it would have been much more limiting. If you just have a photo that just captures one second, it doesn’t give you the opportunity to write about it. While if you just have the writing, it’s...the photo really helps to illustrate what you are trying to say, I think. (Celeste, interview)

The photographs and the journals were made and sent in digital formats. The use of digital media has become so taken-for-granted that neither the participants nor I thought about confirming it. Participants in this research were familiar with working with computers and online; all the files were either sent through e-mail or shared with me in online space. At the time of material generation, to transfer digital files between devices and to share images over the Internet were not difficult, but the vast development of Internet technology and file-sharing applications since then has made it even more convenient to communicate digitally<sup>62</sup>.

As I have mentioned, my research practice has been revised several times. Likewise, the design of the second phase has undergone some adjustments and benefited from pilot participants' feedback. My original idea was to have women participants take pictures of their bodies, in part or as a whole, that are sexually desirable and undesirable to them. There were several concerns arising from the pilot interview experience. Firstly, the setup of photographing 'desirable body parts' can put off potential participants, making recruitment very challenging. I imagined many women would feel uneasy about participating because they might link the idea with 'photographing sexual organs', although this may not necessarily be the case. Secondly, photographing an 'undesirable body' in the pilot studies made participants feel unhappy. Jessica told me that it felt as though she had to 'find fault' with her body. Additionally, this design might make participants feel as though they have to scrutinise and expose their bodies: rather than focusing on their subjective desire, participants might turn to focus on objectified sexual bodies. As a result, the instruction to photograph 'only' the body was revised and opened up to include props and other elements that participants find appropriate. This means that participants can have more space to be creative in producing their visual representations; it also suggests that desire, associated with embodied experiences and feelings, is not confined to the physicality of the body<sup>63</sup>.

Another adjustment that I made was to the 'instructions', which appears to be trivial, but was in fact influential in the process of material generation. I originally asked for five

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<sup>62</sup> The Office for National Statistics estimated that, in 2014, 84% of households in Great Britain had Internet access, and 76% of the adult population accesses the Internet every day. The percentage of Internet access using a mobile phone has more than doubled between 2010 (24%) and 2014 (58%).

<sup>63</sup> I discuss participants' embodied experience of desire in Chapter 5.

photos for each category (desirable / undesirable) and this was changed to encourage participants to take as many pictures as they wanted, and then to *choose* which images to send to me. This adjustment led to a change in practice. In the previous exercise, participants would aim to complete the 10 pictures while the revised instructions encouraged them to experiment more, and to become more involved in active decision-making by choosing photographs that best represent their ideas.

I acknowledge that the material generation demanded much time and effort from the participants. Even though I suggested that the second phase could be done in three to four weeks, many participants required more time before they could do the interviews. Most participants needed eight to nine weeks to finish the second phase – the shortest length was three weeks and the longest was 22 weeks. How long this phase took for each participant depended largely on their personal commitment and the ways in which they approached it. Several processes were delayed because participants were busy with their studies, and one was postponed because of the Christmas holidays. Participants who lived in London and Edinburgh had slightly more time because I had to plan my travel, although they had less flexibility to extend the process. Some participants were very committed to the project, and aimed for ‘high standards’ for their photographs, so they took longer before they were satisfied with their images. At the same time, there was time pressure for me to complete the material collection. Under these circumstances, keeping track of each participant’s progress became a crucial but difficult task. After our first meeting, I kept in contact with each participant every two weeks via e-mail or Facebook messages. I did not intend for participants to rush, but I also wanted to be sure that they did not encounter too much difficulty during the process. Once participants were ready, they would send me their photos and journals and we would arrange for the interviews.

### *Phase 3: Semi-structured Interviews*

In this last phase, I conducted in-person interviews with each participant. I decided to do this for several reasons. Firstly, even though Skype is a useful tool for interviews and there is software that can help with recording, there was still a physical distance between participants and me. While Skype ‘face-to-face’ video chat does create the feeling of closeness during the first stage of meeting, many people still think that it is the interaction in ‘real life’, the in-person meeting that counts as being formally introduced to each other.

When participants who lived outside of York and I met for the interviews, we greeted each other with ‘it’s great to finally meet you.’ Also, travelling to places that were convenient for participants was the least I felt I could do in appreciation of their devotion to this project. Having in-person conversations also helped to build up friendships between participants and me. This interpersonal relationship is valuable because of my feminist concern with women’s lived experiences and the support we offer to each other. At the end of each interview, I suggested that participants keep in touch if they wished, both to add more ideas to their materials if relevant, and to learn more about my analysis<sup>64</sup>.

There were two main sections to the interview. In the first section, participants and I shared our ideas and stories of sexual desire; and in the second, participants talked about their experiences of auto-photography. Prior to the interview, I prepared open questions in response to each participant’s photographs and journals. I started each interview with the same question: what words pop into your head when you hear the term ‘sexual desire’? Then we chatted about various aspects of sexual desire, based on their pictures and journals. We also talked about the process of auto-photography – the difficulties they encountered, the things they enjoyed, ideas that were helpful for me both to assess this project, and to adjust my methods for future research. The interviews, or ‘conversations’, were arranged in quiet, closed environments, such as participants’ homes and private offices, to provide privacy and for the convenience of audio-recording.

Semi-structured interviews provide participants with more space in the conversation to elaborate upon their thoughts and tell their stories than a survey or a structured interview. In this project, interviews are ‘conversations’ that I had with each participant; they did not simply ‘answer questions’. Instead, participants and I exchanged our views and experiences. Through the discussions, participants and I had the opportunity to reflect on each other’s comments, and our understanding of desire could potentially be reshaped. As a result, subjects covered in each interview varied depending not only on participants’ materials, but also on how the conversations ‘flowed’. As the journals assisted me in approaching participants’ photographs, the conversations help me to access a more thorough picture of the cultural norms, embodied experiences and theories associated with women’s desire. Additionally, I conducted four follow-up interviews with three

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<sup>64</sup> I will address the issue of building friendships and ‘friends as participants’ in the ethics section.

participants to clarify some ideas that emerged from their materials, and to further discuss their conceptualisations of desire.

It was also during the last phase that I confirmed participants' anonymity and their consent to the use of photographs in publications. I am cautious about the ethics of using data in this research, particularly the photographs created by the participants, for two possibly contradictory reasons: maintaining participants' anonymity and acknowledging participants' effort. In addition, I am aware of my friendships with participants – some I already knew before the project, while others have built friendships with me – and where I locate myself in this project has some influence on this research. I now turn to these ethical considerations.

### Ethics

In order to conduct this research, I obtained ethics approval from the University of York by completing a form in which I provided information about how I have ensured my own safety and that of my participants, and confirmed that I have also paid careful attention to privacy and copyright issues. However, the ethics of this research stretched far beyond the requirements of this form, and in this part I cover four significant concerns: participants' choice of 'names', the publishing of participants' photos in different contexts, building friendships with participants, and locating myself in this research.

Firstly, in this project participants could choose whether they wished to be anonymous, and if so, they could pick their own pseudonyms. Although much social research does not offer any options – and the informants are usually numbered or named by the researcher for privacy and convenience – in this project, I left this choice to participants as I appreciate their commitment and that they took their creative output seriously. They are 'participants' who produced texts and developed knowledge, and as such should be credited for their effort and creativity. Yet while I do not consider that participants need full 'protection' in the context of this project, I do want to ensure that taking part in this research will not cause any undue inconvenience or uncomfortable feelings for them. A few participants took anonymity seriously. Alexia, for instance, did not want her friends or family to know about her participation; she was also very conscious that what she said in the interview should not reveal any personal traits. Some other participants did not mind sharing their

experience of taking part, and they picked pseudonyms that are personally important. There is also Rachel, who decided to go by her official name because she perceived her participation to be an act of bravery. By providing the options of anonymity and choosing their own pseudonym, on one hand, I let participants decide how their materials can be represented – which is important for recognising their contribution in co-creating knowledge. On the other hand, I use this design to take responsibility for interpreting each participant's materials; hence, if a participant thought that I might have misrepresented her materials, she could contact me for discussion.

The second ethical concern is how the photographs would be presented in different contexts, and how that might violate participants' privacy. Some photographs are presented in this thesis, a few on the research blog, and more might be published at conferences and in journal papers. Some participants did not feel comfortable sharing images that contain personal traits or private items that could potentially disclose their identities to the public, particularly because this project deals with the sensitive subject of sexuality. Therefore, I confirmed with participants three types of publication: my online blog<sup>65</sup>, in journals and at conferences, and in this thesis. I did so in response to the social 'reality' that sexuality is a sensitive subject for many; hence, participants' images should be carefully managed so as not to reveal who they are. Another thought I had was to respect participants' feelings because they might feel more comfortable sharing their images in a more 'private' setting rather than seeing them in public forums. Most participants felt more comfortable with their images being presented in the thesis, partly because it is grounded in an academic context, and also because it may not reach a large audience. Some participants were much more concerned about their photographs being published online, since the pictures could easily be taken out of context and used by someone else, not to mention the fact that anyone who has Internet access can potentially find their images. The context of journal papers and conferences is located in the middle of the spectrum, as some participants understood the value for me to present their materials in research; however, they needed to weight this against the possibility of being recognised. Due to the fact that a digital copy of this thesis will be published on White Rose E-Theses Online and the University of York

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<sup>65</sup> I am quite cautious about how images might be used when they are taken out of their original setting; and when photos are published on the Internet, they can be easily accessible and used. In order to make distributing 'stolen' images more difficult, I inserted a watermark of the blog link onto those photographs displayed online. I also reassured participants that I would consult them before publishing their photographs on the blog.

Library website – a factor that I was not aware of until much later – the images I present in this thesis are the ones that participants would ‘at least’ agree to being published in journal papers. Reflecting on this experience, I am aware that I could have asked participants not to contribute any images that they could not give me full permission to publish; however, this would have elicited a stronger self-censorship and prevented me from accessing such rich materials.

Even with participants’ consent, there are a few sexually explicit photographs which made me think about wider issues related to publishing such images in research. Sexuality is a sensitive subject; for instance, mainstream visual media such as films, TV or exhibitions which explore or depict ‘sex’ always come with a warning: ‘contains sexual scenes’. As a researcher, I need to be attentive to readers’ feelings that some sexual images can generate disturbing emotions. In our research centre, where all the other PhD students had to share offices, I was even allowed to have my own work space so that my colleagues would not encounter these explicit materials accidentally. However, I think it is equally important to challenge the notion that sexual materials should receive special treatment. Sexuality can be regarded as just another aspect of human lives rather than a feature that should be kept in particular secrecy and privacy. Furthermore, I wonder what is at stake if I censor participants’ images, which represent *their* sexual desire, while in popular and high culture it has mostly been women’s bodies that are sexualised<sup>66</sup>? Does this not suggest that women can never make their self-representations and their subjective desire visible, but can only be objects of desire? This is a particularly difficult task that I am not sure how to negotiate.

A further issue that arose in terms of publishing images was *third-party copyright* and I had to consult the University copyright advisor about this. A few participants photographed – not copying and pasting – materials such as a still from a video, or a celebrity photo they found on the Internet; furthermore, I also intended to use a few images from advertisements and from Google Search Engine for analysis. Hence, I was worried about whether participants or I would infringe the law by publishing these images in the thesis. I was advised that unless my participant had transformed the photo in some way, she would have breached the law by taking a picture of such images on the computer screen and

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<sup>66</sup> Feminist artists such as Guerrilla Girls have been challenging the extensive representations of naked females in popular and high culture, and they have pointed out that the work of female artists is almost invisible in museums.

sharing it with me; however, it is arguable that my participant was *quoting* such materials provided that her use was *fair dealing*; and that the quality of her reproduction was so low that it could not have affected the market for the original work. As for my case, I was advised that, according to the law<sup>67</sup>, one does not infringe any copyright by quoting the work for criticism or review, as long as one provides sufficient acknowledgement. The advice I received affected my decision about whether to publish a few of the participants' images or to describe them in words instead. As a researcher, I have to be cautious about my ethics to both respect the original creator and protect my participants.

My third ethical concern is about doing research with *friends*. Forming friendships with participants in this project is a reasonable and expected result. James (1986 cited in Reinharz 1992) argues that building a friendship with participants helps avoid the alienation of the researcher from the participants (p.20). This connection can bring the researcher closer to sympathising with participants' experiences and emotions. Feminist research is concerned with human beings' gendered experiences; in its pursuit of knowledge building it is embedded within a context of care and support for people. The friendships established between participants and me could potentially be long-lasting and will enable continuing support, or even co-creation again in the future. One challenge that emerged was around difficult sexual experiences being disclosed, and one participant told me about being sexually abused as a child. This was unexpected and indeed quite upsetting for me. It was not easy to negotiate my personal emotions at the same time as contemplating how I should react, both as a researcher and as a friend. In the end, I listened to her story of how that past experience affects her thoughts about sexual desire and decided that she was not asking for help; otherwise I would have suggested some professional consultants.

Doing interviews with friends is practically beneficial, although it may also have generated some limitations to this project. For instance, friendship might affect participants'

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<sup>67</sup> See Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, Section 30: <<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/48/section/30>>

decisions about whether to disclose specific experiences or feelings<sup>68</sup>, such as my friend's disclosure of her experience of sexual abuse. Another possibility is that my friends and I may share similar views, for instance, on the subject of women's desire; therefore, the scope of this research may be limited. However, doing interviews with friends does not make the data less valid. I argue that building friendships with participants is consequential to understanding women's lived experience. Some women might feel restrained in talking about their sexuality because of cultural conventions. Participants might be more at ease about sharing their stories with someone they know and are comfortable with. Additionally, friendship building with participants was an expected result in this research because it brought together women with shared interests. It is almost certain that women who are willing to go through this demanding process will have some passion for exploring women's expression of sexuality, photography, or both. Thus, the relationship between each participant and me was very likely to become closer than before the interviews because we have exchanged ideas and stories with each other.

Finally, it is important to recognise where *I* am located in this research. I position myself as a woman who belongs to the 'group' being researched, and I experimented with this methodology to explore my desire as part of 'women's desire'. I went through the process of making some photographs and writing journals of my sexuality; however, I did not include my materials in this thesis. This was partly because I could not 'complete' the whole process: I kept changing my mind during self-photography, and although participants and I exchanged ideas, I could not interview myself. Furthermore, I did not have the choice to be anonymous in my own project: I struggled between wanting to include my own visual experiments of representing my sexuality, and being nervous about my family and relatives' reaction to my images. I felt much more comfortable considering myself a 'facilitator' who generated materials and discussion with my participants. I recognise my own cultural location and that my interpretation of participants' materials is dependent on my personal knowledge, which is constituted within available discourses. Even though I wanted to sit down with my participants on a more equal level – because they were the active creators and subjects of this research – I am aware that, after all, I was

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<sup>68</sup> Participants might choose what information to disclose depending on their relationship with the researcher, be it friends or not. However, here, I am particularly concerned with how 'friends' would assume that I have readily acquired some personal knowledge of them, or might sideline the research context. In the workshop *Research/Ing In Asia* at the University of York, Ting-Fang Chin (2015) talked about putting on a 'researcher's mask' when she interviewed her friends to remind them of the research setting. This is a potential method to consider for future projects.

the researcher who designed this methodology, and the one who actively chose which materials to use and how I should analyse them.

### Analysis

As would be expected from this complex research practice, my method generated multiple materials: 22 interview transcripts (including four from follow-up interviews), 21 journals, and a total of 183 photographs created by 18 participants. I was keen, as I have indicated before, to engage participants' ideas as valid knowledge in order for them to become co-creators of my research investigations; meanwhile, I also wanted to read participants' materials critically to examine other subtle meanings embedded in their words and images. This is not a straightforward task. My analytical method needs to be as flexible as my method of material generation in order to represent participants' understanding while I keep to my critical reading. The analytical methods I discuss in this section apply to Chapters 4 and 5, where I focus on participants' own understanding. I adopt different approaches to reading participants' photographs in Chapter 6, and I explain my methods for visual analysis in that chapter.

I used thematic analysis with techniques drawn from discourse analysis and a narratives approach to interpret participants' *words*. Using thematic analysis, I identified ideas that were frequently and extensively represented by participants themselves. Meanwhile, by adopting techniques from discourse analysis and the narratives approach, I treated participants' interpretations of desire as felt and experienced in a local context, rather than as 'social realities'. Additionally, I paid attention to how participants made sense of their sexuality by constructing a coherent story which aligned their photos, journals and interview accounts.

My analysis started when I received participants' journals and photographs. Before each interview, I read participants' writings alongside their corresponding images – sometimes there would be a few pieces of journal on their own, as participants chose not to send through the photos – to prepare the interview questions. During this process, I familiarised myself with the contexts of the photos; and by picking out important themes which I wanted to talk about, I was readily interpreting participants' materials. However, as I brought my questions to our conversations, participants were able to develop new ideas

surrounding their created work and their previous thoughts on desire; thus redirecting my thematic focus. After gathering all the materials – including participants’ journals, photographs and interview transcripts – I put each participant’s products side by side to get a fuller picture of her theorisation and developing ideas. Two interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. I transcribed them first, and then translated the resulting data into English contextually, in keeping with the theme of discussion rather than using a literal word-for-word translation. I am aware that the ways in which I transcribed and translated are clearly a result of my interpretation (Locke 2004; Burck 2005).

Besides reading multiple materials by each participant, I also used NVivo – a qualitative data analysis package – to code the research materials by identifying common themes. I chose NVivo over other software because it allows me to code the photographs by capturing parts or as a whole, and the codes I created can be used for both words and visual data. When I viewed participants’ materials as a whole, they were full of diverse ideas; as a result, I ‘instinctively’ created 44 codes at first. Aronson (1995) suggests that, by constructing themes through thematic analysis, researchers can bring together fragments of ideas that are meaningless on their own. To bring out the ‘shared’ ideas, I examined each code and its corresponding materials. I identified five main themes which had a larger representation: participants’ *interpretations* of desire, their interactions with and expectations of their sexual *partners*, their focus on *sexual acts* and *pleasure*, an understanding shaped by *feminist ideas*, and their extensive references to the *body* – including their body image and embodied feelings. As I further engaged with these materials, I found that many participants and I all had difficulties *defining* desire. I conducted follow-up interviews with three participants to discuss this finding, and their responses – including Brigitte’s developed analogy that I quoted in Chapter 1 – led me to focus on the more ‘cultural’ and ‘personal’ dimensions in my previously constructed themes. The ‘cultural impact’ incorporates one’s upbringing – including religious, family and cultural background – popular sexual representations and feminist ideas; and the theme of body includes self-perception, sensory experiences, and embodied interaction. The in-depth conversations not only helped me to understand how participants thought about my interpretation (see Tuckett 2005) – at the very least, they agreed that it was not possible to talk directly about desire – it also generated a more profound language of desire that I incorporated into my research.

## Conclusion

This research facilitates auto-photography as an innovative feminist methodology which engages participants' ideas in co-creating knowledge about women's sexual desire. Other auto-photographic projects have suggested that the practice raises the consciousness of the producers, and images created through this method can become activist work to counter popular media representations. When applied as a social research method, auto-photography functions to generate materials that provide insights into participants' lived experience and the cultures they inhabit. I hoped, perhaps rather naively, to bring positive change to participants' lives, so I incorporated self-photography, journaling and interviews in a three-phase practice to generate participants' in-depth self-analysis of their sexuality. Participants' materials suggest that they were reflexive about their lived sexualities, and that their ideas developed as they exchanged thoughts with me in our conversations. Furthermore, their varying textual and visual representations brought to light the diversity amongst 'women' that is relatively unseen in the ubiquitous discourses of 'female sexuality' in popular media, indicating that this gendering is not homogeneous.

This social research project has activist potential. By allowing participants personal time and space, I encouraged them to experiment and be creative with their own auto-photographic practices. I designed flexible methods for participants to explore 'desire' via self-photography as well as to make choices about the construction of their images and their publication in my thesis. Thus, participants were confident when they provided materials that I was taking their knowledge into account as valid. Furthermore, by working with participants over a period of time, particularly with a few follow-up conversations, I incorporated their profound understanding into my analysis. Participants' insightful contributions and our ongoing interactions inspired me to re-examine the relationship between the researcher and the researched, and made me more aware of my own position, of my power as well as my limitations as the designer and facilitator of this project; thus, throughout this work, I endeavour to find my own creative way in order to understand and weave together the ingenuity of the women who generously gave their time and energy to this project.

## Chapter 4

### The Cultural Practice of Desire

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In my interview with Pumpkin, she suggested that desire was related to ‘choice’ which, she asserted, was a personal response to a desired other. Reflecting on an earlier chat about ‘cultural influences’ on sexuality, I asked Pumpkin whether she thought the ‘choice’ she mentioned could be culturally conditioned rather than a ‘free choice’. She answered:

Now that you mention it, I think desire might be similar to choice in this sense. Like, the choice you talk about is, whether you would make a choice or not make a choice is under the cultural influence. [pause] Some of these influences, are, for instance, not, not analysed when it comes to emotion and desire. I think there are reasons behind [emotion and desire]. So, I think there are two aspects to it. One is the choice that is constituted by the broader, cultural elements, and the other is a kind of a personal choice, a deeper personal choice that has gone through self-reflection. I think these choices can be used to explain some, probably some things that are usually quite difficult to explain, such as desire and sexuality. [translated] (Pumpkin, interview)

I was, once again, surprised by my participants’ ability to solve the difficult task of articulating how desire accrued meaning for them, and here we see Pumpkin trying to make sense of the relationship between cultural norms and personal values. Her narrative can be read in two parts: the first is her ‘musing’ on my question, and the second part is her ‘conclusion’, her interpretation. Crucially, she decided that the ‘personal choice’ she was talking about was partly shaped by broader cultural materials, and partly constituted through self-reflection. Pumpkin’s association of desire with choice suggests that desire, as a feeling, can be rationalised; hence, desire is not spontaneous, nor is it a ‘natural drive’. Since desire comes with ‘choice’, when one’s choice is understood as culturally conditioned as well as being a personal preference, desire must be conceptualised as a personal negotiation within cultural mores. However, there is no distinct boundary between cultural and personal desire, as what is claimed to be ‘personal’ must be shaped by the available cultural materials, and what is ‘cultural’ must have been reproduced based on human experience. In particular, Pumpkin pointed out that personal choice is the result of self-reflection, suggesting that one has to examine the available cultural scripts and look back on one’s embodied sexual experience in order to decide what one prefers. Without

social interaction or cultural materials, one would hardly have anything to ‘reflect’ on; furthermore, without embodiment, one would not be able to perceive the outer world.

This interaction between cultural scripts and personal reflections illuminates the webs of participants’ understandings of desire – in terms of both meaning and feelings. I was keen to find out how cultural scripts defined and framed desire for participants, and the ways in which they conversed with these scripts: what ideas did participants adopt or abandon in order to weave their lived sexuality? How might participants rationalise their ‘choices’? While exploring these issues, I examine in detail how participants’ negotiation of desire took place; in addition, I intend to demonstrate that the process of negotiation is not only meaningful, but meaning-making.

This chapter focuses on ‘cultural scripting’. In particular, I investigate how participants took into account and reflected on cultural sites that were important in their lives. Within these sites, their practices involve interpretation and negotiation, including the ways in which they might struggle with cultural scripts. I discuss four cultural sites which provided participants with diverse materials of desire: ‘Christianity’<sup>69</sup>, ethnicity, popular culture and feminist ideas. Christianity and ethnicity are represented by relatively small samples; however, as part of these participants’ upbringing, they were strongly and specifically pinpointed by participants as sites which provided them with influential sexual scripts. Popular culture and feminist ideas are sites that I identified from multiple participants’ materials. These two sites embody powerful scripts which constituted part of participants’ subjectivities. Comparatively, participants seemed to be more reflexive about the effects of Christianity and ethnicity in shaping their desire, while they were less able to be critical of some of the materials they had learnt from popular culture and feminist ideas.

It is crucial to note that gender never ceases to exist in participants’ narratives of sexuality. The lived reality of ‘being a woman’ had a major impact on the ways in which participants practised their desire. Participants frequently referred to the gender expectations they encountered in their everyday experience. In particular, they discussed how cultural scripts – their interpretation of texts and erotic representations – perpetuate dominant ideas of ‘female sexuality’. As I will demonstrate in this and the next chapter, participants were

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<sup>69</sup> ‘Christianity’, in this thesis, refers to participants’ *interpretations* of some parts of the Christian teachings.

mostly aware of, and clearly indicated that, the double standards in patriarchal societies demand different things from women and men. Some participants described this double standard as a fact, while others actively expressed their discontent and their intention to seek a way out. Gender is, thus, the most important and recurring theme in this study of sexuality. Participants' identification as women had a strong effect on where they were located in various cultural sites which, in turn, shaped their practices of desire.

Participants identified certain aspects of their background, such as religious belief, ethnicity and family, as influential in their practice of desire. These institutions offered multiple scripts, which became intertwined in the shaping of participants' desire. Their desire relied on their evaluation of and negotiations within social conventions as to what is 'permitted', such as finding 'appropriate' ways for them to communicate their sexual feelings to other people. According to participants' own interpretations, these cultural institutions played a crucial part in constituting their sexuality; however, rather than accepting the given scripts, some participants questioned the social values embedded in these institutions.

## **Christianity**

In this section, I focus specifically on participants Brigitte's and Josephine's interpretations of 'Christianity' – a term they used to refer to an aspect of their upbringing – and how their understandings of the Christian texts had an impact on their practice of desire.

Christianity and the development of Western sexual culture are said to be 'integrally related' (Hawkes 2004, p.39). Even though there are diverse theological and popular approaches in Christianity, Hawkes (2004) argues that controlling sex and pleasure has been a crucial practice since the early establishment of Christianity. One possible reason for this control might be the mind/body dualism – a philosophy dominant in Western thinking – which permeates the history of Christian thought (Baker 1995). This dualism locates sexual desire – a carnal feeling – as the opposite to spirituality; hence, the pursuit of bodily desire can be a threat to spiritual growth, although the Bible contains sensual books such as the Song of Solomon. Sexual desire, as a result, has to be controlled and managed. One common interpretation of Christian dogma is that sexual practices are only

allowed within marriage. That is, marriage provides a ‘legitimate’ context for carnal activities and the enactment of sexual desire.

In Brigitte’s and Josephine’s narratives, Christianity has overt influences on their sexual desire. Both participants represented Christianity with a Bible in their photographs (Figures 4.1 and 4.2) rather than using other symbols such as a cross, a church or an image of Jesus Christ. This could be because the Bible is a script itself, which provides Christians with guidelines for ‘appropriate’ sexual behaviours and values; whereas other symbols do not offer such ‘instructions’ for daily life. The scripts in the Bible are open to interpretation and contestation. For instance, Brigitte’s photograph is of an open Bible focusing on a specific passage about sexuality, as she explained:

I have a troubled relationship with my faith. This Bible is open at Romans 1:18-32<sup>70</sup>, the passage that condemns homosexuality. I was raped at the age of seven, and Christians’ emphasis on sexual purity seems ridiculous to me. I have not been a virgin since I was a child, yet I am expected to behave as though I am. I was raised Calvinist, which means that everything that I have experienced was pre-ordained by God, but doesn’t that include my sexual pleasure with a female partner? (Brigitte, journal)

By reflecting on her experiences and her understanding of Calvinist Christian values, Brigitte questioned the Christian scripts. In her narrative, she pointed out two paradoxes: firstly, God has given her a sexuality that is deemed ‘inappropriate’ in her learnt Christian norms. Secondly, the Christian focus on sexual purity required *her* not to have sexual

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<sup>70</sup> For reference, I quote Romans 1:18-32 from the Common English Bible (CEB) here: ‘God’s wrath is being revealed from heaven against all the ungodly behavior and the injustice of human beings who silence the truth with injustice. This is because what is known about God should be plain to them because God made it plain to them. Ever since the creation of the world, God’s invisible qualities—God’s eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, because they are understood through the things God has made. So humans are without excuse. Although they knew God, they didn’t honor God as God or thank him. Instead, their reasoning became pointless, and their foolish hearts were darkened. While they were claiming to be wise, they made fools of themselves. They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images that look like mortal humans: birds, animals, and reptiles. So God abandoned them to their hearts’ desires, which led to the moral corruption of degrading their own bodies with each other. They traded God’s truth for a lie, and they worshipped and served the creation instead of the creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. ‘That’s why God abandoned them to degrading lust. Their females traded natural sexual relations for unnatural sexual relations. Also, in the same way, the males traded natural sexual relations with females, and burned with lust for each other. Males performed shameful actions with males, and they were paid back with the penalty they deserved for their mistake in their own bodies. Since they didn’t think it was worthwhile to acknowledge God, God abandoned them to a defective mind to do inappropriate things. So they were filled with all injustice, wicked behavior, greed, and evil behavior. They are full of jealousy, murder, fighting, deception, and malice. They are gossips, they slander people, and they hate God. They are rude and proud, and they brag. They invent ways to be evil, and they are disobedient to their parents. They are without understanding, disloyal, without affection, and without mercy. Though they know God’s decision that those who persist in such practices deserve death, they not only keep doing these things but also approve others who practice them.’

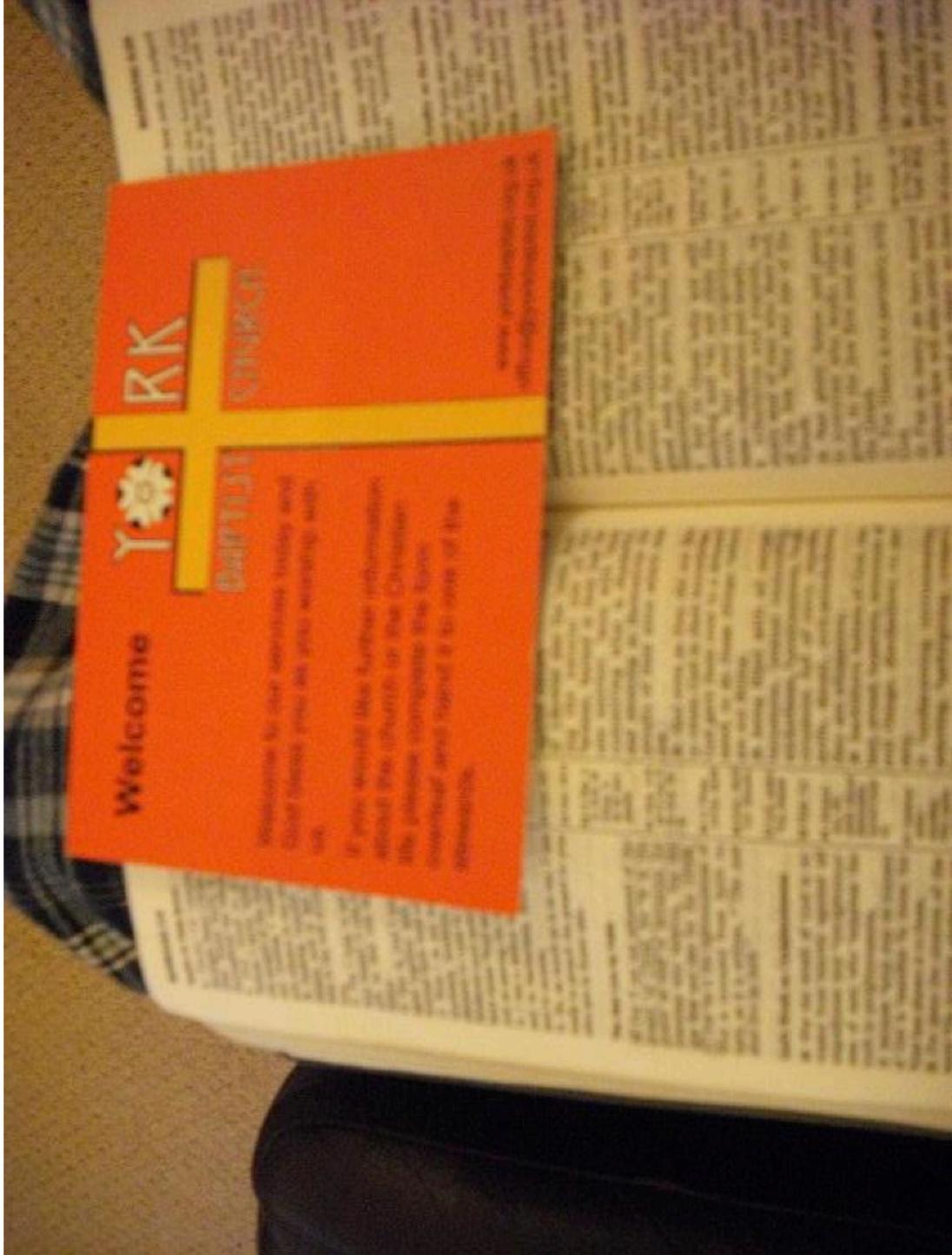


Figure 4.1 *Untitled* (Brigitte)

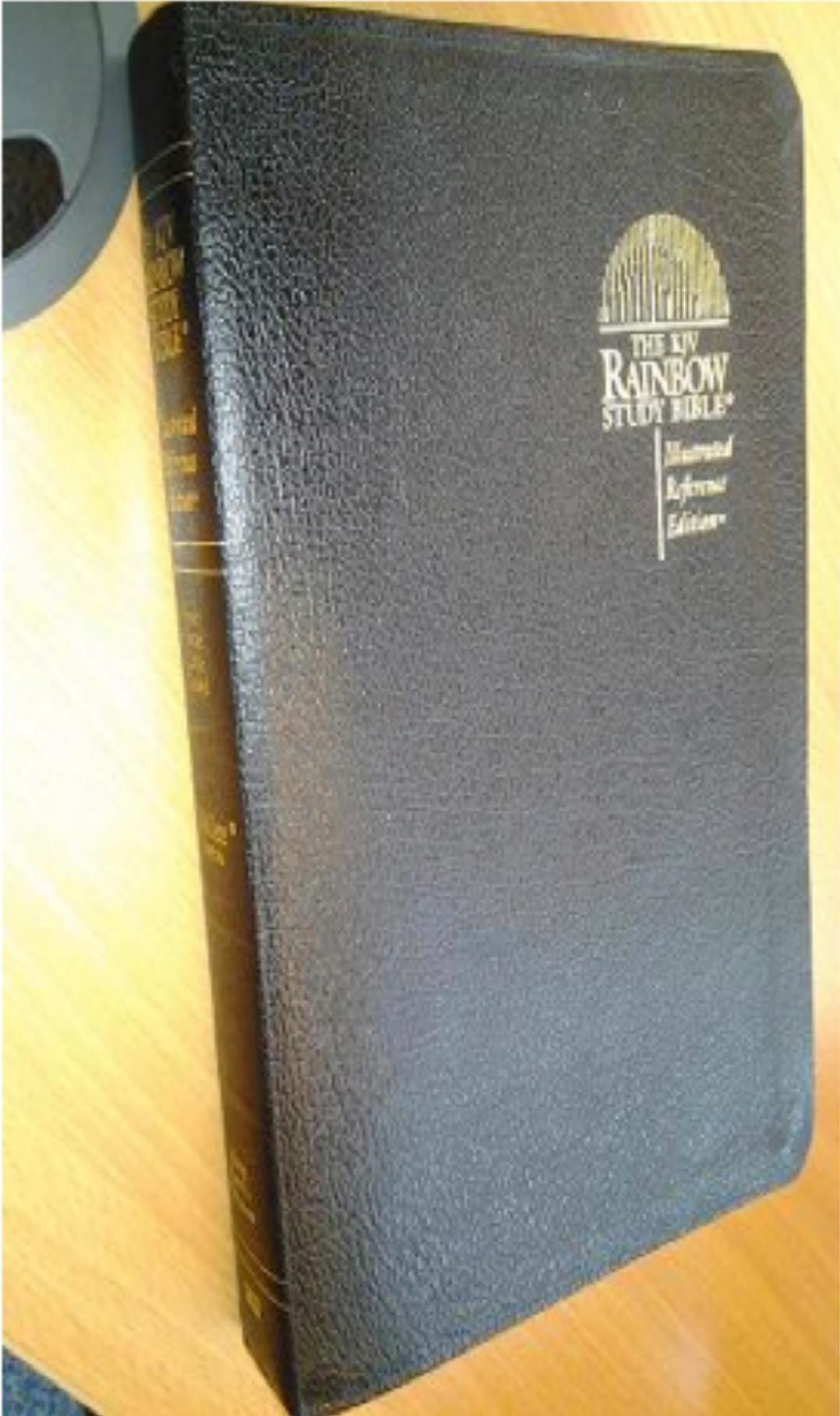


Figure 4.2 *My Study Bible Kept in My Office (Josephine)*

intercourse; however, the sexual abuse was done to her, an incident that was beyond her control. Brigitte's account of being 'raised Calvinist' suggests that this particular Christian approach to understanding human lives was brought to her by other people; hence, the paradox of 'God predetermined a person's sexuality and lived experience against its own rules' was a result of people's interpretation. It is unclear whether Brigitte accepted the idea that her sexuality was 'innate' as prescribed by God; however, the social expectation still existed to discipline her acts, as she wrote: 'I am expected to behave as though I am [a virgin].'

The contradiction between Brigitte's personal desire and her interpreted Christian values was also represented in another part of her journal and in a set of two photographs. Brigitte laid out two spreads of the Tarot<sup>71</sup> to signify what she should desire (Figure 4.3) and what she did desire (Figure 4.4):

I wanted to show the difference between what I should desire, and what I actually do desire. This spread represents what I feel I ought to want. All of these cards are happy, positive cards in the Tarot. They represent a legitimate and celebrated sexual union – marriage. (Brigitte, journal)

These cards represent the side of my sexuality that most frightens me. I am fascinated by BDSM and enjoy being dominated. So in the spread you can see pain, addiction, judgement, and bondage. (Brigitte, journal)

In the first quote, Brigitte's analysis indicates the social expectation that was imposed upon her: the only legitimate desire is the one embedded in heterosexual marriage, as seen in 'The Lovers' card showing a man and a woman as a couple (Figure 4.3). This layout is Brigitte's interpretation of cultural conventions in which marriage was equated to 'positive' emotions and events that were normalised as something everyone should pursue. The terms 'happy', 'positive', 'celebrated' also refer to a *common perception* which embodies social values. Contrasting with this 'norm' are sexual acts which Brigitte found desirable and pleasurable: BDSM<sup>72</sup>. She used nouns such as 'pain', 'addiction' and

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<sup>71</sup> Tarot is considered pagan by many Christians. Brigitte's use of the Tarot here suggests a more relaxed attitude towards Christian beliefs.

<sup>72</sup> The abbreviation BDSM is commonly understood to stand for: bondage and discipline (BD), dominance and submission (DS), and sadism and masochism (SM). However, the meanings of the terms shift and are largely dependent on the practices (see Weiss 2011).



Figure 4.3 *Untitled* (Brigitte)



Figure 4.4 *Untitled* (Brigitte)

‘bondage’ which are facts and acts that suggest fewer moral judgements, although these terms embody relatively ‘negative’ connotations. BDSM desire was unsettling for Brigitte as she was unsure about the legitimacy of her sexual interests, and was thus afraid of being defined by her ‘unconventional’ desire, as seen in the card ‘judgement’ (Figure 4.4). Reading this piece of writing alongside the quote I discussed earlier, there is a suggestion that her sexuality potentially made her question her faith even more, although this is unclear.

Brigitte’s narratives focus on her reflections on the contradictions between her faith and her desire. Josephine’s materials, on the other hand, demonstrate that, for her, desire was constructed around her faith – more specifically, her interpretation of Christian principles. Josephine identified herself as a Pentecostal Christian, and she emphasised that faith played a crucial role in her life. In fact, when she was filling in the demographic form, she pointed out with dismay that I should have listed ‘religious belief’ as one of the basic questions. Josephine explained to me that, as an unmarried Pentecostal Christian woman, having or thinking about sexual desire was not permitted. Hence, during the material generation, she diverted the subject ‘sexual desire’ to ‘attractiveness’ and regarded her participation as a way to share her perspectives and experiences. However, I wondered about this connection between ‘desire’ and ‘attractiveness’. After all, women’s bodies have always been regarded as seductive in Christian-tradition-embedded Western culture (Bordo 1993). Because of the Christian principle that one should not feel desire or provoke desire in others, being ‘physically’ attractive could be seen as potentially problematic. While this principle should apply to everyone, regardless of gender, it seems that the responsibility is placed specifically on women to discipline their appearance.

As a Christian I’m a strong believer in sex after marriage and under no circumstances would I purpose to make myself sexually appealing to anyone. One of Jesus’ teaching [s] says that if you lust [after] a woman (in the case of the women, ‘lust [after] a man’) in your heart, you have committed fornication. I’m sure this scripture speaks about the motives behind looking at a person and/or liking them. For me this becomes very difficult when I dress and when I pick up what I wear. I love to dress to feel good and I do not intend to make myself attractive to be sexually desired. Therefore the motive for my dressing is what counts. I also believe that how I dress and make myself appear also counts. If I decide to dress up provocatively, by leaving aspects of my body showing i.e. my cleavage for instance, so I can attract the attention of others to myself

and/or make guys fall victim to the temptation of sex, my attraction then becomes problematic. (Josephine, journal)

Josephine not only followed her Christian sexual scripts – not having sex before marriage – she took these scripts as a belief in itself. In her interpretation, ‘Jesus’ teaching’ – manifested in the Bible – equates sexual feelings with sexual acts. Hence, having sexual desire is just as sinful as having sex before getting married. The Christian understanding of sexual relationships, in Josephine’s writing, is heteronormative: she particularly emphasised the lust between men and women rather than using non-gendered terms such as ‘people’. In addition, Josephine applied these scripts to first interpret other people’s behaviour, then to discipline her personal choice of clothing. Josephine’s Christian principles led her to believe that when a man looked, and expressed a compliment, he probably had sexual motives; hence, she would be attentive to her clothing so that she neither drew attention nor appeared to be sexually appealing. Josephine’s narrative demonstrates the paradox of her thoughts: she pointed out that her core intention was not to generate men’s desire; however, she also felt responsible if her clothing turned out to be arousing. The issue in question is this: regardless of how she dressed up, Josephine could never have full control over how other people perceived her body image. This is a contradiction Josephine was not able to address. Instead, she seemed to take great responsibility for disciplining her own actions in order not to commit the ‘crime’ of generating men’s desire, so men would not become ‘victims’ of a sin.

Josephine did not discuss her subjective desire in her materials because she was not supposed to feel, or even think about, her desire. Therefore, she focused on how not to become an object of desire, particularly by managing her appearance. She related women’s physical beauty to a ‘curse’ (Josephine, journal) because, in the Bible, this attribute arouses men’s desire and results in the sexual objectification of women. Josephine explained how she read the scripture<sup>73</sup> about the relationship between men and women:

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<sup>73</sup> Josephine was specifically responding to Deuteronomy 21:10-14 in the Old Testament. She wrote the verses in her journal: ‘When you go for a war against your enemies and the Lord deliver them into your hands and you take them captive and you see among the captives a beautiful woman, and if you desire her and want to have her as a wife; Then you shall bring her home to your house and she shall shave her hair and trim her nails. She shall put away the clothing of her captivity, remain in your house and mourn for her parents for a month. After that you may approach her and have sex with her and you shall become a husband and a wife. If you later realise that you no longer fancy her, then just let her go as a free woman and don’t sell her for money as a slave because you violated her.’

Because when [men] went to war, there would be so many women there, but they were picked. [Men] would point and pick the beautiful ones. Possibly when she comes, she's going to be used as a sex object, isn't it? The moment [men] satisfied themselves sexually, they dump [women]. (Josephine, interview)

Josephine's narrative suggests a dichotomy between men as sexual subjects and women as objects of desire; furthermore, men hold power over women, and women do not have a choice but become men's sex objects. Reading this alongside Josephine's earlier journal entry, two contradictions emerge. Firstly, a woman could not stop herself from being an object of men's sexual desire, but she was still held responsible for disciplining her action so as not to arouse men's desire. Secondly, Josephine described men as 'victims' of sexual desire in her earlier writing, but here, it was obviously women who suffered from men's sexual actions. Perhaps another way to read Josephine's narrative is that she avoided dressing up in a sexually appealing manner, so that she might be able to avoid men's desire and abuse. However, this interpretation is built on the foundation of an over-simplistic view of human subjectivity which draws on the dichotomy between male perpetrator and female victim.

There is one common theme in the Christian scripts of sexuality as expressed in Brigitte's and Josephine's narratives: the principle that sex is legitimate within heterosexual marriage. Rather than saying 'one should not have sex before getting married' in a negative voice, both Brigitte and Josephine described sex in marriage in a positive tone by saying: 'sex is encouraged within marriage' (Brigitte, interview), or 'I'm a strong believer in sex after marriage' (Josephine, journal). These participants' language suggests that sex itself is not sinful or unacceptable in their interpretation of Christian scripts, but it is only 'positive' and celebrated within the context of marriage.

'Christianity' shaped Brigitte's and Josephine's practices of desire in two ways. The Christian scripts – the Bible – acted as a guideline which constructed participants' conceptualisation of desire. The dominant sexual scripts in the Bible, as Brigitte and Josephine illustrated, were 'sex within marriage' and heteronormativity. These scripts suggest that there exist certain types of accepted, appropriate sexuality. Hence, Brigitte and Josephine referred to verses in the Bible either to raise questions about their sexuality, or to examine the unbalanced sexual relationship between men and women. The two

participants also used these scripts to reflect on their interpersonal experiences and to renegotiate their intrapsychic interpretations: Brigitte focused on the contradictions between her faith, past experiences and desire, while Josephine transformed desire into ‘attractiveness’ and questioned a man’s motives for complimenting her on her looks. Additionally, both participants’ interpretations of Christian scripts might lead them to discipline their own actions. For instance, Brigitte might choose not to disclose her desire or her experience of sexual abuse because they were not part of the ‘legitimate’ sexuality defined by Christianity. In Josephine’s case, she neither talked about nor referred to any experience of desire at all. Furthermore, her rationale for choosing clothing was certainly affected by her understanding that she should avoid inflaming men’s desire – despite how contradictory her view seemed.

Christianity, as part of these participants’ upbringing and lived experience, offered influential cultural scripts that shaped how they interpreted and negotiated their sexual desire. Even though the scriptures in the Bible might provide guidelines for ‘appropriate’ sexualities, it is probably through families and/or local religious communities that the cultural mores are being reinforced. Like Christianity, ethnicity was another key cultural site that participants identified as having overt scripts that could shape their practice of desire – mostly through their parents’ backgrounds and within their friendship groups – particularly in the ways in which they communicate sexual desire.

## **Ethnicity**

Ethnicity is a rather ambiguous term to use; in this context, it covers participants’ references to their locally experienced cultural conventions and their family’s cultural background, usually discussed in terms of nationalities. Participants’ materials demonstrate that ethnicity had an impact on their cultural practice of desire in two ways. Ethnicity signifies the social norms within which participants learnt about the ‘appropriate’ settings for telling sexual stories. In separate interviews, I discussed with Beth, Pumpkin, Cassandra, Steel Vagina and Alexia how we, as women, were encouraged to talk and discouraged from talking about<sup>74</sup> desire in different social scenarios in a given culture. Furthermore, participants who encountered multiple cultural scripts were reflexive about

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<sup>74</sup> There are, of course, many methods to communicate sexuality; and in this project women use writing, photography and conversations. In this section, however, the main focus is on the talking.

different social conventions, and they negotiated their desire within these ‘norms’. Specifically, Alexia discussed how her parents’ embodied cultural values affected her attitude towards sex; whereas Pumpkin focused on how she became capable of communicating sexuality after moving from one nation to another.

In everyday life, I often observe and compare my experiences with other people based on ethnicity to make sense of the differences. It turned out that I was not alone in doing this. During the interviews, I noticed that participants (and I) would compare different cultural attitudes towards sexuality to interpret which was more ‘open’ or ‘conservative’. Participants with a Chinese background by birth or parents’ birth – Pumpkin, Alexia, Steel Vagina – and I talked about the sexual culture in the UK as being more open than the Chinese or Taiwanese<sup>75</sup>; however, British participants, such as Beth and Cassandra, interpreted British culture as more prudish and conservative compared to other Western countries. Beth told me that, in her opinion, it was not common for British people, particularly women, to communicate desire.

We don’t talk about [desire and sex] very often at all<sup>76</sup>. Well, actually that’s not entirely true. I think, between friends actually, certainly my group of friends, we do talk... I don’t think it’s something that women really talk about outside that very small group. Some of my friends do, and obviously some of them will come up with something I said in the past in the wrong kind of company. That’s embarrassing. [...] Somebody who was in the group shares it with somebody outside the group. That’s definitely awkward. Particularly because you addressed that ‘I told you that in confident, why did you say that?’ So it can get, I guess, even complex in that respect. (Beth, interview)

Beth accepted the cultural script that, for a British woman, desire or sex was only discussed within a group of close friends under an unspoken contract that the conversation would be kept to this group. Interestingly, the act of sharing sexual stories was so secretive that she did not even acknowledge it at first. Additionally, Beth’s description made it very unclear in what capacity she and her friends communicated desire – did they share

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<sup>75</sup> Participant Odinsleep was from Taiwan; however, she did not particularly share her views on ‘cultural difference’ in her materials.

<sup>76</sup> Foucault (1978) disputes this view in *The History of Sexuality* and argues that telling sexual stories has existed in public discourses in the form of confessions since the seventeenth century, and in scientific publications as ‘knowledge’ since the turn of the eighteenth century. However, just because there were social scenarios in which sex was spoken of in the Victorian era, this did not necessarily mean that ordinary women had the same opportunity. I discuss this issue further on page 115.

fantasies, discuss sexual knowledge, or talk about sexual experiences? In fact, Beth's narrative is full of ambiguities as though she was not just describing the awkward moment when her 'secret' was revealed unexpectedly; she was also embarrassed to admit in the interview that she talked about sex at all. From reading this interview transcript, I get a sense that desire was a private issue which Beth mostly kept to herself; not only that, but she interpreted this attitude as common amongst many women in British culture. Hence, when a friend broke the informal social contract and exposed her sexual stories to an 'outsider', it became a difficult situation for her to negotiate. The embarrassment and the awkwardness emerged not only because Beth's private lived experience was exposed, but also because she was aware of the social norms and cautious about how other people might react to her stories. Beth's decision to talk about her desire relied on trust and mutual understanding within the friendship group – that is, everyone in the community should have learnt the 'commonsense' cultural scripts of sharing sexual stories. After an unexpected event like this, Beth might need to renegotiate her interpersonal relationship, which would potentially make her social life more complicated to deal with than before.

Another participant of British nationality, Alexia, said:

I don't find it that hard to talk about [desire]. Not that hard because my friends, some of my friends are really liberal, they talk about sex very easily, like amongst our close group of friends. So in that sense, you become used to it and so you're not really bothered about talking about how you feel and so on. (Alexia, interview)

Alexia's narrative indicates that when a local culture 'allows' its inhabitants to talk about sexuality, the communication of desire becomes a social norm which can encourage people to feel more at ease sharing their sexual stories. One of the reasons why Alexia felt capable of discussing sex – even though she might not particularly enjoy the telling – was because of familiarity. Since a few of her friends frequently shared sexual stories in a straightforward manner, Alexia interpreted this act as part of the common social scenarios: communicating desire amongst friends was an acceptable act, therefore she could also do it if she chose. However, Alexia identified that it was, once again, only within a 'close group of friends' that they could discuss sex more easily than in other social settings. Although discussions about sex are not uncommon in mass media in the UK – I am thinking particularly of 'problem pages' in magazines or on reality TV – in personal, everyday experience desire is still constructed around a sense of privacy and secrecy, especially for

women. Nevertheless, friendship groups provide a social environment that crosses between private life and the public sphere. For some British participants, friendship groups were a 'legitimate' setting for communicating sexual experience and knowledge.

In my view, the act of communicating desire enables women's sexuality to become public knowledge grounded in individual experience: this research itself is based on the premise that participants' analyses can bring to light how they interpreted and negotiated their personal desire within a broader cultural context, such as the ways in which they carefully evaluated what kind of sexual stories they could tell in different scenarios. Plummer (1995) argues that telling sexual stories makes personal and private narratives become 'the most public property' (p.9). However, the extent of this 'publicity' depends on the context in which the stories are told. Whereas a friendship group provides a semi-public environment, other platforms or settings can make personal conceptualisations of desire more accessible to the general public. Beth, Alexia and Cassandra told me that, depending on the scenario, they adopted different approaches when they talked about desire. Although this seems fairly obvious, it does reinforce the idea that people are able to evaluate interpersonal settings in order to construct narratives of desire that would seem suitable in response to the social setting. In the context of my research, many participants focused more on the concepts of desire rather than explicit illustrations of their sexual experiences. Cassandra, a British participant, told me that she felt more comfortable talking about sex from a theoretical perspective in our interview. If she were to talk about the mechanical side of sex, she would prefer to discuss it with her best friends. In some ways, this approach – talking about their interpretation rather than the sexual acts – was easier for these three British participants because they were able to discuss sex without disclosing a part of their lives that was deemed private.

The social norms of telling sexual stories are highly gendered. Beth reflected on her understanding of British culture to elaborate on how women are 'judged' if they talk about sex:

I certainly think that, traditionally, the society and culture don't talk about it, sex, you know... Women, well there's a whole women, not seen or not heard, you know, ladies particularly are demure, don't talk about these kind of things. Girls who do talk about them, traditionally, are seen as easy. And it's not the case, you know, well just because

you say 'he's attractive' does not mean you're going to jump into bed with them.  
(Beth, interview)

Beth argued that it was not conventional for people, particularly women, to discuss sex, suggesting that sex did not exist in public discourse in British culture. However, people do talk about sex in mass media in Western societies<sup>77</sup>, but ordinary women struggle to find a way to do so. For instance, Duncker (1992) suggests that, in the 1960s, women could not talk about sex because they did not have a language of their own to do so; then within the 'women's liberation movement' of the 1970s and 1980s, they started to search for new ways to speak of sex. Despite changes in the social climate since then, one thing remains, though: women who openly express their desire face the risk of being criticised or abused<sup>78</sup>, particularly in societies where this act is not part of the general mores. As Beth's narrative suggests, women who discuss desire are 'named' for their behaviour. Beth pointed out that 'women', 'ladies' and those who are 'demure' do not discuss sex publicly. These terms carry connotations of higher social status and a particular fashion of femininity that is preferable within British social norms. In contrast, Beth turned to describe how 'girls' could be judged as 'easy' – as in easy for men to take sexual advantage of – if they talked freely about desire. This shift in language suggests that females who told their sexual stories were less 'mature' than women. Additionally, the term 'easy' is gendered, and is derogatory to women. Beth's account demonstrates the double standard in the communication of sexual desire for men and women.

Since the experience of sex was scripted as a private matter for many participants, and because in their interpretation women were judged for communicating desire in the public sphere, my participants tended to keep their sexual talk between friends or partners. However, this project offered incentives for participants to share their sexual stories: I was inviting participants to contribute to the construction of knowledge. Whereas in everyday experience women's stories about their sexuality might risk being ridiculed by other listeners, I treated their materials seriously and critically. Additionally, I offered an opportunity for participants to talk about their understanding of how their desire was negotiated within a broader cultural context, a topic that was uncommon in daily

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<sup>77</sup> Also see Foucault (1978) in footnote 76 on page 112.

<sup>78</sup> See, also, my discussion in Chapter 1 (page 11) and Johnson (2002) in Chapter 2 (page 51).

conversations. In a research context, women can make a significant contribution to the knowledge of human sexuality by telling their sexual stories.

My Taiwanese cultural background and my personal experience once made me wonder whether communicating desire is liberating for women<sup>79</sup>. I had an opportunity to ask Alexia about her view on this as we were talking through what it meant for her to tell her sexual stories in the interview and in other settings. She told me:

If I were to talk about [my sex life] in the vaguest sense, I would distance myself. I would be to say, for example, ‘if someone was having sex’. I’d talk about it in a third person and that sort of thing whilst not referring to myself specifically... I don’t like to share too many personal details about myself and so, like it’s, I don’t think it’s due to shyness as I don’t like it. I wanna keep certain things private and so I don’t find it necessarily liberating. But it’s nice to talk about it if you want to. (Alexia, interview)

Alexia’s account suggests that she has negotiated a particular way of talking about sex: in order to keep her sex life to herself, she would represent her sexuality by making her narrative impersonal. Alexia was very clear that this was her subjective decision (note the references to ‘I’ in this narrative). She pointed out that even though she did not find it liberating to talk about desire – and she distanced herself from the act of telling in the last sentence – it was good that people had the choice to do it.

Here, I think again about whether women’s telling of sexual stories can have a political effect. Duncker (1992) points out that ‘sex [is] a private act with public consequences’ (p. 9). By this she suggests that women’s talk of desire can have an impact on reconstituting interpersonal and cultural scripts. Even though Alexia did not find speaking of her desire a liberating act, she still considered having the option a positive thing. This choice would not be possible if existing scripts – shaped by agents in the social world – did not make it available to women. This indicates that women telling sexual stories can reconstruct sexual scripts; hence, it has the potential to reshape cultural norms, to give more women the ‘option’. For me, I am still capable of (and did not stop) talking about my sexuality,

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<sup>79</sup> See Chapter 1.

although I feel that this practice has become secondary to other political activism that strives for gender equality<sup>80</sup>.

Although Alexia was born and raised in Britain, she had to negotiate with other competing scripts. She emphasised that her parents – who embodied two other ethnicities<sup>81</sup> and cultural values – had a strong impact on her attitude towards sex:

My background may have influenced me in, like, certain ways. But overall that, I don't know. I'd say the way it affects me is that I'm very scared to getting pregnant. Because in Chinese, well, in both of my [parents'] backgrounds, you might get banned if you become pregnant early. And now it's the fear that still continues even though at my age, they're open to women who have kids. (Alexia, interview)

Alexia's account reveals how the scripts from her parents' cultural origins affected her feelings about the 'risks' of sex. Her narrative also emphasises (heterosexual) women's experience, particularly the concern with pregnancy. In the interview, Alexia told me that in both her parents' cultural backgrounds, sex was not something people talked about. The only time her mother spoke to her about sex was to remind her to use contraception, because, she suggested: 'the fear of pregnancy overcomes the embarrassment of talking to me about it' (Alexia, interview). The presumption was that if she married, pregnancy would not have been an issue – that is, pregnancy, as a possible result of sexual activities, was only accepted within marriage. Desire and sex, originally kept as a personal issue, would become public with the visible signs of pregnancy. The parental cultural communities that Alexia related to, as she understood them, would regard pregnancy outside of marriage and particularly at a young age as a dishonour and disgrace<sup>82</sup>. This cultural value passed down by her parents in family education has had a significant impact on Alexia's sexuality as she understood the serious consequences a single woman would face if she fell pregnant. A woman in Alexia's position might either pay more attention to

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<sup>80</sup> Scripts are not fixed, and one's adaptation of scripts changes, too (see my discussion in Chapter 2). As I am engaging more with popular cultural representations, women's narratives of embodied experiences and theoretical discussions on sexuality, these scripts have reshaped my own cultural practice and how I understand the 'use' of sexual desire.

<sup>81</sup> Alexia asked me to only declare one of her parents' cultural backgrounds. I chose to discuss the 'Chinese' one because she revealed it in the interview whereas she only told me about the other ethnicity after I inquired off the record.

<sup>82</sup> This was different from Brigitte's and Josephine's account of the prohibited 'sex before marriage' in their Christian understanding. While 'not having sex before marriage' focuses on disciplining the act, 'not getting pregnant before marriage' suggests that one treats sex outside of wedlock as an 'elephant in the room' that it is, in some ways, 'acknowledged'.

contraception, or avoid heterosexual intercourse. Furthermore, in Alexia's narrative, pregnancy is linked to having a baby, implying that abortion was not an option.

Alexia identified her parents' cultural backgrounds – partly Chinese – as the main reason why her parents were 'prudish'. The relatively 'conservative' sexual attitude in Chinese culture was also identified by Pumpkin, a Chinese woman studying in the UK. She reflected on her experience of communicating about sex in the two countries and pointed out the cultural differences she observed:

Between friends, we talked about [sexuality and the body], but it was more of a, it probably counted as a private discourse, not a social discourse. So we didn't have a way to express it. The change in cultural environment provides this opportunity, provides a way of expression, a medium of expression. For instance, a British friend once said I was sexy. Perhaps my friend in Shanghai would have made a similar comment, but it wouldn't have been so straightforward... I don't think I've heard such a thing from female friends, not unless they're lesbians. I have never heard any female friend of mine say I was sexy as a more 'positive' expression. [translated] (Pumpkin, interview)

The change in cultural environment encouraged Pumpkin to work with different sexual scripts; for instance, being described as 'sexy' has a different connotation in British culture than in China. The comment 'you're sexy' has multiple implications: it can be a compliment, a criticism, a tease, or an invitation. Pumpkin's narrative suggests that her friends' use *and* her perception of 'sexy' are shaped by cultural and interpersonal scripts, meaning that the interpretation of this comment is reliant on a person's ability to evaluate the cues – which can be subtle, thus not easy to identify – in cultural scenarios and in interactions. This personal capacity – what Pumpkin referred to as 'a way' or 'a medium' that she did not have – developed as she moved to a different culture that exposed her to new sexual scripts. Thus, Pumpkin was able to renegotiate her intrapsychic scripts, which allowed her to understand the comment 'you look sexy' as a more 'positive' expression.

Both Pumpkin and I were aware of the social norms in Chinese and Taiwanese cultures, in which expressing sexual desire is 'unconventional' for women. In my experience, the transition from Taiwanese to British culture has made it possible for me to explore and communicate my desire more freely, yet I am not suggesting that women in the UK can

discuss their desire however and wherever they want. I realised that the ‘sense of freedom’ I felt came not only because I was exposed to different sexual scripts, but also because I could temporarily leave my ‘original’ cultural burdens<sup>83</sup> behind.

Participants’ accounts of the ethnic effect on their cultural practices focus on how they experienced and interpreted sexual scripts through social interactions, specifically with their friends and family members. Having learnt various cultural scripts, participants were capable of renegotiating their sexuality and their communication of desire in different social settings. Whereas ethnicity shaped participants’ cultural practice on a more ‘interpersonal’ level, popular culture has the potential to constitute their sexual subjectivities with widely reproduced and distributed sexual representations. The popular cultural representations I discuss in the next section are not limited to texts, but also include visual materials such as videos and pictures.

## **Popular Culture**

Popular culture represents gender and sexuality in several ways: through texts, still or moving images, sounds and even tactile feedback. In this research, because of my methodology, texts and images are the most dominant scripts used by participants to reconstitute their desire and sexual subjectivities<sup>84</sup>. Here, I focus on three functions of popular culture in shaping participants’ cultural practices. Firstly, popular culture has propounded several theories of human sexuality, thus leading many participants to think of desire as a biological, uncontrollable urge<sup>85</sup>. Secondly, participants interpreted the sexual materials in popular culture – including erotica and pornography – as gendered in its medium. For participants, there was a lack of visual representation of and for *women’s desire*, even though women’s bodies were highly sexualised in mass media. Finally, popular cultural products, such as perfumes and lipsticks, were adopted by participants to reconstitute their desire; in some ways they have become an inseparable part of

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<sup>83</sup> By ‘cultural burdens’, I mean a range of social expectations that are imposed on women in Taiwan. For me, the most stressful of all is the gendered expectation that I am frequently reminded of by my family members. For instance, my grandfather told me that I ‘have to’ let my son carry the family name ‘Tsao’, with the presumption that I will have to get married and have children in the future.

<sup>84</sup> I discuss the impact of popular cultural images on participants’ visual representations in Chapter 6.

<sup>85</sup> However, a more significant amount of qualitative material suggests that desire is culturally constituted, including participants’ understanding of ‘intrinsic desire’. See my discussion of this and Freud’s psychoanalytical theory in Chapter 2.

participants' sexual subjectivities. Popular culture was so influential in participants' practice of desire that they usually adopted the scripts rather than identifying or being critical of their impact.

### Popularising the Sexual Drive

Gagnon and Simon (2005) suggest that Freud's<sup>86</sup> and Kinsey's theories – which characterise desire as an intrinsic drive that 'presses against and must be controlled by the cultural and social matrix' (p.8) – are famous in popular and sexological literature. It was not uncommon for participants to talk about their understanding of desire as an innate, uncontrollable drive that could emerge spontaneously. In each interview, I asked participants to tell me the first few words they thought of when hearing the term 'sexual desire'. Here are two responses:

I suppose love, but probably lust first because lust is not always accompanied by love. Erm, passion, some kind of atavistic animal level, operating at instinctive level, I would think, rather than a thought-out one. Erm, something very raw... very naturalistic, something beyond thought. Not rational in its most extreme form. I think sexual desire is very animal like. That you see somebody and you just have that kind of passionate feeling. (Celeste, interview)

Sex, beauty... erm, actually no, I think beauty is more pure. So actually love, sex, anything kind of like animalistic, primal. I guess it's something you don't think about, it's just instinctive... I guess it's primal, animalistic and perhaps raw, too. Yeah, raw. I was gonna say animalistic but it's perhaps too raw. I'll say maybe it's, if you think about sexual desire, like animalistic is like, on the extreme side, I guess it's sort of erm, lust? (Alexia, interview)

Celeste's and Alexia's words suggest that they had adopted biological and psychoanalytical discourses in their conceptualisation of desire. These scripts are built on the dualism of nature/culture and body/mind – a concept that is a 'practical metaphysics' deeply embedded in our social lives (Bordo 1993, p.13) – which places desire in contrast to rationality. Hence, desire was 'rationalised' as inbuilt, original and crude, and thus 'raw' (also in Rachael's interview). As Celeste emphasised, desire is 'not rational in its most extreme form'. Celeste seems to interpret desire as a powerful drive which makes one

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<sup>86</sup> See section 'From Freud to Foucault: a move towards the cultural construction of desire' in Chapter 2.

act without considering the consequences. Yet, despite the sense of desire as uncontrollable, she used the term ‘somebody’ – not *anybody* – implying that there might be some personal choice involved.

Both Celeste and Alexia talked about ‘love’ in their narratives; however, love is not necessarily a precondition or a product of desire. In fact, ‘love’ is such an ambiguous term that when participants talked about their desire in relation to their partners, they more often referred to a sense of intimacy and closeness<sup>87</sup>. Another term used by both participants was ‘lust’. The meaning of lust suggests libidinous desire with a theological connotation of sin. Hence, in Christian tradition, sexual desire should be disciplined and controlled. Although lust was related to desire, participants did not necessarily conceptualise it as equivalent to desire. In the follow-up interview, Mina suggested that, for her, lust was a term more definite and more fleshy than desire. The word lust indicates a strong physical urge, and implies a powerful, uncontrollable emotion<sup>88</sup>.

The idea of desire as ‘uncontrollable’ is consistent with its popularised psychoanalytical discourse. There are two aspects of this ‘uncontrollability’: desire is interpreted as such a strong feeling that one cannot help being overwhelmed by it, and this uncontrollable desire is also portrayed as a drive, a motivation for sexual acts (Vandermassen 2004). Celeste interpreted desire as an overpowering emotion which *initiates* action, leading a person to prioritise sexual satisfaction over one’s ordinary role:

I think there’s a sense of being out of control. I think in a lot of relationships, early in that relationship you have the real kind of, that drive, where it isn’t controllable, and you don’t... it’s very chemical, isn’t it? It’s a real kind of chemical buzz that you just want to rip someone’s clothes off, you think about them a lot in that way. I think all these things operate on a very, not rational level. If you think about it, in a wider sense, people do all sorts of ridiculous things when they’re in the heat of passion, don’t they? You know they act in ways that are out of character, they jeopardise job, they jeopardise relationship because of sexual desire, because of lust and, you know, Bill Clinton jeopardised his presidency of the bloody United States to have a quick shag with a woman. (Celeste, interview)

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<sup>87</sup> I discuss ‘intimate relationships’ as a precondition for participants’ embodied sexual feelings in Chapter 5.

<sup>88</sup> Also see my discussion about language and the understanding of desire in Chapter 1.

Celeste's narrative, once again, emphasises an understanding of the dichotomy between body and mind: desire is located in the biological body, generated by 'chemicals', and thus cannot be controlled. Since Celeste framed desire within a relationship, her account indicated that this powerful emotion was directed towards someone as an object of desire. Nevertheless, desire should be disciplined in line with one's social role in case one acts 'out of character'. Character suggests social responsibility that is led by the 'mind'; thus, sexual desire functions to reveal the 'natural' self of the actor. This implication, once again, responds to the popular discourse of desire as 'innate' and something that should be kept under restraint.

For Jessica, the concept of 'uncontrollable desire' had a negative connotation, and particularly for women:

I think the first word that came, when you said negative, to my mind was like the 'uncontrollable' desire. You know, growing up from a young age we're taught, 'be careful! Because your boyfriends have uncontrollable desire', to keep that in check. And, like, for women having like an uncontrollable desire, in some ways I think it's celebrated. I think it should be celebrated. (Jessica, interview)

Jessica pointed out a few problems with the 'gendered' desire in popular discourses. In her experience, women were asked to manage men's uncontrollable desire. The social implication is that a woman is told to play a disciplinary role: she is expected to 'reduce' men's sexual desire by regulating her own actions. This way of thinking illuminates the culture of victim blaming in which women are wrongly held responsible for abuse. This social problem is based on the second issue, that men are assumed to be incapable of controlling their own actions because they are so powerfully driven. However, this misconception overlooks human subjectivity – it is unfair to suggest that men cannot take responsibility for their behaviour – furthermore, it makes sexual desire a scapegoat for sexual crimes.

In addition, Jessica argued that women *do* experience 'uncontrollable' desire; thus, women and men should not be conceptualised as different in this respect. However, Jessica's narrative turned from overtly stating that women's unruly desire is celebrated, to suggesting that it might not have been so. This shift in her account indicates to me that popular cultural discourses represent women's sexuality in a way that encourages women to communicate their desire; however, women in their everyday experience still face risks

for expressing desire publicly. Jessica's narrative demonstrates the multiple dilemmas women face. On one hand, she proposed that women's desire should be acknowledged; on the other hand, it was difficult to negotiate within dominant scripts that constructed human sexuality as gendered.

### Gendered Sexual Representations

The most common visual sexual representation – pornography – is a site full of cultural scripts. Even though pornography includes literature, still images and videos, more recently the term 'porn' within popular culture refers to the visual representation of sex<sup>89</sup>. Mainstream pornography is understood to portray women as sexual objects in order to cater to heterosexual men's desire (Rutter and Schwartz 2012; Eisner 2013; Mayhem 2013) and Rachael shared this view. As a British student of History of Art, Rachael told me that sexualised images of female bodies were so pervasive that women just interpreted them as depictions of desire – but *whose* desire?

I think [women] just come to accept that these images [of naked women] are what porn is about, and then they're just about sexual desire, rather than thinking that, actually, this is catering to, this is akin to male desire. But I think a lot of women don't, don't even think. They don't even realise that it's sort of excluding the way that they see sex themselves, and how they actually see desire. I think they kind of, just, learnt to adapt to that. I know I do it sometimes. (Rachael, interview)

In Rachael's interpretation, many women have acquired sexual scripts from pornography without any critical evaluation. However, since pornographic images constitute a large part of cultural scripts, and not every woman has access to a variety of other sexual representations, it is not surprising that some women adopt pornographic scripts in order to negotiate their desire. For instance, Steel Vagina told me that she found some porn arousing. Furthermore, pornography provides multiple sexual scripts<sup>90</sup> that lie outside of conventional sexual norms, offering ideas for women to experiment and explore with. Rachael's frustration also stemmed from the fact that images of objectified female bodies were so prevalent that they overshadowed women's subjective desire. While Rachael

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<sup>89</sup> There are written representations of sex that could be considered as porn, such as *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

<sup>90</sup> There is a 'bigger' script in pornography which represents women at the service of men, but there are multiple 'micro' scripts portraying a variety of bodies and sexual acts, as can be observed from the long 'lists' on porn websites.

acknowledged that her sexuality was partially shaped by pornography, she also suggested that a woman could only start to explore *her own desire* by resisting pornographic images.

Rachael's narrative also indicates a constructed distinction between heterosexual men's and women's desire. Mainstream pornography is usually positioned from the male character's viewpoint, hence focusing on sexualising female bodies as objects of desire. Even though in popular culture there are also images of 'sexy male bodies'<sup>91</sup>, Rachael did not think those images really represented her subjective desire. She explained:

I think I do find men's body sexy and so on, but it's not as heightened to me, as important as many other factors about them. That probably is a societal thing. Like, I've always been probably taught not to sexualise their bodies that much. But nevertheless it's there, so I feel like it's the project that I wouldn't just take loads of, like pictures of men's bodies. I feel like in a way it kind of wouldn't be true to my actual view... yeah, it's a combination of not so sure, not being sure if it was totally true to my actual desires, as much as my actual, like, one desire to have more, like, equality. (Rachael, interview)

Popular sexual scripts are gendered in several ways. Firstly, heterosexual men's desire can be shaped by scripts from mainstream pornographic images. These images lead men to focus on the visual representations of female bodies for sexual pleasure; in turn, heterosexual men might adopt these scripts to interpret their desire as based on a visualisation of the sexy female body. As more men look for objectified female bodies to stimulate sexual arousal, the porn industry continues to reproduce these representations to reinforce the male gaze. For women, it is different. In Rachael's interpretation, popular cultural scripts neither provided visual representations *of* a woman's subjective desire, nor encouraged her to adopt images of sexualised male bodies *for* her pleasure. Since she did not really interpret 'sexy male body' as her desire, photographing such a body would not represent her sexuality. In addition, popular discourses construct women's subjective desire as based on 'emotions' and relationships, thus diverting women from constituting their sexual feelings around *others'* bodies. Rachael's 'object' of desire was a person as a *whole*: there were many features altogether, rather than the body image on its own, which aroused her.

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<sup>91</sup> For instance, pictures of male celebrities such as Brad Pitt, Cristiano Ronaldo and Ryan Reynolds posing topless, and as seen in the film *Magic Mike*.

Although Rachael was critical of how visual sexual representations were gendered, she did not question why women's desire should be, and has been, represented in a more 'textual' way. In fact, Rachael made a photo of the 'texts' which, according to her, had shaped her sexuality (Figure 4.5). The careful positioning of the books suggests that Rachael did not simply mean books to represent knowledge; rather, she was emphasising the importance of each written work in shaping her sexuality. At the centre of this image is a piece of erotica written by Anaïs Nin. Rachael explained:

Just, like, [these books] *ground* my sexuality, I guess. Erm, sort of give me words to express it. If I read other people's words and I sort of find, like a language in a way if I come to think about my sexuality and how to relate to it. [...] And it also, reading erotica by Anaïs Nin, like I think I was fifteen when I found so... and again, if you like a female writer writing erotica, I found that interesting. So I guess that for me, ways that helped me to think about my sexual desire, so... I don't know if cultivate is the right word, but things to relate to and things to, like, know how to think about it and know it's okay to think about it, or whatever. So, they're quite important to me. [my emphasis] (Rachael, interview)

Rachael's books represent the scripts that she chose to embed the theoretical and practical basis of her desire. These texts shaped not only her interpretation of desire – as she talked about a 'language' that enabled her to think and relate to her sexuality – but also her 'women's sexuality' itself. Anaïs Nin was one of the first acknowledged female writers of erotica in Western societies. Her writing demonstrated to Rachael that women could communicate their sexual desire; furthermore, reading Nin's construction of women's experience has helped develop Rachael's own desire.

Unlike pornography, which, in Rachael's reflexive understanding, failed to provide her with visual resources to represent her desire, erotica such as Anaïs Nin's work offered her textual scripts to both interpret and portray her sexuality. Here, I consider the ways in which popular cultural scripts can lead women to frame their desire in terms of emotional development and sensual pleasure more than sexual intercourse; as a result, women might prefer 'erotic materials' rather than pornography because the former place more emphasis on the storyline and foreplay (Rutter and Schwartz 2012). Erotic literature, 'erotica', was a genre interpreted as being more 'for women' by participants Beth, Alexia and Cherry, while they viewed pornography as arousing for heterosexual men. Like Rachael, Alexia



Figure 4.5 Sapphosexuality (Rachael)

has read Nin's novels, and she considered them 'sensual, subtle and imaginative' (interview). As she explained in the interview, Alexia interpreted Nin's erotica as arousing for women because her writing provided space for women readers to fit in their own fantasies. This reasoning suggests that Alexia's pleasure was focused on how she could develop her desire within the story.

Alexia, Cherry and Rachael used sexual representations to generate desire by identifying with the female characters as sexual *subjects*, and they found more potential for this in 'erotica' than 'pornography'. Nevertheless, Steel Vagina used still frames<sup>92</sup> from pornography to explain the importance of being a subject of desire in her sexual experience. She particularly picked out scenes from the video where the female character appeared to be initiating sex and leading the interaction: for Steel Vagina, these were the moments when porn became much more arousing than when the male character had control (interview). Participants' narratives on sexual representations indicate that their subjectivities constituted a significant part of their practice of desire<sup>93</sup>: whether with erotica or porn, they needed to occupy an active role to develop their sexual feelings.

### Constituting Sexual Subjectivities with Popular Cultural Products

In popular cultural scripts, particularly in the form of advertisements, consumer products have been given sexual meanings. Some participants adopted these scripts and used commodities such as jewellery, lipsticks, shoes and perfumes in preparation for their sexual encounters. On one hand, these accessories functioned to draw attention to participants themselves and their bodies; on the other hand, participants used these items as a practice of changing their emotions, making them ready to be a desiring subject. In some cases, these cultural products have become an inseparable part of participants' sexual subjectivities<sup>94</sup>. In this subsection, I mainly discuss participants' use of *scents* – the commercials for which are highly sexualised in mass media – as I shall analyse other cultural products alongside participants' photographs in Chapter 6.

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<sup>92</sup> I decided not to display these images because of concerns about copyright law.

<sup>93</sup> Being the subject of their own desire was very important for participants to develop sexual feelings, and I discuss this in Chapter 5.

<sup>94</sup> My focus in this section is on how items are used to reconstitute sexual subjectivities rather than participants directing their desire onto items – the latter is considered a 'fetish'.

In advertisements, consumer products have been given certain meanings in order to sell; and these constructions have been taken up by some participants to negotiate their intrapsychic scripts. For instance, since our media technologies have not been able to deliver scents, advertising agencies had to find a way to visually represent perfumes in their commercials: by attaching cues of social status, sexual desire or sexual power to perfumes. Personally, I cannot remember how I got the idea that one ‘should’ apply perfumes to the wrists and the neck, but I can certainly find visual hints from TV commercials in which female celebrities either put perfume near the neck (see, for instance, Chanel 2011, 2014) or are being subtly sniffed around the neck by their potential sexual partners (see Commercial 2012). This constructed association between scents, specific body parts and desire was made by participant Rachel, who linked the smell of an aftershave to her partner:

As I have previously said, smell and sound have a great effect on my mood. As well as uplifting my spirits, they can remind me of certain people or certain events in my life. This smell reminds me of being close to my partner, whether it’s in bed or when hugging. It reassures and comforts me, but mostly, it reminds me of when we are being intimate and my head gets buried in his neck and the smell instantly takes me to a time and a place when I felt closest to him and at my most sexual. (Rachel, journal)

In Rachel’s interpretation, certain sensory cues generate memories<sup>95</sup> of particular sensuous experiences during her previous social interactions. The smell of her partner’s aftershave, in particular, reminded her of their physical interactions and a feeling of intimacy. Aftershave, of course, is different from perfumes; however, Rachel’s emphasis on the gesture of ‘burying her head in his neck’ illuminates how the connection between scent and a sense of closeness – hence sexual desire – is established. Although Rachel’s narrative illustrates her *private* experience and interpretation, her connection between scents and desire is not personal but shared by many people, including myself. This suggests that there exist cultural scenarios which have a more extensive effect on people’s cultural practices of desire. Rachel’s interpretation indicates the popular cultural influence on reshaping her intrapsychic scripts, enabling her desire to be initiated by an accessory.

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<sup>95</sup> There is a more detailed discussion about sensations generating desire – through memories – in the section ‘Sensations’ in the next chapter.

In a similar manner, Alexia saw perfumes as capable of both shaping her emotions and communicating her personality. She attached different meanings to various types of scent. She wrote:

Apart from the cologne, I also have several perfumes which I love to wear. They make me feel more desirable and it almost feels like each perfume communicates a certain personality that I want to wear for the period when I wear them. For example, I wear one of my heavier perfumes at particularly nice events (like dates), because it makes me feel sophisticated and sultry. (Alexia, journal)

Alexia used perfumes as an ‘add-on’ to renegotiate her sexual subjectivity: making her feel more attractive and ready for sexual attention than she already was. Alexia’s statement that ‘each perfume communicates a certain personality’ has several implications. Firstly, Alexia made sense of scents as embodying different meanings. Some scents can represent ‘sophistication’ and ‘sultriness’ while others might endow her with other characteristics that she wished to amplify for a particular scenario. Alexia’s narrative also suggests that, as an accessory, perfume was something that she could manipulate – she was free to take it off or replace it depending on how she wanted to present herself to others. Thirdly, perfume’s ability to ‘communicate’ is reliant on a culturally shared interpretation of scents. A communication was not just about how Alexia ‘expressed’ herself with scents, it also required the recipient of the scent to be knowledgeable and able to interpret the symbolic meanings in order to respond. Finally, Alexia used perfumes to communicate with other people as well as with herself. Her choice of perfume relied on her understanding of the event she was attending, the result she was anticipating, and how others might perceive the scent she had chosen. Once she put on the perfume, the scent contributed to shaping her emotions and helped her keep to the character she was playing.

In Celeste’s narrative, the scent turns into an essential part of her sexual subjectivity. She told me that a sexual encounter without her perfume was unimaginable:

Perfume makes me feel very sexual. I can’t imagine not wearing it when anticipating a sexual encounter or date with someone. I always have lots of perfume even when I am a bit hard up financially. It feels like an ‘essential luxury’. There is something very exciting about applying perfume just before a date, when you are dressed and have maybe put on some make-up and jewellery of course! I like it when you can smell

your own perfume on a scarf or catch a drift of someone else's as they turn their head.  
(Celeste, journal)

Celeste focused on herself being a sexual subject in her opening statement: she felt 'sexual' rather than 'sexy' with perfume. Hence, when she put on her perfume, it was not done (simply) for other people but, importantly, for her own desire. When she went through the routine of preparing herself for a date, putting on perfume was the final, concluding ritual which accelerated her excitement. Celeste's interpretation of perfume as essential for her sexual encounters indicates that this popular cultural product has become a part of her sexual being rather than just an accessory for her sexual experience. Furthermore, Celeste's enjoyment of smelling perfumes – attached to *her* – implies that she liked the moment when she recognised herself as being a sexual subject. Scents have been written into Celeste's intrapsychic scripts of desire.

In this section, I have offered a few examples of popular culture as one of the cultural sites that provide women with scripts to work with. These scripts creep into participants' intrapsychic scripts by creating familiarity with the extensive distribution of sexual materials. At times, these popular scripts were challenged by participants because of their gendered 'nature'; although participants found it easier to question pornography, as catering to male desire, rather than reflecting on how 'erotic literature' was also constructed as representing female sexuality. Almost all my participants had been in contact with feminist ideas, and were able to identify the gendered double standards in cultural scripts, including the ones I discussed in previous sections. In the next section, I turn to examine popularised feminist ideas as a cultural site.

## **Feminist Ideas**

By 'feminist ideas', I mean that I am interested in the ways in which my participants interpret feminism and use popularised feminist ideas to evaluate cultural scenarios. Hence, I am not engaging with the heterogeneous theories and politics in 'feminism'. Feminist ideas have a significant impact on participants' negotiation of desire in two ways. Some participants pointed out their struggle with certain feminist scripts of 'appropriate' sexuality. In particular, they reflected on their *personal* desire to suggest that these scripts ignored their *women's* experience. However, these participants did, in fact, adopt feminist

discourses to question dominant sexual representations. This leads to the second aspect, in which I explore how participants applied their feminist ideas to deal with normative sexual scripts. Participants' materials suggest that once an idea, a scenario or an object challenged feminist politics, they found it difficult to experience desire.

Participants who were familiar with feminist ideas quite often reflected on their knowledge of feminism as they conceptualised their sexuality. For them, feminist ideas are cultural scripts that need to be negotiated in order to reconstitute their intrapsychic scripts. Brigitte and Rachael specifically picked out the 'anti-pornography movement' and 'radical feminism' for discussion. In Brigitte's interpretation, the anti-pornography movement and its discourse perpetuated the idea of an 'appropriate' sexuality, which made her struggle when thinking about her own desire:

I worked a lot, I've been looking a lot about porn sites for men, and in anti-pornography movement there's still this way of talking about the right kind of sex and the wrong kind of sex. And the right kind of sex is egalitarian, and loving and gazing into one another's eyes and stimulating clitorises; and the wrong kind of sex, is, you know, 'bang bang thanks madam', anything to do with kind of, erm, sex toy, anything like that, because that's patriarchy involved. And I find it very interesting, two things are kind of, I think ideologically what shape me the most, which are feminism and Christianity, both really have a problem (laugh) with people's experience of sexual desire, the way they experience it. (Brigitte, interview 1)

For Brigitte, the feminist anti-pornography movement signified the ways in which sexual acts were given value – just as in social norms, certain kinds of sex were defined as 'appropriate' and others 'perverse'. In her understanding, this movement contributed to classifying what kinds of sex women should and should not have, and hence to disciplining women's desire. As a result, sexual desire is stratified; and those sexual acts deemed undesirable to 'anti-pornography feminists' are marginalised or considered inappropriate. In this sense, a feminist discourse that perpetuates what sex is 'good' or 'bad' for women is no different from what it stands against: the cultural stratification of sexuality in patriarchal societies which defines what sex *men or women* should enjoy.

However, Brigitte seemed to have equated the feminist anti-pornography movement with radical feminism: the former focuses on how pornographic *representations* of hetero-sex,

and pornography as part of a wider sex *industry* cause harm and violence to women; whereas the latter identifies heterosexuality and hetero-sex in patriarchal culture as a site of oppression for women (MacKinnon 1982, 1989; Graham 1994). Even though some radical feminists support the feminist anti-pornography movement, there are still differences between the two. Dworkin (1985) wrote in support of the anti-pornography movement by arguing that pornography offers insults to sex by perpetuating the subordination of women (p.9), implying that she does not necessarily consider hetero-sex itself to be male dominance over women. Nevertheless, since radical feminists argue that heterosexuality in patriarchal societies is a form of male control over women, many heterosexual women who read this would find themselves being *negotiated* as having no subjectivity in their sexual relationships with men. As a result, radical feminism is often perceived as hostile to heterosexual, penetrative sex. This is probably why Brigitte interpreted radical feminism as problematic; and it was certainly Rachael's feeling that her sexual self disappeared in radical feminist thinking:

[Having control of my body and desire] gives me a sense of, um, like, *my* sexual desire being about *myself* and *my own body*. And I'm probably quite self-conscious about it. From, you know, reading feminist theory and so on, and little, I don't know, Andrea Dworkin idea's of sex is essentially like rape, 'it's all for the men' blah blah blah. So in my head I want to really fight against it. But it's probably slightly quite self-consciously that I want to be like, 'No! This is for *me*, and I'm going to make this to *me!*' [my emphasis]. (Rachael, interview)

As discussed earlier, Rachael regarded some literature as providing her with a way to understand her sexuality. Other feminist scripts also made it possible for her to interpret gendered sexual representations in popular culture. However, in this context, she found it difficult to claim her desire as *hers* because radical feminists framed her heterosexuality (within patriarchy) as serving only men's interests. What if Rachael enjoyed sex with her male partner? How could she negotiate her feminist identification in relation to her desire? As Rachael could not relate radical feminist ideas to *her* desire, she rejected these scripts because of her wish to claim her own sexual feelings.

Another reason why Brigitte picked out radical feminism in her material was because of her personal history. Because I was curious as to why Brigitte felt so strongly about

radical feminism rather than other feminisms, I conducted a third interview with her. She told me:

What frustrated me when I first became engaged in feminism, in a real sense when I was about the age of 18 or 19, is that suddenly there is this whole new group of people telling me that I wasn't doing it right. So coming from a [Christian] background where you have been told to have zero sexual desire, it just wasn't meant to happen until you're married, like nobody wants to think that you were meant to feel any sexual desire whatsoever, to then be, surrounded by a group of women who were saying, 'well you can feel sexual desire, but only in this way' was very frustrating. (Brigitte, interview 3)

From Brigitte's perspective, the radical feminist rejection of hetero-sex ignored many people's – not just women's – desire and how they experienced sexual feelings. Despite its political importance, denouncing heterosexuality could discourage heterosexual women from exploring and communicating their sexuality. Additionally, this view of women as oppressed within patriarchal heteronormativity constructs heterosexual women as having no sexual subjectivity unless patriarchy is abolished. Brigitte's narratives demonstrate that ideas of Christianity and feminism had a similar impact on her practice: she struggled with both sets of cultural scripts. Although Brigitte refused to have her heterosexual, BDSM desire<sup>96</sup> interpreted via this feminist approach – as she explained later in the same interview – she still adopted some of the ideas to aid her criticism of pornography. As she pointed out, pornography is not simply a sexual representation but an 'industry' embodying unequal power relations. Hence, she argued that if one did not engage in the consumerist nature of pornography, one might lose sight of other gender issues – such as women's sex work – related to this industry (Brigitte, interview 3).

Likewise, Rachael was able to use her feminist scripts and her focus on women's sexual subjectivity to criticise pornographic images. As discussed earlier, Rachael argued that she could not find visual representations *for* and *of* her desire because mainstream pornographic images were produced to cater to heterosexual men's sexual interests. In her narrative, these images of sexually objectified women (see Rachael's photo, Figure 4.6) are 'offensive, annoying and irritating' (Rachael, interview). Rachael was unhappy with those pornographic images, not only because she did not find them desirable for herself but also

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<sup>96</sup> Brigitte's BDSM desire was discussed in the first section: Christianity.



because, from her point of view, the women represented were just an implement for pleasuring men:

Erm, but then, more, sort of personal level, I just feel, like, it's maybe hard to connect to the, kind of images, because they really are, selling something that is like the extortion of sex. Like, they're not like selling people and their feelings. They're selling, like, stereotypes. You've got like, the, uh, you've got these sort of wife who has just left her husband, and you've got like this old granny, and you've got like underage girl, which is slightly creepy and, all these little figures, they're not real people there. Erm, and I find this totally not sexually appealing to me. (Rachael, interview)

Rachael first acknowledged that, even though for herself these pornographic images were not arousing, other people might feel differently. Nevertheless, from her perspective, these sex adverts stripped women of their personalities by reducing them to 'social roles'.

Particularly in representations like these, women became merely images of a stereotyped feminine body to be scrutinised by heterosexual men instead of 'real people' who invested in sexual interactions: women were reduced to images of sexually attractive bodies that seduced male spectators for money. Rachael emphasised that these images are selling an 'extortion of sex', indicating a sense of violence and abuse attached to them: these adverts not only disconnect desire from 'people and their feelings', they seem to be trafficking women. To make it even more appalling, these adverts were selling gendered stereotypes: 'wife who has just left her husband' suggests that she was probably both emotionally and sexually desperate, and in need of a companion; 'old granny' was perhaps built upon age play; and 'underage girl' indicated that she was innocent, curious and needed a man to instruct her. Even though viewers might interpret these characters differently to fit in with their desire, it seems to me that all these three roles are based on one common trait: the vulnerable woman.

Vulnerable women were really not my participants' 'cup of tea'. Rachel, for instance, was unimpressed by how the female protagonist was portrayed in the bestseller *Fifty Shades of Grey*<sup>97</sup>. Mirroring Alexia's desire for 'literary' erotica, Rachel complained about the poor writing in *Fifty Shades*. Rachel found the book even more unbearable when she interpreted the representation of BDSM:

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<sup>97</sup> Beth, Alexia and Mina also mentioned this novel in their materials. Beth and Alexia found the book 'undesirable' whereas Mina mentioned it as an example of how women's desire has been commodified.

It's very poorly written, and that makes it worse. Because then it's like things are not properly explained. Cos like you said, it's not proper BDSM. They use things like cable ties which is dangerous, you know. And it makes, and it's odd because, she was virgin before she met him, and then, they had consensual sex, yes, and she does consent to what is being asked of her. But it's in a very bizarre way cos she had to say things like, 'yes, sir.' To me, it's not my idea of consent. Also, her only sexual experience was with this one man. So she doesn't know anything. Whereas BDSM, dominant and submissive agreements, happens with normally, two sexually experienced people. And the submissive knows what's going to happen, and wants to be in that situation. So it makes BDSM community look crazy, which is bad for them. It makes *this woman* look weak, but it also, I'm not supportive of the man who wants to, you know, injure *this woman*. But if that is lifestyle where, cos he's been a submissive before when he was younger, and if that's his lifestyle, it makes it look like it's an illness that needs fixing. Whereas if he was with someone who was experienced, and that he didn't play out in this weird cable ties and this dangerous stuff. [my emphasis] (Rachel, interview)

Rachel's criticism of this novel is manifold. Firstly, she focused on the content of the sexual interactions and concluded that it misrepresented BDSM. Rachel had her own knowledge of BDSM, and many parts of the novel – the use of props, the portrayed relationship between the characters, and the female protagonist's sexual knowledge – contradicted her understanding. Additionally, Rachel disagreed with the 'consent' represented in this novel. In her interpretation, informed consent should be established between people in an equal relationship; however, the female protagonist's response 'yes, sir' clearly demonstrated an imbalanced power relationship. Rachel's narrative further indicates that she did not treat *Fifty Shades* as sexual fiction to be used for arousal. Rachel criticised this book as leaving some issues 'not properly explained', suggesting that she thought the writer had the responsibility to do so. Rachel critically viewed this novel as powerful cultural material that could perpetuate stereotypical gender and sexual roles.

This fiction provided cultural scripts that strongly contradicted Rachel's intrapsychic interpretation of BDSM sexuality, and this contradiction was manifested in her narrative when she said that she could not make sense of the BDSM relationship in *Fifty Shades* – particularly in terms of the female character's lack of sexual experience. Rachel was very invested in *reading* this novel. In her account, she emphasised 'this woman' twice, implying that she sympathised with the female character's experience. It could be that

Rachel interpreted this character as a ‘woman victim’ who was vulnerable to the male character’s domination and to the unsafe sexual play he initiated.

*Fifty Shades*, in many ways, challenged Rachel’s feminist politics. For her, the book perpetuated cultural sexual mores: the stereotypes of BDSM practitioners, gendered roles, and a conventional romance between a dominant older man and a submissive younger woman (also mentioned in Alexia’s interview). She not only found the fiction undesirable, but also felt angry and worried about how the scripts reproduced romanticised gender identities:

It’s just like one of the biggest turn-offs. My partner picked it up and read it, and he was like ‘this is actually what women find...’ Like it’s been on chat show where people are saying, women are saying it saved their marriage, because of the erotica and things like that. The erotica is no worse than the regular Mills and Boon you pick up, you know, the romance. (Rachel, interview)

Rachel’s interpersonal experience demonstrated to her that this book *did* have an impact on how people interpreted heterosexual women’s sexuality: men thought this fiction reflected *what women really want sexually*, and some women might read the scripts as *what women should desire*. These misconceptions were reproduced in popular media which emphasised that the book was widely purchased by women. The rhetoric ‘women are saying it saved their marriage’ suggests that heterosexual couples actually practised and enjoyed the sex – perhaps also the gender relationship – in this fiction. This means that the sexual scripts embodied in this novel have been adopted to renegotiate readers’ desire. This would have been okay in the sense that at least some women enjoyed their sex; however, in Rachel’s interpretation, *Fifty Shades of Grey* was yet another typical romance novel like those published by Mills and Boon, which perpetuated gender stereotypes and emphasised women’s subordination to men (Cummins and Bindel 2007)<sup>98</sup>.

Rachel’s *personal* understanding of BDSM practices and her feminist ideas allowed her to criticise cultural representations that construct the imbalanced power relationship between men and women. Cassandra’s feminist awareness also led her to identify sites and

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<sup>98</sup> *Fifty Shades of Grey* has received many criticisms. Reviews suggest that, besides the bad writing, it is questionable whether the female protagonist has individual agency (Alliston and Greenfield 2012); furthermore, its plot is a cliché of a young woman falling for a rich older man, making it as corny as Mills & Boon (Barnett 2012) or worse (Sheehy 2012).

behaviours which reinforced gender stereotypes. This perpetuation of a particular kind of masculinity and femininity removed individuality from a person and reduced diversity. Cassandra discussed how she felt put off by the male-centred sex industry with her picture of a lap-dancing club (Figure 4.7):

Lap dancing is not about, is not about the women who are dancing, expressing their sexuality in a way that's suitable to them. Maybe for some women it is, but, I would imagine most of them do it for the money. Erm, it's about men's sexuality, it's about being men, just to be the object of men's sex. (Cassandra, interview)

The problems Cassandra had with lap-dancing clubs were about women's bodies being objectified for men's desire as much as the perpetuation of the gender dichotomy which has constructed social norms for men and women to behave accordingly. Women who worked as lap-dancers were unlikely to be acting upon their sexual subjectivity. Since lap-dancing was about running a business, women dancers had to follow certain protocols to ensure that their performance catered to the viewing consumers' desire. Furthermore, heterosexual men's involvement in this sex industry signified that some men took part in such activities to 'make a point', to demonstrate their masculinity and to even *become* masculine ('being men'). That is, men used their participation in the sex industry to reconstitute their intrapsychic scripting.

What really infuriated Cassandra was not only the lack of women's sexual subjectivity in the sex industry, but also how conventional gender roles were reproduced as social norms. For instance, Cassandra presumed that there was a dominant image of a 'sexy, feminine body' that was reinforced in the sex industry. This hegemonic femininity removed individuality from a woman, persuading her to perform and 'fit in' with patriarchal norms. Cassandra's concerns indicated that neither men nor women really had a choice – their subjectivities were limited within dominant discourses. In this sense, a woman in sexual employment was sexually exploited through the way in which she had to reconstitute her subjectivity around men's desire in order to continue earning.

But again, apart from the exploitation of women that happens in there financially, the premise of lap dancing says to me, is, 'this is what men like, they like these women to have this kind of hair, and they have this shape breasts, and this shape waist, and they do this kind of thing.' Is it all men like things to be just one way? That irritates me. It's not that it just irritates me because it seems to be saying that all men are sexists.

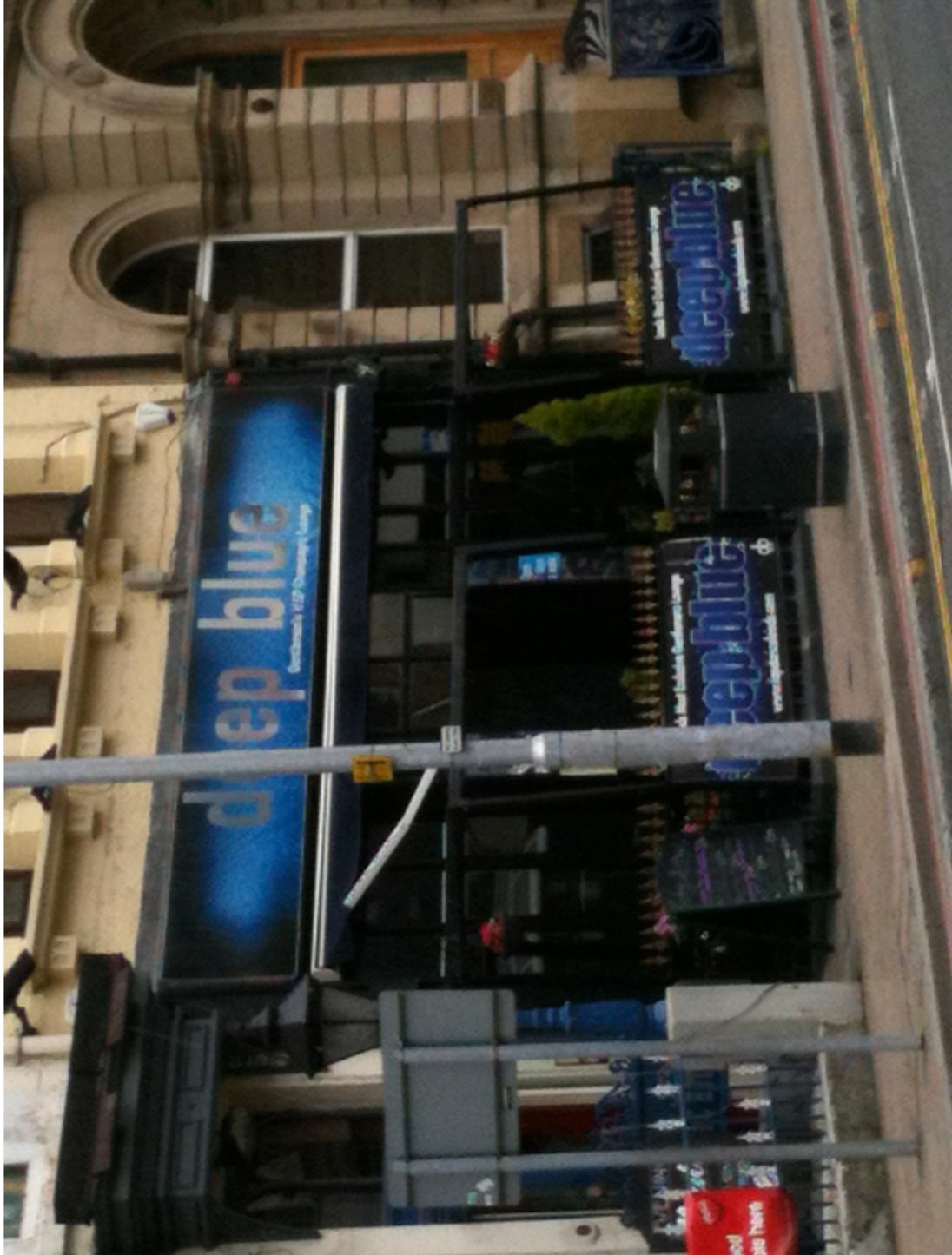


Figure 4.7 Lapdancing Club Opposite My Bus Stop (Cassandra)

Because they all only like this particular kind of sexual object to look at. They're not interested in the woman's sexuality at all, they're only interested in their own. And that's why it makes me want to not like men. (Cassandra, interview)

Since hegemonic masculinity has constructed men as a homogeneous group, and in the context of lap-dancing clubs heterosexual men are the usual consumers, this suggested to Cassandra that every man objectified and exploited women for his own sexual desire. However, human subjectivities are more *active* than Cassandra's description, and there exist various, competing scripts that social agents can use to negotiate their sexuality. Cassandra's language, rather than targeting individuals' intrapsychic scripts, is directed at cultural scenarios she felt strongly about: the idea that the existing sexual culture could perpetuate dominant gender roles was unsettling. Cassandra's feminist approach illuminates the underlying gender inequality in patriarchal societies. There exist cultural expectations of people to take up their assigned gender roles, which reinforce the imbalanced power relationship between men and women: as masculinity is bound up with superiority, femininity is, 'essentially', inferior to its counterpart in the gender dichotomy. Cassandra used the example of men in sports to illustrate her analysis of dominant masculinity:

So the sporting masculinity is a particular masculinity that I abhor, because it's so exclusively male. Yeah, and homosocial as well so that the only people that can be such as friends or, respecting them on an equal level would be other men, and other heterosexual men. Probably other heterosexual men who like sports. Which means it's close to violence and bullying of gay men and women, and so around big sporting events like the World Cup, you get much more of them being violent, and so that masculinity because it's so tied up with sexist attitudes, just makes me furious. I wouldn't, you know, it turns me off, I suppose. It makes me angry, angry in a sort of get the shears out and snip their cocks off kind of way. (Cassandra, interview)

In Cassandra's interpretation, the superiority of masculinity was constructed upon the foundation of belittling 'others' – those who were not heterosexual men. In turn, only heterosexual men could possibly benefit from the perpetuation of masculinity. Men whose performance successfully 'fit in' to the conventional masculinity created an exclusive social boundary, and they were encouraged to use violence to reinforce their privilege. These 'masculine men' were the products as well as the perpetrators of the 'macho culture' in patriarchal society. Cassandra detested the sexism embodied in macho culture;

hence, whenever she encountered symbols of masculinity, she would become too occupied with anger to think about or experience desire. That is, Cassandra's adopted feminist ideas were readily negotiated into her intrapsychic scripting. She was not only interpreting a scenario as undesirable, but any sign of sexism could stop her sexual feelings from being initiated.

Using feminist ideas, participants renegotiated their intrapsychic scripts and established themselves as individual agents of their own sexuality. Thus, participants were capable of mobilising these ideas to criticise the unequal gender relationships in normative sexual representations – both texts and images – and in the sex industry. Furthermore, participants confronted cultural scripts which perpetuated a sense of 'appropriate' sex, including the perceived radical feminist view on hetero-sex, suggesting that participants refused to be framed as objects that serve men's interests; rather, they claim their desire as part of their subjective selves.

## **Conclusion**

My analysis of the cultural practice of desire reveals that participants interacted with cultural scripts in a complex way. Dominant cultural scripts did not unilaterally constitute participants' sexuality. In fact, sexual scripts from different cultural sites provided diverse, often conflicting, meanings for participants to converse with. Participants were more aware of the impact of certain cultural sites, particularly aspects of their upbringing which they understood and interpreted as 'Christianity' or 'ethnicity'. However, even though some have adopted scripts from popular culture and feminist ideas as a crucial part of their intrapsychic scripting, they did not necessarily specify these two sites. In their cultural practice, participants interpreted and negotiated their desire by using existing scripts: they might adopt some materials to make sense of their sexuality, reject certain sexual representations, and struggle between the learnt cultural scripts and their personal experience of desire. It is crucial to acknowledge that this cultural practice is an ongoing process that involves women's reflexivity; and it is within this process that strings of discourses, ideas and representations come in to weave the webs of women's understanding of desire.

The four cultural sites that I have discussed in this chapter provided different sexual meanings of desire, and participants' interactions with them varied. The Christian texts, as two participants interpreted passages from the Bible, suggested that desire was sinful outside of wedlock and was heteronormative. In response, one participant disciplined her own emotions and actions so she neither felt desire nor aroused desire in other people. The other participant, however, reflected on her own sexual feelings and demonstrated how she struggled with the scripts. In participants' understanding, their ethnic backgrounds – predominantly British and Chinese – framed desire as private and dangerous. These meanings were mostly delivered through social interactions with friends and family. As a result, some women felt that their sexual stories should only be told – if they chose to do so at all – within close friendship groups. However, the narratives of two participants who experienced multiple ethnicities indicated that intrapsychic scripts can be renegotiated within different cultural and social scenarios.

Compared to the previous two sites, popular culture offered relatively messy and extensive representations which portrayed desire as uncontrollable, gendered, pleasurable and consumable. These ideas were embodied in multiple media such as texts, still images and videos. Many participants appeared to have adopted these meanings without identifying the influence of popular culture because it is so ubiquitous. For instance, some participants characterised desire as a 'natural drive'. However, this understanding is shaped within popular discourse and their narratives are paradoxical. A few participants acquired scripts from commercials to reshape their sexual subjectivities using consumer products. Some participants understood the sexual representations in popular culture as highly gendered, and they questioned this phenomenon with their feminist ideas. Participants' feminist ideas predominantly instate them as individual agents; thus, when they confronted feminist scripts or sexual norms that suggested otherwise, they found that these ideas quenched their desire. Thus, women who embodied feminist ideas in their intrapsychic scripts considered patriarchal norms and sexism repellent to their sexual feelings; furthermore, they used their feminist understanding to criticise their perceived 'radical feminism' and perpetuated gender roles.

My analysis also suggests that scripts provide the basic knowledge for social interaction; and, in this project, scripts allow women to understand and use 'cues' to communicate their

desire. Sensory cues – including scents and images – and language such as ‘sexy’ all embody multiple meanings. Participants had to negotiate their intrapsychic scripts within cultural scenarios in order to make sense of the signals, so they could interpret other people’s sexual ‘messages’ as well as sending out their own; at the same time, participants also relied on other people’s capacity to decipher sexual meanings for this communication to ‘succeed’. For instance, participants who used their perfumes to amplify their sexual attractiveness would expect their potential sexual partner to understand this cue; likewise, participants had to judge whether ‘you are sexy’ is a comment sent by an admirer or a hater in order to respond accordingly. Similarly, women making images to communicate their desire – which is what this project is about – might appropriate visual cues which embody multiple cultural meanings, as I will discuss in Chapter 6.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated the complex relationship between cultural scripts and participants’ interaction with them. There might be occasions when participants have conversed with dominant scripts in similar ways – such as adopting materials from popular culture in order to constitute their intrapsychic scripts – but more often individual participants would respond to these scripts differently in their cultural practice. Although participants sometimes appeared to be picking up or abandoning certain scripts out of ‘choice’, their *personal* reasons may be obscure because the choices themselves were culturally conditioned. The four cultural sites I have discussed here focus on ‘broader’ scenarios which allowed participants to *make sense* of desire; however, participants’ rich materials also demonstrate the contexts and scenarios in which they *feel* desire. In the next chapter, I turn to explore the embodied experience of desire by examining the preconditions which potentially generate sexual feelings for participants.

## Chapter 5

### Preconditions for Desire: Embodying Sexual Pleasure

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[The] body has always been a topic that fascinates and confuses me at the same time. Born into a Chinese family, I was not allowed to express my sexuality, or even think of it. Of course as a result, I wanted it even more.

Every relationship I had started with [the] body, though I thought I was looking for a soulmate. When I moved to the UK, I had the chance to feel more comfortable about my body, yet more confused about its user, myself, who I really am.

Gradually I learned to feel the harmony of sexuality and feelings; as a student of anthropology I understand how our sense of our bodies and the self is shaped by our culture and society, however I just want to be comfortable, and in this sense honest with how I feel.

The most essential and foremost relationship one can have, is with oneself. The photo shooting took place in my friend's bathroom. I was behaving as if I was with myself, expressing my body, and how I felt about it – without which I cannot relate to anyone, or anything in the world. (Pumpkin, journal)

Pumpkin wrote this journal entry in relation to a photo<sup>99</sup> which represents her desire. This piece of writing reads as rather fragmented, yet it offers an insight into the development of her emotions and her relationship with her body. At the start, Pumpkin's narrative suggests that she perceived a link between the body and sexuality; however, she did not elaborate, nor did she explain why the body 'fascinates and confuses' her. A hint can be found in the second section, where Pumpkin wrote that her relationship started with bodily interaction – perhaps as an enactment of desire – although she was looking for a like-minded partner (my interpretation of 'soulmate'). The entry implies that Pumpkin located sexuality in her body and, during her early life, her *body* was in irreconcilable conflict with her *mind*.

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<sup>99</sup> This image contains Pumpkin's facial appearance; hence I am not displaying it due to anonymity. The image contains three incomplete photos of herself that were hung up on the wall. In these photos, Pumpkin appears to be on her own – undressing, wiping the mirror with her hand, looking down and pondering – in the bathroom. Although she was being scrutinised and captured by the camera – and hence the hidden photographer – she seemed comfortable with her acts. The photo implies that her feelings about her body are confident and even 'thoughtful'.

As Pumpkin's journal continues, the binary of mind and body in her interpretation of sexuality seems to have been discarded as she learnt a new set of discourses: anthropology. As she constructed it, the idea of 'embodiment'<sup>100</sup> – although she did not use the term – was how she started to reconcile her sexuality with her *self*: she accepted her sexual emotions as part of who she was. Despite her cultural knowledge, Pumpkin decided to focus on her sexual emotions as she experienced and understood them rather than being defined or restrained by existing sexual scripts. In the final section, Pumpkin emphasised that, through her embodiment – which was the most important relationship one can have with oneself – she was able to experience herself as a sexual being, to connect with other people, and to make sense of her desire as well as obtaining other knowledge about the world.

Pumpkin's journal was very reflexive about her past experience and her understanding of sexual scripts. Her account is an excellent example of how I wish to theorise 'embodiment' in this thesis. The language around 'body' and 'embodiment' is very difficult. Drawing upon Jackson and Scott's (2007) concept, I use the term *embodiment* to suggest the relationship between body, emotions and mind rather than just the 'body', which is often understood in the body/mind dichotomy. These three elements are usually entangled, and are all important in experiencing sexual desire. Although, grammatically, 'embodiment' is a noun, conceptually I also regard it as a verb<sup>101</sup> involving a process of self-reflection and interaction with cultural scripts. I ask: how does embodiment enable a woman to have sexual feelings? Under what preconditions can embodiment generate desire for a woman – be it on her own, or in her social relationships?

Whereas in the previous chapter I focused on how participants interacted with broader cultural scripts to interpret and negotiate desire, in this chapter I turn to participants' *personal*, embodied experiences of sexual feelings. Reading participants' materials, I examine the contexts and scenarios in which their desire was generated or enhanced. I identified four preconditions for desire: body perception, sensations, fantasy, and intimate relationships. The narratives reflecting on preconditions demonstrate that sexual desire, more often than not, involves a process of 'becoming' rather than appearing spontaneously.

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<sup>100</sup> I discuss my ideas and Jackson and Scott's theory of embodiment in the section 'Symbolic Interactionism and Sexual Scripts' in Chapter 4.

<sup>101</sup> See my discussion on how embodiment is a process on page 151.

Participants were more likely to experience desire when their preconditions were satisfied; however, these preconditions were not determinants that would necessarily lead to sexual feelings or arousal<sup>102</sup>. Even when the preconditions were met, there were still times when participants did not experience sexual desire at all. Desire only *came to be* when participants picked up cues and interpreted a scenario – be it an imagined or a physical sexual encounter – as desirable. My analysis of preconditions supports the notion that desire is culturally constructed. Reflecting on their past experience, participants were aware that the circumstances in which their desire was aroused were changeable depending on the social interaction and the cultural environment in which they were located. Hence, these preconditions involve crucial interpersonal and cultural elements which shaped participants' sexual feelings.

### **Perception of Body Image**

Perhaps not surprisingly, body image has a strong effect on individuals' sexual conduct. Research suggests that an association is commonly observed between women's self-perception of body image and their sexuality (Wiederman and Hurst 1997; La Rocque and Cioe 2011). In their quantitative research with 362 undergraduate students, both male and female, at a university in Canada, La Rocque and Cioe (2011) examined the relationship between body image – including their research subjects' self-evaluation, investment and emotional experience – and sexual avoidance. They claim that women's awareness of their body image might occur because they were conscious of the body as an attractive visual stimulus for their sexual partners, and women who perceived their body image more positively were more likely to be sexually confident and have satisfactory sexual experiences (p.404). While similar connections have been found in other quantitative studies (see, for instance, Wiederman and Hurst 1998; Wiederman 2000; Meana and Nunnink 2006; McCabe and Goldhammer 2012), little empirical research has been done to investigate how or why women's self-perception of body image becomes part of their sexual subjectivity<sup>103</sup>.

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<sup>102</sup> In my interpretation, arousal involves physiological reactions, whereas desire is related to emotions.

<sup>103</sup> Koch et al. (2005) suggest that most of the empirical research on the relationship between body image and sexuality focuses on women with disabilities or disorders.

Although I agree that if women have a ‘positive’ perception of their body image this can give them greater sexual confidence, women’s embodied desire is not only, if at all, about being a visually stimulating object in the way that La Rocque and Cioe (2010) suggest. A woman can be aware of how her body is perceived as an object of desire, but her embodiment allows her to experience desire in many sensuous ways other than being a visual stimulus in a sexual encounter. Without a closer examination of their research subjects’ experiences, quantitative researchers were unable to explain how a woman’s body image influences her subjective sexual feelings. The questions to ask here are: how is the body influential in women’s subjective desire? In what way does the perception of the body act as a precondition for participants’ sexual feelings?

‘Body’ is the most mentioned and photographed subject in my participants’ narratives of desire. Of the eighteen participants, only three – Odinsleep, Cassandra and Lucy – did not send any pictures of their own bodies<sup>104</sup> or body parts; but even so, Odinsleep and Lucy took pictures which represent ideas related to their bodies. This extensive focus on their bodies, in fact, suggests that *embodiment* is an essential part of participants’ desire. Their emphasis on ‘body image’, for instance, is at the very least concerned with their perception (how they *think* and *feel*) of the look of their physicality (the *body*). In this section, I explore how embodiment works within participants’ perceptions of body image – including their own and those represented in cultural scripts – to possibly generate or suppress their sexual desire.

Many participants stated quite clearly that feeling comfortable with, and confident about, their body image was crucial to experiencing desire. This perception of their body image, as a precondition, was strongly associated with the ways in which they adopted conventional femininity in negotiating their personal desire. When participants learnt and appropriated the cues of ‘sexiness’ as their own, they might turn into desiring subjects. Their performance of sexiness was informed by cultural and interpersonal scripts which not only represented but also reproduced dominant images of desired femininity. The adoption of conventional femininity into one’s body image requires the ‘working’ of embodiment, particularly self-reflexivity.

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<sup>104</sup> Here, I focus on photographs participants took of *their own* rather than other people’s bodies. Odinsleep and Lucy did not photograph any bodies or body parts at all; whereas Cassandra sent five pictures of other people and their bodies.

Perception of the body is directly linked to objectified embodiment. With self-reflexivity, participants scrutinised and evaluated how their bodies as objects might be observed and desired by others; and participants' perceptions of their body image could have a strong impact on their self-confidence during sexual interactions. The idea of what constitutes a desirable body, in participants' narratives, comes from cultural and interpersonal scripts which, in turn, construct their self-consciousness about their body. Rachael, for instance, shared the story of her ex-boyfriend commenting on her teeth (Figure 5.1) – a part of the body which Rachael found ugly.

When I first met one of my previous boyfriends I was utterly taken aback by his beauty, though when I told him this he grimaced and replied with some hesitation that when he first met me he was rather taken aback by the appearance of my teeth! I was utterly devastated. (Rachael, journal)

Rachael uses 'taken aback' twice, and this expression creates distance between Rachael and her ex-partner: both of them were 'surprised' by the other's appearance; however, their feelings stemmed from very different responses. For Rachael, their first encounter was rather desirable: she was drawn to his attractive appearance. However, as Rachael's narrative suggests, since her ex-boyfriend indicated that her teeth looked unappealing, she has become more conscious of this part of her body image. In the interview, she told me that she would modify this part of her body if she could afford the money to do so, indicating her knowledge of the social convention of attractive teeth – white and aligned – and the possible ways to achieve it.

Another dominant script of an 'ideal' female body is 'thinness'. Even though participants did not mention 'thinness', their references to 'fat' suggest that having a thin body was more desirable for them: Odinsleep, Rachael, Rae and Brigitte all stated that 'being fat' is unattractive. When participants thought of thinness as a desirable body feature, usually they were scrutinising their body images rather than using slenderness to evaluate whether another person is desirable to them. For many women, having a slim body – which is usually seen in both Western and East-Asian popular media – fits into the dominant cultural representation of ideal femininity. Female attractiveness, in Western societies, is based on a slim body (Adam 2001), which can be achieved either through muscle-building or being trimmed close to the bone (Bordo 1993, p.191). The popular cultural exposure of

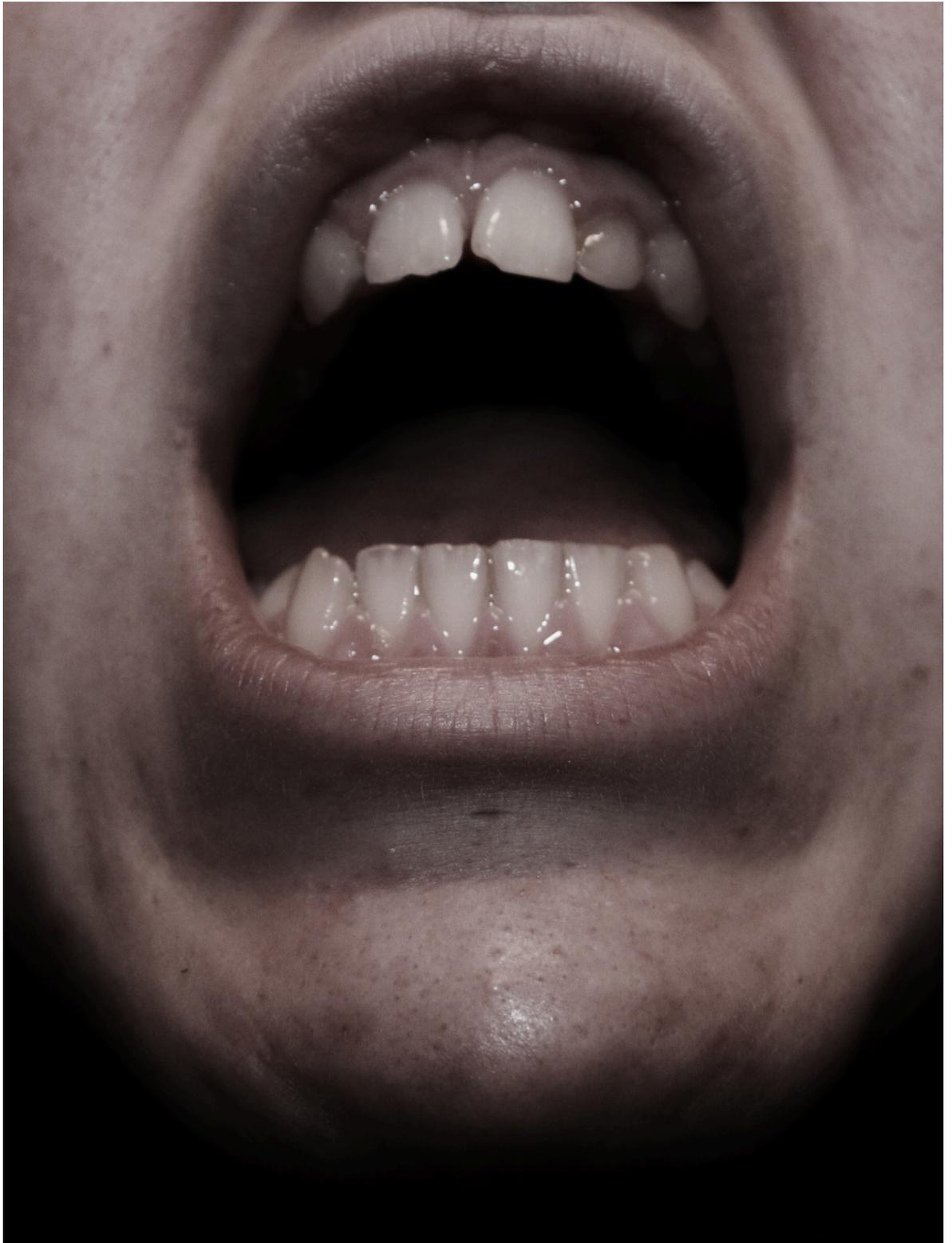


Figure 5.1 *Chipped and Scarred* (Rachael)

thin ideals can further generate comparison and body dissatisfaction for women (Tiggemann and Slater 2003; Wykes and Gunter 2005), leading women to feel that a slender body is essential for constructing desirable femininity. Similar perceptions of ideal female body image can be found in 'East-Asian' societies, in which many women emphasise how much thinner they need to be before they will be happy with their appearance. Many participants stated that having a satisfying body image was crucial for them to have confidence in themselves before they became a desiring subject; hence, at times when they overly focused on their body image and perceived it as 'undesirable', they might not see themselves as having sexual feelings at all.

Some participants clearly identified this compulsory femininity as a form of patriarchal control over women's bodies. Brigitte, for instance, talked about 'fat':

The one thing, and this is a horrible thing to say. I find fat people sexually undesirable. And I find, therefore myself, the way I have been for the past four years, I find my body, I do not see my body as sexually desirable. I get all the arguments about it, and I get sort of patriarchal control, and I get all of that. But when I look at my body, because I used to be extremely fit, I do not see it as being sexually desirable. And I do not see other people whose body shape is similar to mine as being sexually desirable. I'm a bad feminist. [laughs] (Brigitte, interview 1)

Brigitte's narrative demonstrates that she was reflexive about her own desire as negotiated between the cultural norm of ideal femininity and her feminist ideas. She interpreted her desire for a 'skinny body' on herself and on other people as being imposed by patriarchal culture. These normative ideas of attractive bodies overpowered her feminist politics, and this was reflected in her *not* having sexual feelings towards fat people. An idealised woman's body under patriarchal control in Western culture is one that is intensely managed and highly disciplined (Bordo 1993): clean shaven, with tight and smooth skin, looking slim. Brigitte claimed that she was a bad feminist because a 'good' feminist should celebrate diverse body shapes – and, perhaps, use the body 'as a site of struggle' to resist gender domination (Bordo *ibid.*, p.184). However, even though she knew these feminist ideas, she could not follow them *emotionally*. Brigitte would probably prefer that her feelings towards a fat body were different, but she could not help it since the cultural norm had shaped her intrapsychic scripts. Furthermore, Brigitte's dissatisfaction with her

body image, in her account, seems to have become intensified as she compared her current and previous body shapes.

Even though some participants shared the same idea that they should not collude with the patriarchal norms of femininity, there were times when they felt that fitting in with cultural expectations made their lives a lot easier. From my personal experience, I also conform to the social conventions of femininity. For instance, deciding whether to shave various parts of my body is something I struggle with; I feel very self-conscious if I do not shave ‘it’ off. At the same time, I do not want to conform to the patriarchal definition of female sexiness. My experience of the relationship between body hair and patriarchal desire is my *embodiment* – my continuous interpretation of cultural scripts and my self-reflexivity – which concerns me. That is, my *embodiment* is constantly in process and engaging in cultural practices. Likewise, Cherry’s interview shows the interplay between scripts and embodiment:

I think, often myself I can be quite a *vain* person. So I do like looking at myself going ‘yeah, I look sexy’. And thinking that about myself also makes me feel sexy. So I do very much enjoy being perceived as sexy. [my emphasis] (Cherry, interview 1)

Cherry’s idea of ‘sexiness’ would have come from broader cultural and interpersonal scripts which categorise certain body images as sexually attractive. These scripts have been written into Cherry’s sexual subjectivity in such a way that her successful enactment of sexiness enhanced her desire. Cherry stated that she enjoyed asserting her sexiness to herself – that is, her *reassurance* to herself that she was sexy gave her great pleasure, and could boost her confidence as a desiring subject even further. Cherry’s interpretation of herself as a *vain* person suggests that she made sense of her feelings as narcissistic; furthermore, the term ‘vain’ carries a moral judgement of superficiality.

Cherry’s pleasure in perceiving her body image as sexy depended on her knowledge of what composes female sexiness, not only for herself, but also for other people to perceive. She explained that her sexual embodiment, with which she interpreted her sexiness as desirable, was shaped by patriarchal norms:

In this culture, I think it’s a very female, feminine thing to be expected to be pretty and to be sexually desirable. I mean, I very much feel like the patriarchy has me. I bought

into that idea, I know I have, and I know it's not right, really. I know I shouldn't say as many words on my appearance as I do, but it's, it'll be so much work to undo all that. [...] The other thing is that even though I know that things I find attractive, including things I find attractive on myself, even though I know they're very socially normative, even though I know that those aren't actually the only way to be beautiful, I do know that they do generally fit the dominant social paradigm of it, and I feel like, well, *just because I know that I've been spoon-fed these images since I was little, doesn't mean I don't find them attractive. It doesn't mean that the feelings I have as a result of them aren't real.* [...] And I don't feel like I would want to deny myself, that, the pleasure I get from that, even though, those, that appreciation that comes from having being, to an extent, to a greater or lesser extent, like, indoctrinated with patriarchal heteronormative ideas of what's beautiful. [my emphasis] (Cherry, interview 1)

Cherry recognised that women were 'expected' to fit in to a certain form of female attractiveness. This expectation could be a powerful mechanism for tempting women into accepting and pursuing the cultural mores of femininity. Cherry judged her desire as 'not right', echoing Brigitte's 'horrible' desire, suggesting that she thought it might be inappropriate to adopt these cultural scripts. Nevertheless, she could not help but feel good about being sexy. To justify her desire as a choice, she emphasised that she knew of many types of attractiveness and that there was a variety of beauty; however, she still found dominant femininity more desirable despite it being 'spoon-fed' to her, as she strongly stated. In fact, it was exactly because she had been immersed in these ideal female images, and because she had successfully appropriated them onto her own body, that she eventually interpreted them as attractive. Furthermore, her emotions were – as she argued – *real*, because her 'reality' is culturally situated and personally experienced. As Cherry had long been living with dominant images of female attractiveness, she had learnt the cues and made sense of them as her own, and used them in her constitution of desire. Cherry's narrative suggests that she was actually quite 'critical' and analytical about how patriarchal norms had shaped her desire, rather than being 'indoctrinated'.

To achieve the 'ideal' feminine image requires self-discipline and certain levels of body modification. At the very least, it required Cherry to shave her body hair. Cherry shared the story of how she started shaving, and her narrative demonstrates how cultural and interpersonal scenarios shaped her embodiment:

It was probably when I was in my mid-teens, between fourteen or sixteen or something like that. I was really struggling with my feminism, and I was, ‘oh! My body hair is normal. I shouldn’t have to do this.’ And I was going to school wearing a dress and having hairy legs, and so many times people suggest your legs are hairy or ‘why don’t you shave your legs?’ Eventually it became more of an effort to have to keep justifying it every time than just to shave my legs and get it over with. (Cherry, interview 1)

Cherry’s story is a constructed narrative of how she made sense of her body modification. She thought that the ‘decisive moment’ for her to start shaving might have come during her teenage years. The idea of shaving was against Cherry’s feminist politics. She tried to convince herself not to shave in order to not conform to patriarchal norms (she ‘struggled with feminism’). However, Cherry could not resist the peer pressure – a form of interpersonal script – which eventually persuaded her to start shaving. Shaving is one way of achieving the cultural convention of femininity. By deciding to shave, Cherry shifted from being ‘normal’ to being part of ‘the norm’. Social interaction, in this instance, had a strong impact on Cherry’s embodiment. It made Cherry aware that her body was being perceived, which also propelled her to examine her body more closely. Additionally, the pressure from people around her made her feel ‘more comfortable’ with shaving than explaining why she refused to do so. Social interactions had a direct influence on how Cherry experienced her body; and as she evaluated the interpersonal scripts, she found that shaving was preferable. Finally, this body modification, after being re-enacted for a period of time, became a gender performance<sup>105</sup>. Cherry’s embodiment made sense of this performance and the ways in which it made her body sexually desirable, to the extent that she now wanted to maintain this body image in a more permanent way:

Actually, something I’m intending to do this winter is to get laser hair removal on my legs because I can’t be bothered to think about *it* anymore. Like, I sort of got to the point where, the time I take to shave it, I get my hair waxed or epilate my legs, and the pain that it causes, erm, compared to, alternatively, the amount of time I have to spend explaining why my legs aren’t shaved, smooth, or the way I would feel about not actually quite happy with the fact that my legs are hairy, is just such a waste of my

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<sup>105</sup> I use the term ‘gender performance’ here to emphasise that participants’ gender practices are shaped by existing scripts. This is slightly different from Judith Butler’s gender performativity, which conceptualises identity as an imitation without an origin, and a doing that cannot be dictated (see the section ‘Queer Theory’ in Chapter 2).

time. I could just spend the money, make my legs smooth, and then I will never have to worry about it again. [my emphasis] (Cherry, interview 1)

The thought of shaving seemed to constantly haunt Cherry. By this time, it was no longer the peer pressure that caused her to shave. The *thing* she could not be bothered to think about was *shaving* instead of her previous *struggle* between whether she should shave or not. This indicates that shaving has readily become part of Cherry's sexual embodiment. She evaluated the benefits of getting laser hair removal, but I suppose none of the other reasons was as important as the fact that she *wanted to* remove her hair permanently. Cherry's plan appeared to be ideal for her: her legs would be hairless and smooth; more importantly, she would not have to struggle with contradictory feelings anymore. This indicates that Cherry's sexual embodiment would perhaps align with her feminist ideas in the sense that, if she no longer had body hair, she would not have to consider whether it was okay to shave.

Body maintenance and modification are essentially about keeping the body under control. While permanent hair removal might reduce the contradictory feelings Cherry had about shaving her legs, there were some other body maintenance tasks, perhaps more subtle or less emphasised in dominant cultural scripts, that she considered influential in her embodied experience of sexual desire. One example is the appearance and smell of her feet:

I know my feet are sometimes quite smelly. I know my mom has smelly feet, so I don't know if it's something that I've picked up. Like when I was around, my mom has really smelly feet, and I know I'm paranoid about it in myself. But in general, I don't feel... My feet at the moment that I've got a couple of blisters and dry skin that's peeling a bit. And it's sort of a part of my body that I think no matter what I try, I can't make it attractive. I probably could if I just wore flat shoes and looked after my feet properly but, erm, yeah, I just feel like that all the parts of my body, my feet are always in the worst condition. (Cherry, interview 1)

Cherry's account indicates that 'body perception' goes beyond 'the look'. She identified two features of her feet that were undesirable: the smell and the skin condition. Cherry projected her perception of her mother's feet onto her own embodiment, and she became concerned that others might consider her feet undesirable. On one hand, Cherry seemed to suspect that her smelly feet were hereditary. On the other hand, she used the term 'pick up'

which indicates that the smell was something that she had ‘adopted’. This contradiction shows that Cherry was either uncertain about the cause or that, by interpreting it as genetic, she was expressing her feeling that the smell was beyond her control. In terms of her skin condition, Cherry thought of possible ways to improve it, such as ‘wearing flat shoes’. Her retrospective account shows that she chose to wear high-heeled shoes, which symbolise feminine sexiness in popular culture. High-heeled shoes could physically reshape her legs and make her body image more appealing, even though they worsened her skin condition and even gave her pain. Since Cherry assumed that she could not do anything more to improve the smell of her feet, and that she had decided to perform the gendered scripts of bodily sexual attractiveness, she left this body condition as it was rather than keeping it up through maintenance.

Conflicting scripts are common; in practice, the perfect body image of popular cultural scripts is almost impossible to achieve (Bartky 1988). As implied in Cherry’s narrative, wearing high-heeled shoes, on one hand, is regarded as enhancing a woman’s physical appearance towards conventional femininity; on the other hand, it might lead to blisters and pain, scenarios that either contradict the ideal body image of smooth skin, or can potentially suppress one’s subjective sexual feelings. Furthermore, these scripts led Cherry to scrutinise her body ‘in parts’<sup>106</sup> as she evaluated her efforts bit by bit and picked out the imperfections of her body. This could be an unpleasant process which potentially made her less confident about her body image, and hence stopped her from becoming a desiring subject. To negotiate with these conflicts, Cherry had to decide which forms of body maintenance she would keep up instead of others, meanwhile reflecting on her own sexual embodiment to choose the scripts that helped to further enhance her desire.

While Cherry chose to adopt conventional femininity to compose her desirable body image, Rachael decided that she would challenge these dominant scripts. Rachael attempted to create an image which represented her sexual desire, meanwhile countering popular cultural scripts of a sexy female body<sup>107</sup>. Her journal documents her knowledge of the visual cues of ‘sexiness’, and the ways in which her body modification was personally important to her embodied desire:

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<sup>106</sup> I also discuss participants’ representations of ‘body parts’ in the section ‘Embodying Femininity – The Effect of Popular Culture’ in Chapter 6.

<sup>107</sup> This image, *Making My Body*, is displayed as Figure 6.4 (page 203) and analysed in Chapter 6.

I tried to prevent as many ‘tropes’ of the female photographic nude pin-up style as possible, cropping the image and taking the photo from above to deemphasise the curvature of my body. Instead, I focused on my coloured hair and my pierced nipples, aspects of my body that I have fashioned myself; they remind me that my body is my own to control as I desire, and they give me a sense of joy. The piercings are particularly symbolic for me; I got them at a time when I had begun to explore my sexual desires more, and they have become sexually desirable for me in and of themselves, giving me an increased sensitivity that heightens my sexual pleasure. (Rachael, journal)

Pin-ups are usually taken from a horizontal level to include the whole female body and in order to emphasise the curves. Rachael went against these visual cues and brought the focus onto her modified body, in particular her purple hair and pierced nipples. Making these modifications were Rachael’s *personal* decisions, and the act suggested to Rachael that she had control over her body image, both in everyday experience and in her photo production. The result was that her image would stand out from other cultural portrayals of women. This gave Rachael pleasure because her body modification – and I think also her choice to avoid traditional visual cues of female sexiness<sup>108</sup> – symbolises that *she* was the subject of her sexual embodiment, and it was *she* who got to use her body image for *her own* desire. Rachael’s story of her nipple piercing suggests that her body perception was extended to other senses than the visual. Her piercings marked a time when she first became more adventurous with her own sexuality, and they provided her with pleasurable tactile sensations. Rachael’s creation of a ‘counter-image’ means that she still relied on her knowledge of dominant visual cues: she needed to know what *not* to do with her image. Nevertheless, she was able to make a more *personal* choice to visualise a satisfactory body image for and of herself, rather than following the cultural norms.

Body perception is concerned with participants’ consciousness of their body image, their modification of their bodies, and the ways in which they negotiate this modification within patriarchal norms and feminist ideas. My examination of this precondition suggests that, with *embodiment*, participants facilitated their understanding of dominant cultural scripts and their concerns – both thoughts and feelings – about how their bodies might be perceived to evaluate and reshape their body image. As suggested by participants’ narratives, those who felt positive about their body images gained confidence that assisted

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<sup>108</sup> Body piercings are common signs of sexiness; but for Rachael, they have radical meanings.

them to become desiring subjects; whereas participants who were less satisfied might turn their focus to consider certain bodily features, such as ‘fat’ or ‘smells’, that they felt were damaging to their desire. However, the latter scenario does not stop women from experiencing desire; rather, it indicates the ways in which participants’ perceptions of their body image became amplified when they rationalised their sexual feelings. The perception of the body is not limited to the visual, but also involves other senses such as the olfactory and tactile, to which I now turn.

## **Sensations**

In this section, I explore the ways in which sensations – a precondition – can generate sexual desire or emotions that are potentially sexual by evoking sensory embodiment. I argue that sensory gratification can arouse sexual desire directly, or produce ‘positive’ emotions which can then develop into sexual feelings. The process of sensation generating emotions is sometimes mediated by *memory*, which is a reconstruction by participants in which they associated desire with previous sensual experiences or sexual encounters. This project of reconstruction required ongoing self-reflection and interpretation of the embodied experience. As a result, participants were able to recognise and elaborate the effects that sensations had on changing their emotions. In addition, participants actively mobilised sensations through the use of cultural materials – such as music or perfume – to reconfigure their feelings into something ‘positive’, enabling them to feel sexual and to enhance their desire.

Although sensation does not equate to emotion, Ahmed (2014) argues that, within lived experience, they are not separable. Firstly, sensation evokes emotion. A sensation that arises from inhaling a scent or listening to a piece of music can make one feel melancholic or, as in Rachel’s example, give rise to a sense of intimacy, happy and desiring:

The aftershave, I definitely knew that was, I think, coz he put it on and I was like, [sniff] that’s, you know, that to me reminds me of intimacy. [...] Yeah, I like it when [my senses] are kind of, alive, because then I guess that’s when I feel everything is most desirable. If I have kind of a room with the things I like to listen to and smell of, I would feel, my happiest, probably at my most sexual and, you know, wanting to have sort of, desire, and be desired. (Rachel, interview)

Rachel attached emotions to the scent of her partner's aftershave: it was a reminder of the intimate moments she had with him, and the smell generated a *feeling* of closeness in her. Her olfactory experience constructed a link between the scent and her partner, and this connection was built into part of Rachel's sexual embodiment: the moment she smelt the scent, she could feel her desire for him. Rachel explained that she enjoyed her *active* sensory embodiment – 'alive' in the sense that it is sensitive – because it allowed her to experience the world, and to feel her desire for the things she enjoyed. Her sensory experiences, particular those linked to 'positive' emotions such as happiness, could turn her into a sexual subject to desire others as well as anticipating being desired.

Secondly, emotion shapes the interpretation of sensation. In this sense, I am tempted to describe it as emotion providing sensation with a 'context'. Physical contact between two people, for instance, can be interpreted as intimate or intrusive depending on one's established feelings towards the other. Beth illustrated how a person's emotion can determine the meaning of physical sensations:

Well, it is a few levels. You can have, if somebody who you are attracted to, even just sort of touching your arm, you can feel reaction in your body. And it's, as you said, sort of basic, non-intrusive. And yet in some respect if somebody who's touched parts of you, they then make a *connection* with you. And if you then, say, you don't want to, you know, it can be very intrusive. And then it all goes down to that route when, you know, pretty much, so much keen on that, not just a hand on arm but two people's body actually press on top of each other, and that is sort of intimate. [...] You know, a hand on arm could have as much, other than sex, in terms of feeling, and you know, being completely naked with each other. This is something very new and exciting. [my emphasis] (Beth, interview)

In Beth's account, whether a physical contact can be interpreted as sensual or not is reliant on the established emotions between the two people, no matter how 'subtle' those emotions are: if one is attracted to another person, then a touch can provide pleasure; if not, the act can be interpreted as intrusive. Hence, the emotion one has, or the emotional state one is in, has an impact on how one makes sense of a sensation. Beth's narrative illuminates the idea of embodiment: she did not regard touch as simply a physical contact, but saw it as capable of establishing a deeper *connection*. A sensory experience is associated with memories, interpretations and emotions; hence, a touch generates multiple meanings beyond a 'body contact', such as the motivation of the person who is reaching out. In

Beth's conceptualisation, the relationship between sensation and emotion is interactive and constantly in process: a couple who are affectionate to each other can demand more bodily interaction – tactile sensation – such as sex, which in turn reinforces the sense of intimacy. Beth concluded by stating that it was the emotion which made sensation meaningful; hence, 'a hand on arm' could communicate as much desire as two people being 'naked with each other'.

When I discuss sensation as a 'precondition' for desire, my understanding is that participants have mostly focused on how sensation generated emotions – how sensory pleasure evoked sexual desire – rather than the other way around. Sensory pleasure as a precondition for desire has a few distinct attributes. In this project, many participants strongly associated desire with 'positive' emotions<sup>109</sup>. One of the reasons might be that, in Western societies, women's sexualities have become a more visible subject since the second-wave feminist movement. Even though some feminists argue that the 'sexual liberation' starting in the 1960s might possibly have been used to justify greater access to women's bodies for men (see Jackson and Scott 1996, pp. 4–5), this movement suggests to many women – including me – that women's sexuality is a political issue that can be liberating. Furthermore, the advertising industry, upon recognising the political and economic changes underway for women, started to portray 'sexually empowered women' to promote consumer products during the late 1980s (Gill 2008). These extensive representations and the changing social phenomena paint a picture of women's desire that is not only allowed, but should be celebrated. Despite this portrayal, participants in this project were aware of the everyday risks they faced when portraying themselves as sexual subjects within patriarchal societies. However, provided with an intellectual setting and a relatively 'safe' context, participants were willing to share their thoughts and sexual stories as an affirmative contribution to academic research.

Another possible reason why participants related 'positive' emotions to desire was that they identified confidence and feeling good about themselves as crucial preconditions for experiencing desire, as I discussed in the previous section. This 'positive' feeling was

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<sup>109</sup> I thought about whether my research design, which requested participants to photograph things that represent what is sexually 'desirable' and 'undesirable' for them, might have contributed to this association. However, I think it is unlikely to be the major reason why participants made a positive emotional connection to sexual desire. Some participants still pointed out their struggles with their desire, such as Brigitte's interests in BDSM; however, in terms of 'sensations', it is related to what participants enjoy sensuously.

further affirmed by participants' reports that being busy, tired or bored made them unable to think about desire (Rae, Cassandra, Jessica, Steel Vagina). Additionally, the 'pleasurable sensations' I discuss here were identified from participants' accounts of their *preferred* stimulants; they emphasised their sensuous *enjoyment* – hence the 'positive' emotions – they experienced.

Besides the association with 'positive' emotions, another attribute of sensation is that it quite often evokes memory. This is notably emphasised in participants' accounts of the olfactory sensation, although memory can also be evoked by other senses. Researchers such as Herz and Engen (1996) argue that memories evoked by odour are more emotionally loaded than those generated by other senses. Willander and Larsson (2006) found that odour made their research subjects experience a stronger feeling of 'being brought back in time' (p.242) than words or pictures, after they presented these three different types of sensory cues to 93 adults aged between 65 and 80 and asked for their self-reported memories. Rachel was one participant who also found that smells evoked strong memories, and for her, the reminiscences were both 'good' and 'bad':

I have certain smells that always remind me of stuff, like, whenever I smell certain flowers and stuff, I think of childhood and stuff like that, so that always, I'm not sure what it is, really. I guess everything just relates to sort of, good. And I suppose bad memories as well, you know. If there's been people in my life that I don't agree with, or things like that, and if they've got a distinctive kind of scent, and if I smell that in the air I'm like, 'oh, is it that person I don't like?' (Rachel, interview)

Despite the fact that Rachel tried to make sense of it, she could not explain how scents generated her memories. Although she did have the experience of the olfactory generating a sense of her past, she could not find a direct association between a certain smell and a particular event. However, she described these scents as something 'she had', suggesting that smells are deeply embodied. Later, Rachel tried again to elaborate upon how olfactory sensations may also evoke 'bad' memories by making a more direct link between a person and a distinctive scent, even though the details were unspecific. When Rachel *recalled* her experience, she was simultaneously reconstructing her understanding.

When participants talked about their memories of an event, they were, of course, reconstructing and reinterpreting their experience. When participants described sensational

experiences in their materials, they were not usually feeling them at that moment. Rather, participants' narratives are their reflection on a particular sensual experience which had evoked their desire in the past. The process of 'recalling' an event is a self-construction and self-intervention (Gilmore 2001). One can never 'truthfully' report a past event by telling one's *memory*. In fact, in the process of telling, one constantly constructs and revises the narrative to make a coherent story of the past. Gilmore (2001) suggests that memory involves 'looking back in order to look forward' (p.34). Hence, it is not just the 'looking back' that is important, but also the forms of the reminiscence and how one understands the meaning of the memory. Participants' understanding of desire, within this context, was based on their regular reflection upon and reconstruction of their sensual experiences. Their memories of past events are not *the reality* of what happened, but what participants remembered and made it out to be.

The olfactory is certainly not the only sensation that 'brings back memories'; however, odours tend to leave a stronger impression of an encounter than do other sensory cues. Pumpkin even stated that the olfactory-evoked memory 'stays the longest compared to other senses' (interview). Likewise, Steel Vagina reflected on her experience of how a slight hint of a scent can immediately take her back into the past:

There was a man's perfume that came out in the early noughties, that Calvin Klein, that really, really *sends me back*. I only need to smell a hint of something like, it doesn't even have to be it, can just be like a hint of something that smells like it, and immediately you know, just be transported back to, erm, when I was like sixteen and I was, like, my first love at the time. [...] I don't know why it kind of *hits home* to me so much, because it just, a lot of sentiment, you know. I don't know if you have this, you know when you smell something and it's like just right for you? It's like, your *signature*, you've found your signature, your 'soulmate' scent. That's what it's like for me, that one. [my emphasis] (Steel Vagina, interview)

Steel Vagina's reflection suggests that one's reaction to scents is instinctive: the process is so 'immediate' and the effect so strong that it 'hits home'. She described a personal, chosen scent as a 'signature' and 'soulmate', indicating its uniqueness and exclusiveness to one person. Her narrative implies that a scent can match a person so much that it has a connection to *embodiment* – a perfume is not simply put on the body, but attached to the emotions. However, finding whether an odour – and other sensory cues such as the taste of

food, or the sound of music – is ‘right’ for you is, in fact, about locating personal preferences in existing cultural materials. For instance, certain dishes that carry strong odours – such as fermented fish, fermented soybeans or *stinky* tofu – might be taken as a cultural delicacy for people who grew up with tasting and smelling that food, or perceived as unbearable by others. Furthermore, perfume is a commercial product – this means that, despite its variety, it is designed to appeal to a broader acceptance and consumption. Perfume has also been constructed to carry cultural meanings that signal individuality; hence, wearing perfume becomes a symbol of age, social class, fashion taste and even sexuality. It is exactly because of the cultural meanings embodied by perfumes that some participants, including Rachel, Steel Vagina and Alexia, regarded them as a ‘personal representation’.

However, odour is not the only sensory cue that has been *personalised*. DeNora (2000) suggests that music is a cultural material that has been used for personal purposes, such as for the construction of memory and mood. She analyses the ways in which music has been used in a continuous process of self-construction, and finds that her participants connected music to individuals in the sense that the aural sensation generates memories of a person. In addition, music constructs the self as an ‘aesthetic agent’ (p.46); therefore, it becomes part of one’s identity. It can be argued that one forms an emotional attachment to sensory cues, such as an odour or a piece of music, in a process that renders these cultural materials personal.

Music has also been used to reconfigure personal emotions (DeNora 2000), and participants reported that they would listen to music to change their mood. Jessica, for instance, used a song to help her work out at the gym:

This is a photo [Figure 5.2] of my iTunes, which is playing a song “Sexy and I know it”. It’s an upbeat song that I generally listen to at the gym. When I heard it today after my workout, I felt energized, confident and happy – feelings for me that make me feel both sexual and sexually desirable. Music of this genre also makes me think of dancing, gyrating hips and perhaps even flirting with a boy on a night out through dance. It’s fun and uplifting as well as allows you to express yourself through dance. After taking this photo, I danced a bit around my room. (Jessica, journal)



Figure 5.2 Desirable 1 (Jessica)

Music clearly had multiple effects on Jessica. Knowing how this particular song could change her mood, she actively mobilised it to generate the right emotion for exercising. Additionally, her exercises *and* the song put her in an emotional state that could arouse desire in herself. This genre of music also encouraged her to move her body and to express herself in a sexy way. Furthermore, the music led her to imagine a sexual encounter. These effects produced by music – being in the ‘right’ mood, sexy body movements, fantasies – elicited sexual feelings in Jessica, as well as making her feel confident, and hence imagining herself to be sexually attractive to other people. Sensation, as a result, evoked participants’ sexual feelings on two levels: it generated ‘positive’ emotions which led to sexual desire, and it elicited fantasies that could arouse sexual desire.

So far, I have discussed the sensory effects triggered by one sense, whether that be music or smell. In daily experience, however, one mostly perceives multiple sensory cues together – but some are more amplified than others. When there was more than one sensory cue, participants tended to describe their sensation as experiencing an *atmosphere* rather than perceiving an object. For instance, Celeste wrote about fire as part of the representation of what was sexually desirable for her (Figure 5.3):

I find fire and candles very sensual and flattering. I love the idea of lighting a fire and filling the room with scented candles – in reality we do this very rarely but the image is so warm and inviting. I also like the flattering effect that candle light has on my skin, particularly my face. (Celeste, journal)

Fire and candlelight evoked three sensations: the scented candles produce odours for the olfactory, fire is warm for the tactile, and the dim light has an effect on visual perception. Despite Celeste’s description, fire and candles are not sensuous in themselves; rather, it is the atmosphere created by multiple sensory cues that is ‘sensual and flattering’. This atmosphere, even when Celeste was just imagining it, could still generate sexual feelings because the idea of it was appealing. The ‘mental image’ itself, reconstructed around the experience of perception, can potentially evoke sensory feelings leading to sexual desire. Celeste’s narrative also demonstrates how three embodiments become integrated in the composition of desire: her objectified embodiment was located in the physical environment, and she understood how her body could be perceived in the candlelight. Simultaneously, her sensory embodiment interacted with the atmosphere – the warmth, the



Figure 5.3 *Candles (Celeste)*

scent, and the dim light – while her sensate embodiment interpreted perceived sensations as desirable and pleasurable.

Rachel also associated fire with sexual feelings. She not only described the sensory experience evoked by fire, but also theorised about what fire and sexual desire had in common:

You use a lot of words to describe fire, and how that relates to sexual desire. You use danger and excitement, lights and warm, teasing, stroking, all these words kind of put together. [...] You want the satisfaction and the relief, and I think fire triggers that. I'm excited coz it's all, I feel lovely and warm, and calm but yet it's a little bit like creating shadows, and that creates a little bit of that danger. (Rachel, interview)

The feelings Rachel associated with fire and desire were complicated, and some appeared to be contradictory. Rachel's account, like Celeste's, indicated that fire created multiple sensations which shaped her emotions. Additionally, fire symbolised certain interactions – teasing and stroking – which could enhance desire and pleasure. This sexual feeling was experienced as intense and it led her to demand more. However, there is also a dark side to fire: the shadow it creates suggests that there is something unseen, signifying parts of desire that are hidden and waiting to be explored. The anticipation was exciting for Rachel; however, an adventure into the unknown always implies some risks and danger.

Mina also discussed sensations evoked by multiple sensory perceptions, and here she analyses her own photograph (Figure 5.4) of desire:

Something about this made me want to do a Pre-Raphaelite-style pose, so I reached out like this and pretended to be Elizabeth Siddal. The sexiness of this photo is, again, sensuous – the remembered cool weight of the plum at the ends of my fingers – but also the self-consciously arty posing itself, deciding that I was (as a joke, but still) going to try to look graceful and lovely, that I was going to become like an image I had already seen. (Mina, journal)

Mina used her knowledge of the cultural material – Pre-Raphaelite art – to pose for the photo. Pre-Raphaelite artists emphasised precision in their painting. They produced colourful, yet almost photographic portraits of their subjects and added symbolism to their work (Landow 1989; Smith 2012; Jacobi 2012). Mina's photograph is itself a 'realist'



Figure 5.4 *Posing* (Mina)

portrait – a photograph – depicting her extended arm and her fingers touching the plum. This image, read within the Pre-Raphaelite context, symbolises Mina reaching out for pleasure and temptation.

In her photographic pose, Mina addressed both visual and tactile sensations. The act of touching the plum evoked tactile sensation for her at the time of the photo shoot. She also found pleasure in reproducing Pre-Raphaelite-style paintings, images which usually have conventionally aesthetically pleasing subjects. By imitating the model – Elizabeth Siddal – of many Pre-Raphaelite paintings, Mina constructed an ‘arty’, graceful-looking pose that was visually sensational. Moreover, by turning herself into the subject of her image, she projected the scrutinisers’ viewing pleasure onto herself. Mina’s embodied sensations were not generated solely by sensory perceptions, but also by reconstructing herself as an object of desire with her cultural knowledge and reflexivity.

Significantly, the making and the viewing of this particular photo produced different sensations for Mina. She reflected on this in the interview:

It’s the combination of the, the idea of what I’m feeling in the picture, coz generally they’re pictures of me, almost all of them are pictures of me, so they’re about what the ‘me’ in the picture physically feels. But they’re also about what the ‘me’ who looks at the picture feels. [...] That picture [Figure 5.4], I think, is a combination of that sort of, almost, sensuousness of what I am actually feeling in the picture, and the way it looked, and the fact that I did it, that I kind of chose to be all like, ‘oh, I’m going to pose in a sort of portrait-like fashion now.’ (Mina, interview 1)

Mina identified three major scenarios in which she experienced sexual feelings with this photo, and they are related to her multiple embodied sensations and her sexual subjectivity. The first scenario was when the photo was being taken. At that moment, her body was physically ‘there’ to reach out and perceive the environment; and she experienced multiple sensations that made her feel desire. The second time was when she revisited the image. Looking at this photo evoked the memory of the sensation she had felt at the time of the photo shoot. Her viewing also gave her pleasure: Mina was the object of scrutiny in the image, but simultaneously the subject who projected desire onto herself. Finally, when she thought about this picture, the fact that *she* had decided upon, and actually performed, an aesthetically pleasing subject in Pre-Raphaelite style also made her excited. This image

indicates to Mina that she was capable of embodying the beautiful subject and the sensuousness in her performance.

Sensations interact with *embodiment* to generate participants' sexual desire in several different ways. Firstly, the process usually starts with the body perceiving stimulation which can evoke emotions that are potentially, if not readily, sexual. This process is sometimes mediated by memory which, as a construction of past events, involves 'the mind'. Secondly, and significantly, participants associated sensory pleasure with 'positive' emotions, and they were aware of how sensory cues could change their emotions by being reflexive about their experience and cultural scripts. With this knowledge, participants actively mobilised sensory stimulants to generate emotions that evoked their desire. Finally, one participant suggested that the whole process can start from emotion itself, too: as she had feelings for a person, she would interpret the stimulation from their bodily contact as sensations that are capable of eliciting desire. Embodied sensations also suggest a *personal* preference for desire, which leads on to my discussion of constructing fantasy.

## **Fantasy**

Fantasy is interpreted here as an imagined personal and sexual script that participants constructed as a precondition for developing or enhancing their desire. Even though other research has suggested that women usually construct their sexual fantasies around their affection for and commitment to their partners (Peplau 2003), I argue that fantasy allows participants to put themselves at the centre of their desire and become the desiring subject. This means that participants enjoyed the pleasure their desire brought without having to negotiate, or justify their sexual preferences to other people. By examining participants' narratives, I investigate the role played by embodiment in fantasy-generated desire: what is the relationship between the body, emotion and mind in composing imaginary scripts that lead to women's sexual feelings?

In the previous section, I discussed how participants used sensations to create an imagined sexual atmosphere, such as by manipulating the lighting; here, Cassandra – who considered music a significant aspect of her identity and sexuality – used music for similar purposes. Her fantasy seemed to encapsulate her in a 'private space' away from the outside world. This isolation was a crucial precondition for Cassandra to develop her desire:

Like I'm allowed just to be, like all the furious things that I am in normal life, my stupid, really complicated life, which isn't that complicated but it feels like, you know, a PhD student, and to keep the household running. Be a girlfriend, and be a daughter, and be a daughter-in-law, and be a lecturer, be a researcher, and all of the, be a musician that I'm not, I don't have time for, and keeping fit, and making sure you eat well, and spending time watching telly, all of the competing things, that just go on and on and then, and then they stop but then they can be pushed away, pushed aside when I listen to *Scott 4*<sup>110</sup>. I suppose then, there's the lyrics, and strings and his voice begins to conjure up this other world where things are, calmer, where I don't have to worry about the PhD, I don't have to worry about housework, and I don't have to worry about keeping fit, or naturally slim, or something. (Cassandra, interview)

Everyday life for Cassandra was full of all sorts of social roles, expectations and accompanied responsibilities which exhausted her. Music, however, gave her strength to force away all the social expectations that were imposed upon her. When she listened to Scott Walker's songs, she concentrated on them so much that the music created another 'world' for her. In this world, she was with herself, being herself rather than existing for other people. By doing so, she could make room for herself and for her desire.

Scott Walker's voice offered Cassandra aural sensation, and it also evoked imaginings that eventually became sexual. Cassandra wrote in her journal:

This album is such a romantic one for me. Scott's voice is like being licked with chocolate. I know that doesn't make sense. His voice is like chocolate, and it's very soothing, reassuring, luxurious. Kind of like a chocolate bath. It evokes a time in an imaginary past, 1960s. The good bits out of films like *Rosemary's Baby* and *Barefoot In The Park*. Delicious, happy, new love forever times. No problems, but an aching loss somehow. Lush orchestration, minor keys, slow songs, metaphysical lyrics, stories of times gone by, knights traveling to Hell and playing chess with Death. And slowly it makes me feel like touching myself, indulging my fingers in my cunt, turning away from my work, stroking myself, running my hands through my hair. (Cassandra, journal)

Cassandra addressed Scott Walker by his first name, a gesture which suggests that she was very familiar with him through his music. Despite their 'intimate relationship', Cassandra

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<sup>110</sup> *Scott 4* is the solo album released in 1969 by Scott Walker, an American-born British singer who has been active since the 1960s.

seemed to have difficulty describing his voice: she illustrated it as ‘being licked with chocolate’. Nonetheless, being in a fantasy, her analogy does not need to *make sense*; it could almost be whatever she wanted it to be. Scott Walker’s voice generated multiple emotions in Cassandra. At first, it was calming and enjoyable, like the sensation created by a piece of chocolate. Then it brought up an imaginary past filled with emotions that were pleasant and perhaps hopeful. Cassandra’s narrative then turns to describe Scott Walker’s music and songs with words which read to me like a melancholic emotion as well as another layer of fantasy. A mixed emotion – rather than a ‘positive’ one as discussed in the previous section – generated Cassandra’s sexual desire, which made her imagine herself masturbating. Her sexual fantasy has a strong focus on tactile sensuousness, only slightly disrupted by the thought of her overwhelming amount of work.

Being the central subject of desire was important for participants who used fantasy. Mina asserted that, even though she was in a relationship, her sexuality was almost always about herself:

Definitely for my part, desire can have very little to do with actual other people. Erm, I mean, in my life at the moment it does have to do with one specific other person, but, you know, I haven’t really been a big boyfriend person. Even now that I’m going out with my partner, there are long periods of time when I don’t see him. And even if I did see him all the time, I think I still have this sort of huge setback that proves that my sexuality was more about me rather than my relationship with him. I mean, so much of it is just to do with me. (Mina, interview 1)

Mina indicated that she focused on herself or imaginary others when she felt desire, instead of ‘actual other people’. Even though she acknowledged the part her partner played in their sexual relationship, Mina defined her sexuality as primarily concerning herself rather than being constituted around her relationship with him. Her statement about not being ‘a big boyfriend person’ also distinguished herself from the common conception that heterosexual women usually focus much more on their partners’ sexual feelings than their own (see Ellis and Symons 1990; Zurbriggen and Yost 2004).

Being the subject of her own fantasies, Steel Vagina enjoyed having a sense of control in her sexual encounters and she emphasised that the idea of having control intensified her desire. When we were discussing her fantasies in the interview, I asked how she felt about

people who talked during sex in order to create imaginative scenarios, such as in a role play. Steel Vagina told me that she disliked such talking, particularly when a man told her what he wanted to do to her: ‘I think it was because when a guy says it, it’s like, he is being the progenitor but then if, I guess one of the ideas I find arousing is like, it’s more about *my* roles, *my* part to play in it’ [my emphasis] (Steel Vagina, interview). In my interpretation, Steel Vagina’s preference for having control of the scripts and being the initiator in sexual encounters – both in interpersonal scenarios and in fantasy – reflect her rather independent and active sexual attitude.

Being used to positioning herself as the sole subject of her sexuality, Mina found it difficult to negotiate her desire with another person – in this context, her partner. Mina suggested that she and her partner would use fantasy to engage in sex in their long-distance relationship when they could not have ‘physical’ sex with each other:

My sexuality’s almost with myself, which is in its own place. I’m kind of trying to get that to mesh with and kind of interact with the sexuality of this whole other person, who one is trying to have a relationship with. And kind of working out a way, I mean, especially in a kind of long-distance relationship in which people can actually get what they want without feeling like you’re pushing them into it. I think it’s, you know if that kind of negotiation is, I mean it’s one of the best things, but it’s also one of the most frustrating things, dealing with the fact that there’s an actual other person here who has their own subjectivity. (Mina, interview 1)

Mina indicated that she used fantasy as an implement enabling her to engage in sex with her partner while she was going through the transition of incorporating him into her sexuality. Mina’s sexual desire was more exclusive to herself until she committed to a relationship, in which she had to incorporate her partner’s needs into *her* sex life. Being involved in an interpersonal scenario required Mina to negotiate her own sexuality with the other’s. On one hand, Mina could be excited enough to explore her sexual pleasure with her partner; on the other hand, it could be difficult for two people who had individual, subjective sexual preferences to cater to each other’s desire. Hence, Mina suggested that one possible measure for a couple to negotiate desire was to engage in fantasy. In this way, she did not have to worry about imposing her sexual preferences on her partner or feel too compromised. Although I was not able to ascertain the details of how fantasy worked in Mina’s relationship, her narrative implies an ‘interpersonally intrapsychic’ script. By this, I

mean that the two people engaging in sex can potentially incorporate their fantasies to enhance pleasure together. In terms of a long-distance relationship, perhaps couples can interact sexually through verbal and virtual means to implement fantasy in their sex.

On some occasions, even when engaging in sex with their partners, participants used fantasy to enhance their desire without declaring it. This act does not mean that participants did not have sexual feeling for their partners, but imagination can sometimes spice things up. Gilly told me about how her emotional attachment to her partner, and her sexual pleasure constructed in fantasy, worked together in two distinct ways:

I find [my partner] very physically attractive. He's not something I fantasise about. I have dreams about him sometimes, you know, so clearly my subconscious does that, too. But just like I'm not a character of my fantasy, he's not either. Even if he's being physically involved with me at the time, erm, I've not told him [laugh]. I'm not thinking about either of us because of that. I wouldn't want to be physically interacting with anybody else, but at the same time, I guess my sexual drive wants something else to stimulate it as well. [...] I don't think I've ever had an orgasm without having bondage, either physical or, actually, without fantasising about bondage. (Gilly, interview)

Gilly's physical and emotional engagement with her partner did not contradict her simultaneous fantasy. Gilly desired her partner, and her imagined sexual 'story' – a fictional encounter that engaged neither herself nor her partner – further enhanced her sexual feelings. Fantasy worked in her favour because she was able to enjoy sex as well as gaining more pleasure from her imagination. Additionally, Gilly's account indicates that her imagination played a more powerful role in giving her pleasure than the sexual act. Bondage gave Gilly strong sexual pleasure; however, even if she was practising it, she still had to 'fantasise' bondage in order to have an orgasm. Gilly's statement that her fantasy did not include herself or her partner implies to me a 'voyeuristic' desire: mentally visualising other people in sexual play could give Gilly pleasure.

While Gilly and Mina chose to use fantasy during sex with their partners, for some participants, fantasy was more exclusively *for themselves* because they did not *need* to – and possibly did not *want* to, either – negotiate or justify their desire. For instance,

Cassandra told me about an ‘interruption’ she experienced while taking photographs for this project:

Last time, when I just thought, ‘right, I’ll just get these last few pictures in, and I’ll send it off to Evangeline, and I’m just gonna go and have a bath,’ and [my partner] comes in and he looks over my shoulders, he sees the file where I saved for pictures that I’m gonna use. And he goes, ‘Skwigelf<sup>111</sup>!’ and, argh! But he said it in such ways it can make me feel embarrassed and ashamed about it, which was quite infuriating. And I said, ‘oh he’s a cartoon character, look, you don’t need to be jealous, this is ridiculous.’ That’s kind of what I was saying, by telling him it was just a cartoon character. But actually, I was really pissed off. I went downstairs, I did something else and came back to finish off doing the pictures for you. (Cassandra, interview)

The exposure of fantasy can stop it from being a precondition for desire. The incident Cassandra experienced made her uncomfortable and angry for several reasons. Firstly, she might not have been ready to share this part of her private sexual desire with her partner. Hence, when it was ‘discovered’ unexpectedly, she felt intruded upon. Secondly, her partner’s reaction, as Cassandra interpreted it, made her feel the need to defend her sexuality. Nevertheless, it was *her* fantasy and *her* desire, why should she have to explain herself? In addition to her partner making her feel bad about herself, Cassandra had to ‘comfort’ him, because he felt jealous of a fictional character. This indicates that, rather than being herself for her desire, she had to play the social role of a ‘girlfriend’ again. Her emotions were conflicting. As Cassandra did not want to compromise or justify her sexuality, and because she had to make sure her partner did not intrude upon her personal desire anymore, she decided that she should keep her fantasy to herself.

Cassandra’s narrative further shows that, even though she and her partner had a shared interest in music, from her perspective, this particular programme only brought up *her* desire. After listening to her story, I asked whether fantasy involved a certain level of secrecy, or whether she was just unhappy about having to justify herself. She responded:

It’s not secrecy that makes it exciting. It’s the fact that it’s *mine, all mine*, it’s *my* own and I’m just doing this, and I don’t care what you think. That you can just fuck off, I’m gonna do this on my own and, yeah, it’s much more about being able to enjoy it without feeling judged. Yeah, I suppose you’re right, yeah. And it’s nice to have things

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<sup>111</sup> Skwisgaar Skwigelf is the leading character – a member of a death metal band – in the animation *Metocalypse*.

when you're in a relationship, it's nice to have something that is sex and yours, you know. When I was doing this [project], I was thinking [*Metacalypse*<sup>112</sup> and *Scott 4*] are very particularly about the time I spend on my own and, you know, things haven't been that great at home. Perhaps that's why I picked up this thing to do first, because I was thinking about the ways that I could, escape from the tension at home, into a, into like a fantasy land of *Metacalypse*. The fantasy land of the lord and Death playing chess in Scott Walker. [her emphasis] (Cassandra, interview)

The desire evoked by *Metacalypse*, the music, and the character Skwigelf had everything to do with Cassandra herself and nothing to do with her partner. Cassandra's narrative indicates that she wished she did not have to concern herself with the social expectations imposed on her sexuality – she wanted to enjoy her time being on her own with her fantasy. Being in a monogamous relationship usually means that sex is *expected* to be participated in by the couple; however, to have one's own sexual fantasy, time and space to oneself can be preferable because one does not need to negotiate with other people. Additionally, Cassandra pointed out that participating in this project and listening to the music of *Metacalypse* and *Scott 4* provided an imaginary space for her to temporarily get away from the problems in her social life. In this respect, fantasy was not just a precondition but was used as a safe domain for Cassandra to alter her emotions. Hence, it was important for her to be able to *own* that privacy for her peace of mind and for her desire.

Fantasy was a crucial precondition enabling participants to develop desire, and the fact that they directed their own intrapsychic scripts without the risks involved in physical sexual encounters made fantasy even more desirable. For Steel Vagina, Odinsleep, Cherry, Gilly and Alexia, fantasy aroused sexual desire exactly because it involved sexual acts that they would not or could not perform in their everyday reality. Alexia liked the fantasy of having a mask party. She thought masks created a sense of secrecy and hence brought sexual excitement:

I think the history behind masks is also very erotic, like the Venetian masks. People wore Venetian masks because when they wore masks, they were allowed to be more liberal, like sexually liberal. If you see, I really like the film *Eyes Wide Shut*. I find it to be a very erotic film. It reminds me of the film. [...] And then you've got all these

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<sup>112</sup> *Metacalypse* is a four-season American animation which ran between 2006 and 2012. Its plot centred around a death metal band, Dethklok.

erotic associations with them, so I like them. I also like them in a fun sort of sense as well. I like going to mask parties where people wear like, tend to, dress all like, or they dress more nicely than normal so the guys will come and talk to them sort of thing. I like those sort of things. I like the fantastical element. (Alexia, interview)

For Alexia, masks carried sexual meanings for two reasons. Masks were given erotic meanings in a historical context in which they gave the wearers sexual freedom. Under a mask, one's identity is hidden, hence one's social relations with others can be temporarily erased. Additionally, masks evoked her memory of *Eyes Wide Shut*, a film which included scenes of masked sex parties. In her imaginary scenario, a mask party itself seemed to be a fancy occasion which required attendees, particularly women, to dress up in order to attract men's attention and encourage them to approach. Alexia's fantasy, as well as the association she made with *Eyes Wide Shut*, suggests that a mask (sex) party was usually constructed as an event for people of a higher social class with relatively select attendees. This contradicts her earlier interpretation of masks as a sexually liberating apparatus. Perhaps, just as masks created fantasy, the sense of sexual freedom they generated is also imaginary.

In Alexia's fantasy, the playfulness of a mask party and having sexual encounters with whomever she desired generated sexual feelings. However, Alexia was clearly aware of the boundary between her fantasy and reality:

I mean, in *Eyes Wide Shut*, they come in wearing these capes and the masks, and then they let go of the capes and then you've got these nude women and the masks. It's very erotic. It's very funny because if I was in that situation, I would be like, 'oh, you could have an STD, and I don't know you.' Like, 'you could be a psycho. I'm not really sure about this. I'm just gonna like sit on the side, and you can have your fun.' It'd be, I would be an onlooker. I don't think I could participate. I wouldn't feel comfortable about it, I don't think. Well, I have no idea [laugh]. I have never been in that situation. (Alexia, interview)

Alexia's language – an 'erotic' scenario and her 'funny' feeling – suggests that there was a gap between fantasy and lived reality. In her intrapsychic script, she could picture the scenario of her having sex with masked people. However, in daily experience, 'having sex with strangers' was not a desired sexual encounter when she considered the risks: she did not know the participants' health condition, history, or personality. Alexia expected herself

to be an onlooker if she were to join a masked sex party: she considered that not participating in sex would significantly reduce the risks for her. Perhaps being the voyeur in this scenario could also arouse her desire, or perhaps the mask party would become 'pointless' as she would not enjoy it. Furthermore, if Alexia's fantasy was enacted, her personal script would become an interpersonal scenario requiring negotiation and compromise. As a result, the enactment of this fantasy would turn out to be neither liberating nor desirable when the risks and troubles were considered.

Fantasy also generated desire in the sense that it was the *imagination* of an act rather than the sexual act itself that was arousing. As Gilly analysed: '[fantasy] allows you to do things that you wouldn't normally do, you only imagine them, and you could try things that would never really happen and feel like that's kind of cool<sup>113</sup>' (Gilly, interview). For instance, one of Steel Vagina's fantasies is about pregnancy. She used a picture of a heavily pregnant Demi Moore<sup>114</sup>, a photo that she perceived as representing a woman's confidence and the 'feminine beauty' of a mother, to discuss her desire to be 'impregnated':

I have a fantasy like, I'm having sex with whomever and it'd get me pregnant, but that's where it stops. Like being actually, being properly pregnant and having a baby that's not part of the fantasy? I know some girls fantasise about having a baby with a proper guy, but you know I've never been quite into that at all. But I do have, actually that's definite because for me to fantasise about a family, that is not sexual, not a sexual thing. But, when I do fantasise about being pregnant... I guess it's not getting pregnant, it's more about being impregnated. (Steel Vagina, interview)

The sexual arousal that Steel Vagina experienced came from the idea of *herself* being impregnated, and it did not matter who the man was. This intrapsychic script was distant from her lived experience in the sense that she did not, and would not, have sex to get pregnant. Steel Vagina was able to interpret such an emotion – the desire to be impregnated – as sexually arousing, at the same time distinguishing this emotion from the sexual act. Although she could not explain why she found this fantasy sexually arousing, it would be a

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<sup>113</sup> 'Kind of cool' suggests a feature that is distinct – in a positively accepted manner – or an experience that is special compared to previous ones. 'Cool' can also indicate a subcultural fashion that partly fits into the mainstream culture. The function of fantasy, allowing one to experiment with ideas that are not enacted in lived experience, in Gilly's portrayal, was 'cool', demonstrating that it is special at the same time as it fits into an accepted culture.

<sup>114</sup> Steel Vagina's photo captures a screen displaying *More Demi Moore* which was used on the cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine in August 1991. Due to copyright issues, I decided not to include this photo in the figures.

mistake to assume that the desire to be pregnant is natural in women: Steel Vagina had already stated that the idea of a family was neither sexual nor what she wished for. The term ‘impregnate’ suggests two things: the ‘ability’ to be pregnant or to get a woman pregnant, and the event of conception which is associated with – although not always – heterosexual intercourse and male ejaculation. These *ideas* of fertility and sexual intercourse seemed to be arousing for Steel Vagina, whereas ‘pregnancy’ refers to a ‘condition’ which was not sexually exciting for her.

Participants’ narratives demonstrate that desire can be developed through imaginary sexual scenarios, meaning that fantasy did not need to be enacted to arouse desire. Leitenberg and Henning (1995) argue that women experience fantasy itself as pleasurable, and it does not have to be put into practice. This contradicts many early psychiatric studies which focused on the correlation between sexual fantasy and behaviour, such as the relation between ‘deviant sexual fantasies’ and sex crimes (see, for instance, Evans 1968; MacCulloch et al. 1983; Prentky et al. 1989). It is now a common cultural understanding that the brain is as crucial a sexual organ as the genitals. Furthermore, when desire was generated through fantasy, participants did not necessarily feel the need to ‘do something about it’; that is, fantasy-generated desire did not need to be followed by sexual acts, such as masturbation or intercourse, and it certainly did not require orgasms as an ‘achievement’. Fantasy, after all, was not about having sex, but about *desiring* (Cassandra, interview).

Fantasy provided participants with an imagined space in which to develop their own desire. This precondition was particularly attractive because participants could focus on themselves as the central subject of their desire without having to negotiate their sexuality with other people. The imaginary sexual scenarios also allowed participants to enjoy pleasure without being concerned about social expectations or the possible risks. When participants used fantasy during sex, they could focus on their own sexuality, and sometimes the ideas were more powerful than the physical sex. As a precondition, fantasy primarily works on the ‘mind’ to generate sexual emotions through embodiment. Nevertheless, imaginary scenarios can be evoked through the body by perceiving sensuous cues, and can also – though not necessarily – be accompanied by physical acts to enhance sexual pleasure. In the next section, I further argue against the conventional understanding

that women *desire* to pleasure their partners, to investigate the ways in which participants invested in intimate relationships for the sake of their own sexual feelings.

## **Intimate Relationships**

In popular discourse, it is said that men are more likely than women to separate emotional attachment from physical sex (see, for instance, Meltzer 2013; Shield n.d.; Sine n.d.); hence, women tend to experience and express sexual desire in a committed, intimate relationship. This is even supported by research which seeks to explore the ways in which intimacy affects women's and men's sexuality (Regan and Berscheid 1999; Peplau 2003; Hill 2002) and the reasons that women and men give for having or avoiding sex (Leigh 1989). Participants in my project did indeed discuss intimacy – characterised by emotional attachment, physical closeness and mutual feelings for each other – as one of the preconditions for desire. However, the involvement of embodiment to generate desire in 'intimate relationships' is not a matter of women seeking committed partnerships or pleasing their partners. Rather, participants' narratives reveal the ways in which they invested in interpersonal sexual scripts with their partners in order to arouse desire in themselves. That is, in the discussion of desire in intimate relationships, participants, again, focused more on their own subjective sexual feelings than on pleasuring their partners.

When participants talked about the potential of having a sexual encounter with another person, some stressed the importance of building mutual trust. These participants required a certain level of interaction before finding other people desirable. Once those taking part feel more familiar with each other, they might be able to explore sexual desire together.

Actually, I think before you have sex with someone, or, in your interaction with people in general, you should have the experience of feeling comfortable with each other, both of you. Then you may continue to push the boundaries, to experiment a bit, to do something new together. Maybe it's because I feel insecure sometimes, so for me, this method is more ideal. [translated] (Odinsleep, interview)

Odinsleep's narrative suggests that a 'precondition' for social interaction – particularly a sexual one – was trust. While Odinsleep made sense of her thinking by reflecting on her 'insecurity', it is unlikely that she was concerned about securing another person in a committed relationship. Instead, this insecurity, in contrast to 'feeling comfortable',

indicates uncertainty. This suggests that Odinsleep needed to *know* the person before she felt confident enough to have closer communication and collaboration. In the context of sexual encounters, sex remains a private and intimate activity for many. Hence, trust-building is crucial for those taking part to feel safe in order to negotiate their desire with each other: it is not just about learning another person's boundaries so that one can push them, but also about *how one allows one's own boundaries to be pushed*. Based on this trusting relationship, those taking part in a sexual encounter might be willing to take a risk and try new things with each other.

An intimate relationship is not only built on trust. For some participants, it was also significantly built on exclusiveness: these monogamous participants asserted that they engaged in desire with their partners in a way that they would not with other people. Beth emphasised this exclusiveness by telling me: 'the whole point is, a relationship is more than friendship, and a big difference is sex and sexual desire. One thing you do with them you don't do with anybody else' (interview). Sex and desire made Beth's intimate relationship with her partner 'special', different from the other kinds of interpersonal connections she had. This exclusiveness was also in keeping with her perception that sex was a private matter. As a result, she felt comfortable to communicate and explore her desire more:

I think it's, it's being able to talk to the person and express the things you like, things you don't like. Being able to have frank discussions about, you know, effectively you don't talk to everybody about. A large part of that, and that in a sense, being able to touch them, effectively you don't touch everybody. Yeah, touch is a big thing, I think. And in fact, it's they have confidence before you have confidence in them. You trust in them. (Beth, interview)

For Beth, an important step towards an intimate relationship was the communication of desire, both in verbal discussion and through touching. I have discussed previously how Beth also talked about sex with her close friends<sup>115</sup>; however, the way in which she shared her sexual stories and the effect she anticipated would be different between her partner and her friends. In Beth's description, she was confident enough to not just share but *communicate* what she desired; she trusted her partner and their relationship enough to push for more profound sexual feelings and pleasure. Beth and her partner's

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<sup>115</sup> See the section 'Ethnicity' in Chapter 4.

communication would rely on both of them to interpret and reflect on the sexual cues – explicit and subtle – in order to succeed. This requires both parties to have trust in themselves as well as in each other: one expects the other to understand the signals and to respond accordingly.

The exclusiveness of sex suggests to any participant in a monogamous relationship that she has special access to her partner's private life, and this 'special pass' signifies intimate feelings. When Celeste and I discussed why jewellery and tattoos were so desirable to her, she explained that she enjoyed wearing jewellery herself; in addition, seeing jewellery or a tattoo on the more private parts of someone's body implies a level of closeness:

The first part of it is you're getting to see a part of a person that isn't always on display, so that you know, nobody else knows that my partner's got her belly button [pierced], well very few people know. No one else knows someone's got a tattoo on the hip or their back. So I suppose it's that level of intimacy and closeness that you have access to that. (Celeste, interview)

An intimate relationship gave Celeste a sense of connection between her own and her partner's *embodiment*, thus leading to desire. Knowing about her partner's piercing signifies physical closeness to Celeste. Even though there were other people who also had this information – as I, and the readers of this thesis, do – they did not have the same access that Celeste did. Body parts such as belly button, hips, and genitals are relatively 'hidden' areas. In everyday experience, they are mostly, though not exclusively, displayed in intimate or sexual settings. The discussion of piercings and tattoos brought our focus to objectified embodiment. In this context, Celeste identified a part of her partner's body that was modified, and turned it into an object of her desire. Finally, piercings and tattoos are presumably done deliberately, so they might carry particular meanings and stories which turn them into a symbol of individuality. Hence, having access to a partner's modified body parts signifies becoming closer to an individual embodiment, a person who is a desired sexual subject.

Another key aspect of a monogamous intimate relationship, as several participants pointed out, is mutual feelings: the idea that both people in a relationship have a shared interest in contributing to developing each other's sexual desire. From Pumpkin's point of view, both people involved in interpersonal scripts should equally enjoy the experience:

It's important to be, maybe, interesting, well interesting and interested. I mentioned that one of the undesirable things is 'patronising', and I think this is undesirable for both men and women. Because, like I said, intimacy is built on the interaction between people. You need to care about how the other person feels, and they care about how you feel. This is very important. [translated] (Pumpkin, interview)

To patronise someone is to treat that person with a sense of superiority, and this suggests a power imbalance between the patroniser and the patronised. This type of unequal relationship, in Pumpkin's interpretation, makes it impossible for both of those involved to enjoy their sexual interactions on an equal footing. Although some people might find pleasure in this type of 'power-play', a patronising act puts off Pumpkin's desire. Pumpkin emphasised the importance of being 'interesting and interested' (her original words). This means that the ideal interpersonal scripts were where, firstly, both people enjoyed the scenario and, secondly, one desired someone who found one desirable, too. For Pumpkin, it was necessary to care about how her partner felt during their sexual interaction; more importantly, she expected her partner to pay attention to her emotions in return.

Another association that Pumpkin made with desire and intimacy was through food. In the interview, I understood that there was a common association between food and sex; however, I was interested in the ways in which Pumpkin related food and intimacy. She explained:

Intimacy is very important. To have that intimacy, you probably need, for example, trust, to open yourself up. You need to be quite relaxed to do this, feeling relaxed, being relaxed about the whole situation. I think food is kind of, more like a basic need. Perhaps it's like the saying, 'appetite and lust are only natural'<sup>116</sup>. Because I enjoy cooking very much, I enjoy food very much. I feel that the process of cooking and sharing food is very pleasurable. It's a pleasurable time in a pleasurable space. Intimacy shares the same pleasure. I think that's how I linked the two together. [translated] (Pumpkin, interview)

Pumpkin used cultural scripts – an old Chinese saying – to make sense of the link between food and sex, suggesting that the desire for food and the desire for sex were both intrinsic and universal. However, she did not elaborate on how intimacy worked within this

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<sup>116</sup> From Mencius 6A:4: 「食色性也。」

‘natural’ association. Instead, she moved on to talk about her personal interest in cooking and her enjoyment of food, indicating that, in everyday scenarios, it was the pleasure she gained from both food and intimacy that linked the two. Furthermore, the act of sharing food involves a certain level of trust – one believes in the person who cooked for one – as intimacy does. Intimacy and eating expose one’s vulnerability – you metaphorically *open yourself up*, and literally open your mouth. Last but not least, sharing food is itself quite an intimate act if one considers the possibility of contacting other people’s saliva in the process<sup>117</sup>: it is almost like kissing through food. Hence, intimacy and food can bring two people closer to desire.

Within this intimate relationship built on trust, closeness and mutual feelings, participants invested in interpersonal sexual scripts in order to develop their own desire. Their desire could be enhanced in two major ways: knowing their capacity for stimulating their partners’ sexual feelings, and collaborating with their partners to explore and work on desire. When discussing sexual interactions between two people, both Pumpkin and Lucy emphasised the importance of mutual desire:

When two people interact with each other, when you find the other person desirable, and that person feels the same about you, *that moment* in the interaction is the most interesting and the most crucial. [my emphasis] [translated] (Pumpkin, interview)

I think perhaps the greatest satisfaction is that you *know* it’s like a mutual benefit, like you both really enjoy it and you’re both sort of comfortable and expressing that you care about each other and things. [my emphasis] (Lucy, interview)

Having *mutual sexual interests* in an intimate relationship was highly desirable in Pumpkin’s and Lucy’s narratives, and they considered it a common view. On a personal level, both Pumpkin and Lucy enjoyed their sexual encounters, in which they and their partners *both* contributed to the interaction and gained pleasure from it. However, in both of their narratives, there is an implicit focus on themselves. Rather than talking about *how* to enhance their partners’ desire and pleasure, participants placed much more emphasis on the moment when they *knew* their partners were enjoying the sexual interaction: Pumpkin regarded this moment of discovery ‘the most crucial’, and Lucy considered it ‘the greatest

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<sup>117</sup> I also discuss other implications of food for desire on page 247 in the section ‘The Unseen Sexual Desire: “Other” Cultural Scripts’ in Chapter 6.

satisfaction'. This means that participants invested in their *capacity* to stimulate their partners' desire – rather than focusing on satisfying their partners – and, in turn, they experienced stronger sexual feelings due to their achievement.

Mina considered *mutual sexual interest* to be a common script for a couple to enhance desire. Here, Mina more straightforwardly expressed that her sexual desire increased when she *found out* that another person was aroused because of her:

Because one of the, the ways my particular sexuality is, is one of the things that fuels my desire is *knowing* that someone else is sexually excited, which I suppose is fairly standard. But I have a certain *investment* in kind of, what you could call almost objectifying myself, in a way that seems, that doesn't seem kind of negative in me. I mean, not exactly empowering, it just seems like something I feel is sexually exciting. I like being desirable to the specific people *who I desire*. [my emphasis] (Mina, interview 1)

Mina explained that she acted on her sexual subjectivity in order to invest in her objectified embodiment; and by doing so, she gained her own pleasure through enhancing her partner's sexual feelings. Mina was knowledgeable about the cultural scripts of 'sexiness'; at the same time, she needed to be aware of the cues – learnt from her interactions with her partner – that could make her partner sexually excited. Furthermore, Mina was conscious of how her objectified body could be perceived by other people. With self-reflection and her capacity to make use of these scripts, Mina constructed a sexually desirable image *with* and *on* her objectified embodiment. Her aim was to stimulate her partner's desire by creating the precondition of sensation for him. If she was successful, the result could most certainly enhance her own sexual feelings in return. The process of constructing a sexually desirable body image is a highly disciplined act which requires accumulated knowledge, much effort, and perhaps the courage to take some risks – just as the term 'investment' implies. Mina did not consider her investment in desire 'empowering' – since the constructed sexiness was still defined by the dominant media portrayal of women – neither did she consider her focus on objectified embodiment to be negative: she just enjoyed doing so. Mina's sexual investment indicates her sexual subjectivity. She constructed a sexy image because she decided to do so with the goal of enhancing her own desire. Likewise, Sarah invested in this 'performance of sexuality':

I enjoy wearing sexy underwear and being, ‘oh! I’m going to try this on for this guy, and he’s going to like it. And he’s going to like the fact that I like the fact that he likes it.’ It’s a two-way thing, you’re both complicit. [...] It’s always nice when somebody does something for you, and that can be sexual as well as nonsexual. It doesn’t have to be a coercive ‘I have to wear this to please my partner.’ (Sarah, interview)

Sarah’s narrative also emphasises the pleasure of being mutually considerate to each other, and this applied in sexual scenarios as well as in nonsexual interactions. Interestingly, she used the word ‘complicit’ when describing the mutual contribution, as if the two people involved are conspiring in an illegal act together. The word first suggests to me that Sarah and her partner’s sexual investment was ‘naughty’ in the sense that their misbehaviour was playful. Then, since it was a wrongdoing, this interpersonal script was better kept private and secret; however, it is commonly understood that ‘secrecy’ makes something all the more desirable. As Sarah and her partner acted together, they both took responsibility for the result: they should both contribute to enhancing desire together. Finally, Sarah described her investment in sexual performance as a choice, proposing that she did it for her partner’s and her own desire, rather than simply to please another person.

The other benefit of investing in an intimate relationship, as participants discussed, was that they could collaborate with their partners to work on and explore previously undiscovered desire. As I discussed earlier, Mina negotiated her *personal* desire in her intimate relationship. However, rather than feeling compromised, Mina argued that a partner enabled her to investigate her sexual feelings in depth:

Indeed with another person, if you’re able to make it work well enough with them, you do start to discover things you had no idea how you felt. I mean, definitely, my sexual desire has taken a completely different path, or at least a quite different path, since I met my partner than it had before. I mean I still have the same basic sexual needs and desires, but they express themselves very differently. (Mina, interview 1)

The collaboration in constructing interpersonal scripts did not come ‘naturally’ when Mina entered a relationship. To *work on* both of their desires, Mina and her partner had to make room for each other’s sexual subjectivity, contribute to adapting to each other’s sexual preferences, and trust that their partner would invest in developing desire together. Mina and her partner’s interpersonal scripts are composed of their negotiated intrapsychic scripts, which could potentially bring new materials for each other’s desire. As a result, as

Mina explained, parts of her personal desire remained while other parts have changed since her relationship began.

Finally, the process of ‘working together’ on sexual desire can also be quite arousing in itself. Mina’s picture<sup>118</sup> shows her performing oral sex on her partner. She argued that this photo represented her ideal of developing sexual desire in an intimate relationship together:

It was very much a process of creating and finding the right angle. That was a particular kind of intimacy in itself. So, I like that picture because it’s not something that I did on my own, it’s something that I did with somebody, and it wouldn’t have been possible without both of us contributing to it. And I think in that sense that picture represents one of my ideals of having sex with someone else. It’s something where both parties are completely engaged in it and completely working towards the same thing. (Mina, interview 1)

Mina’s photo embodied desire in several layers. Firstly, this image presents a sexual contact – her mouth on her partner’s penis – with the gesture of touching and tasting the body. This no doubt demonstrates the physical closeness between Mina and her partner. Furthermore, the act indicated the embodied sensations they both received. Secondly, Mina and her partner engaged in the co-creation of pleasure together, both during the sex act and in making this photo arousing. The process was intimate as it required them to experiment with different photographic methods and angles until they were both satisfied with this image, while they continued their sexual interaction. Their co-creation also signifies their co-exploration of desire: it required them to have a shared understanding of what they intended to achieve, meanwhile working with each other to negotiate the differences. Finally, the image itself could be arousing material as it represents a sexual act; hence, the viewing could be pleasurable for some.

Intimate relationships, particularly those discussed as exclusive and monogamous, provided a trusting and reassuring atmosphere for participants to develop their desire. My analysis suggests that this precondition involves a complex interaction of *embodiment*, both in the prior establishment of a ‘feeling of intimacy’ and in a ‘relationship’: a woman

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<sup>118</sup> I decided not to display this image because it is a close-up shot of oral sex, and some readers might find it too explicit.

engages in bodily and emotional communication with a person, she judges if the person is trustworthy, and she facilitates her knowledge to elicit mutual arousal by using her body – in interaction and in performance. Additionally, her reflexivity allows her to negotiate with her partner to explore sexual desire, and in this process, she gains a greater understanding of their sexual preferences. Unlike dominant cultural discourses, which suggest that women seek to please their partners sexually, participants' narratives demonstrate that they invested in their relationships in order to explore and enhance desire for themselves.

## **Conclusion**

Women engage in a complex interaction with cultural and social scenarios in the composition of intrapsychic scripts which form the web of their sexual feelings. In order to experience desire, women rely on their *embodiment* – an inseparable whole comprising the relationship between the body, mind and emotions – to interact with cultural materials. Preconditions, then, signify the scenarios in which these interactions were successful in generating desire. With the example of bodily perception, embodiment enabled participants to use their understanding and their ability to be reflexive in working on their body image. Women might choose to appropriate the cultural norms of femininity in order to compose their own version of desirability with their body and, by doing so, they embody conventional 'female sexiness' as part of their own sexual subjectivity. Alternatively, they might also use their cultural knowledge to modify their body image in order to construct a more 'personal' representation of their desire. Either way, this precondition emphasises women's satisfactory perception of their body image, which can enhance their self-confidence and make them become desiring.

With their bodily senses, women are able to perceive pleasurable sensations, another precondition which can lead to sexual emotions. Sometimes, this process is less straightforward as sensations stimulate women to construct reminiscence before their desire is generated. Notably, women are not passive recipients of sensual cues; instead, they can reflect on and make use of understanding gained from previous embodied experiences to actively mobilise sensual cues for their desire. This memory-making and the mobilisation of sensations indicate that this precondition also involves the mind in embodiment. The capacity to act upon self-reflexivity further allows women to interpret

the metaphorical relationship between sensory cues and desire; hence, they can produce sensuous materials to represent their sexual feelings.

Women's embodiment can also generate desire *in* and *for* themselves through fantasy, as they focus on their sexual subjectivity as the centre of their attention. This precondition is primarily about how the mind creates sexual emotions through imaginary scenarios; however, it can also engage the body in gaining sensuous pleasure to develop the intrapsychic scripts and to enhance desire. When their embodiment was in connection with another person, they did not simply perceive their partner as an object of desire. In fact, the stipulation of an 'intimate' relationship as a precondition suggests that it is based on emotional involvement. In this interpersonal scenario, women focus on initiating mutual excitement – by using their bodies and the knowledge learnt from social scripts – to enhance desire for themselves. Their embodied interactions with their partners also enabled them to negotiate in order to explore new, exciting scripts to enhance their desire and pleasure.

The relationship between embodiment and the experience of desire is an ever-changing one, because women's interactions with cultural materials and social relationships are frequent and complex. Although I have tried to theorise participants' embodied sexual feelings in a structured and coherent manner, there are still ideas that can slip through the webs. For instance, my analysis of how embodiment works in each precondition might imply that the body, emotions and mind are separate entities interacting with each other; but in fact, the relationship between the three is much more entangled. Furthermore, one's sexuality is often negotiated within the 'non-conscious'<sup>119</sup>; hence, the process of embodiment generating desire can be more implicit than participants suggested. In the next chapter, therefore, I approach participants' materials from a different angle: I experiment with foregrounding my own readings of these images in an attempt to uncover meanings hidden from the participants themselves.

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<sup>119</sup> By this, I mean that participants might not be fully aware of this negotiation; but still, this process has a significant impact on their experience and understanding of their sexuality.

## Chapter 6

### Cultural Framing, Framing Culture

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When I first imagined the photos my participants would make, I visualised pictures of the kinds of ‘glamorous sexy women’ depicted in advertisements and fashion magazines<sup>120</sup>. This may well have been because I associated these types of sexiness with *desirability*<sup>121</sup>. As it turned out, none of my participants sent me those kinds of images – they were clearly more sophisticated than I was. However, one participant did send me a photo of a magazine cover (Figure 6.1) depicting a conventionally sexy woman. In this photo, the subject – a women’s magazine – is displayed sideways, an uncommon angle for viewing. This representation makes it difficult for spectators to read the text or view the image and thus draws attention to the materiality of the magazine rather than the content. The composition also suggests that the photographer did not intend for the cover, which illustrates conventional femininity through both the image and words, to be read carefully. Furthermore, the magazine is left on the floor with the corner of its cover rolled up, indicating that this item is not treasured by its owner; instead, it appears to be disposable. The journal kept by the photographer Rachel supports this reading: she took this picture to express her view that the media and society’s imposition of a particular femininity on women is *undesirable*. Since she did not agree with this perpetuation of femininity, she seemed not to want to reproduce this portrayal of women by turning the image ‘upright.’

This photograph personifies Rachel’s own interpretation and negotiation within popular sexual representations. As with all my participants, her desire is a web of personal identities – such as gender, age, social class and cultural background – and more individual experiences which can weave and unwind this web in everyday social practices. As I argued in Chapters 4 and 5, each participant’s desire is lived through her complex interaction with the cultural scripts she encounters. In this sense, every participant’s ideas

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<sup>120</sup> These thoughts were from early in my research, before I started material generation and conducted my own auto-photographic project; hence, I was still quite naïve about how women might use this method to generate diverse representations. This thought was also related to my earlier understanding of women’s desire as associated with images of ‘sexy’ females, as I explained in Chapter 1.

<sup>121</sup> Jackson and Scott (2010) point out that a woman’s *desirability* – her performance of sexual attractiveness – and her sexuality – *desires*, practices and pleasures – should be differentiated rather than equated (p.145). I share Jackson and Scott’s view, although many participants regarded their desirability as crucial for them to become a desiring subject, as I discussed in the section ‘Body Perception’ in Chapter 5. I also discussed my terminology in the section ‘Material Generation: The 3 Phases and Beyond...’ in Chapter 3.

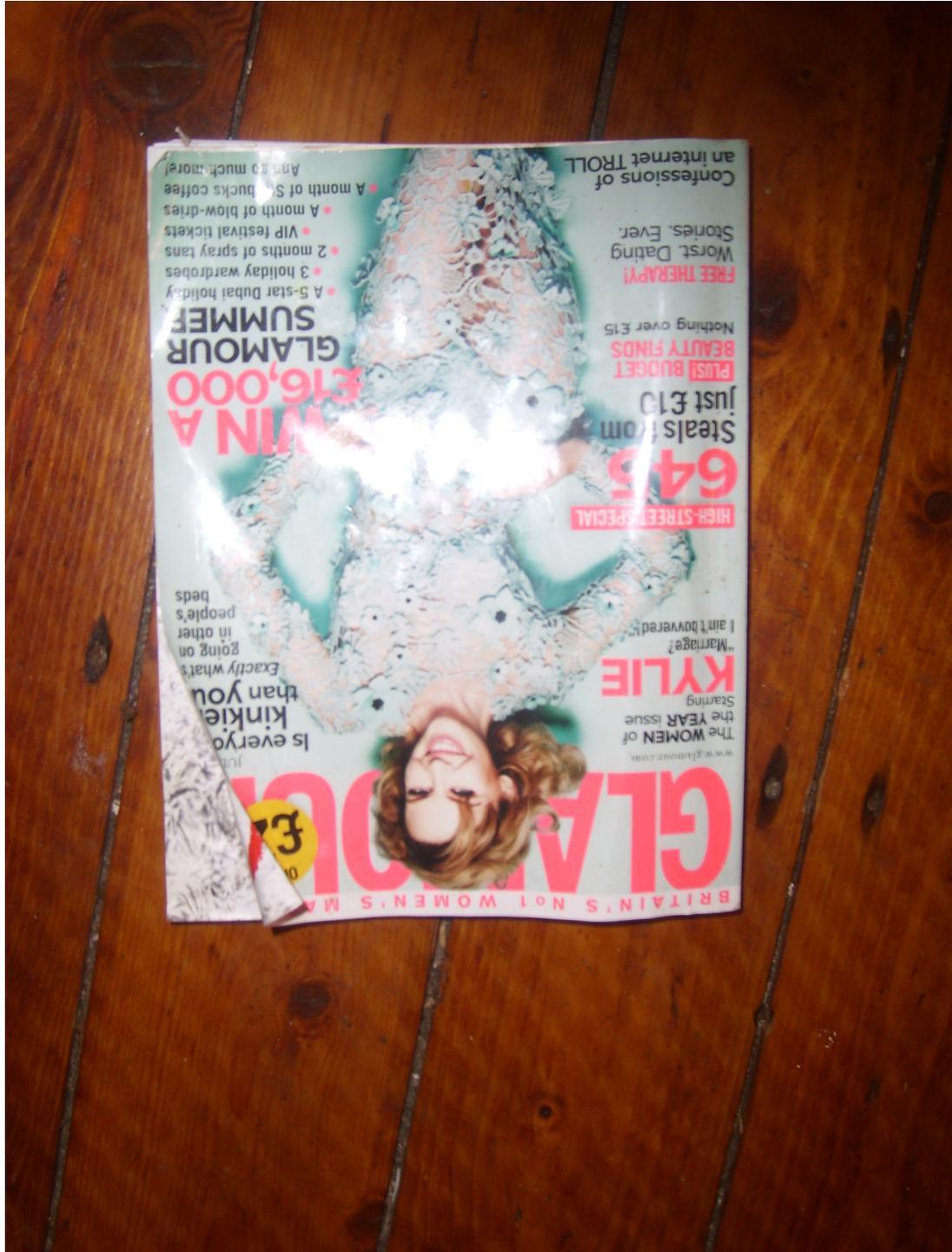


Figure 6.1 *Women's Magazine* (Rachel)

of desire are distinctive, as no two people share the same life trajectory. Likewise, during their *making* of photographs, participants picked up different visual cues from cultural scripts; as a result, these images can reveal aspects of desire that are significant to a particular individual. This personal negotiation within cultural norms explains why participants' pictures, even when representing the same subjects, are constructed differently from one another, although these differences can be quite subtle. For instance, Rachel made use of popular cultural material – a women's magazine – to demonstrate a kind of perpetuated conventional femininity which *suppressed* her desire, while some other participants' images, as I shall discuss in this chapter, reflect how they adopted popular visual cues, each in their own individual ways, to *represent* their sexual desire.

The visual cues that participants appropriated to make the photographs of their bodies suggest that popular cultural representations of female sexiness are influential in shaping their desire. One common feminist critique of popular cultural portrayals of 'sexy women' is that such images are reproduced for the male gaze. Mulvey (1975) argued in her influential essay that the sexual imbalance in society divides visual pleasure into active/male and passive/female (p.11). Since a male spectator cannot bear to become an object of sexualisation, he identifies with the leading male character, projecting his gaze onto the male protagonist's, viewing the woman as an erotic spectacle. A woman is not only being looked at, but also being displayed as a sexual object. Around the same time, Berger (1972) argued that, in the context of Western painting, a man is traditionally the owner and spectator of an objectified female nude. This unequal power relationship, according to Berger, shapes the way in which a woman looks at herself: she inevitably scrutinises herself from the perspective of the spectator – the man – and turns herself into an object. Even though the theory of the 'male gaze' offers a way to examine gender relationships in visual culture, it is nevertheless based on a gender dichotomy and heterosexual norms that make it questionable; furthermore, as this concept was developed through analysing the 'social structure', it does not engage with how individual practices might overturn the gaze.

These theories of the male gaze were developed in the 1970s. The social and political climates have changed since then, and others have explored how women are viewing subjects. Since the late twentieth century, male bodies have become more widely

distributed to encourage consumption – and for consumption (Bordo 1999). These changes in the social atmosphere seem to have given women an opportunity to gaze at men for their own viewing pleasure. Bordo (1999) vividly described her experience in 1995 of seeing a sexually charged image of a male body in *The New York Times* for the first time, and her story suggests that she was an active female subject who gazed for her own desire. The sexually inviting images of male bodies indicate that people who are not heterosexual men were also given permission to be voyeurs (Bordo 1999, p.170). Bordo's argument responds to Coward's (1984) idea that photographs allow a woman to look, because they are removed from the occasion where it would be unacceptable to stare; hence, through photography, a woman is no longer just an object of the gaze but can 'reclaim the visible world' (Coward 1984, p.52).

I further argue that women who take over the cameras not only turn themselves into the subjects of viewing, but also seize the opportunity to tell stories of their own desire. Although popular culture, a site in which visibility predominates in creating sensuous pleasure, might produce images that cater to women's desire, it also reinforces a socially 'ideal' picture of human experience. For instance, most of the Western romantic comedy films – such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* (2005), *The Proposal* (2009), and *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015), just to name a few – are framed around middle-class (and upper-class), white, fit couples of the same age groups in heterosexual relationships. This type of dominant representation renders *other* kinds of – more diverse – experiences invisible. When *ordinary* women become auto-photographers, they can create images to tell stories of their lived experiences. For example, projects collected in *What Can a Woman Do with a Camera?: Photography for Women* (Spence and Solomon 1995) cover wide-ranging aspects of women's lives. Some auto-photographers explore family relations, some represent experiences of illness, and some contest the popular portrayal of women. Through making photographs and writing about them, these women contributors share their personal stories. The act of expressing these varying, usually unheard voices can symbolically connect women who have had similar experiences, and potentially help women who do not fit in to the 'normalised' images feel less marginalised. While my project might not have established this kind of 'connection' as yet, participants' photographs allow me to explore the underrepresented aspects of *women's* desire: although a large number of photographs from many participants suggest that popular cultural

representations are influential in shaping their sexuality, these images embody meanings of *personal* sexual emotions that are not usually seen in popular media.

To explore the multiplicity of desire, in this chapter I attempt another way of accessing participants' ideas. As I have lived with participants' materials for years, I can too easily fall back on their meanings as they articulated them in journals and interviews. In order to explore possible meanings in the images without being influenced by participants' self-proclaimed intentions<sup>122</sup>, I re-imagined their photographs as displayed in an 'exhibition' of desire: the photographs presented with only titles and photographers' names. I experimented with reading the photographs using multiple methods, exploring aspects of desire that participants did not put into words. As I viewed the images, I first categorised them according to the photographic subjects, then I examined possible sexual meanings by deciphering the compositions and symbols. After each reading, I briefly brought in the photographer's written or spoken explanation to offer the context of the image. This connection respects participants' creativity and ideas<sup>123</sup>, and it also reveals sexual meanings that participants intended to communicate that might lie outside of my interpretation. Finally, I worked with these materials, gathering ideas from 18 participants in order to develop arguments about women's desire. In the following sections, I first discuss the methods I applied to read the images; then, in the main part, I offer my reading of the photographs in two categories: one responding to the popular cultural portrayal of femininity, and the other communicating women's subjective desire in ways which are often underrepresented in mass media.

## **My Visual Analytical Methods**

I used a mixed method in which I integrated techniques from discourse analysis, social semiology and narrative analysis to read the photos. I incorporated these methods with different theoretical groundings and analytical concerns, thus allowing me to examine multiple layers of meaning in participants' materials. These three methods work together because they share an epistemology which does not regard photography as a record or

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<sup>122</sup> I explained in the Introduction why I chose to structure this thesis so that this analysis arrives after I have dealt with participants' textual accounts, see page 23.

<sup>123</sup> Some participants thought that using both images *and* words to represent their sexualities was important. Celeste, for instance, considered that a photograph on its own might not fully communicate her desire (see page 87).

evidence of reality. Rather, they theorise photography as a cultural product, and each image – including the content, framing, composition and lighting – carries particular cultural meanings. Hence, these methods emphasise that any analysis of a photograph, including what a photographer intends to express and how a spectator might perceive its meaning, should be grounded in its particular cultural and historical context (Riessman 2008; Baetens and Bleyen 2010; Rose 2012). In my own practice, I identified resemblances between some of the photographs participants made and popular cultural representations – mainly in advertisements, TV, films and social media – and I read these images alongside each other. By doing so, I was able to identify dominant *discourses* of female sexuality in modern Western societies. I also used a *narrative* approach, focusing on ideas that were repeatedly emphasised by individual participants and analysing the photos as a ‘series of images’. Furthermore, I applied skills of *semiotics* to focus on the signs in the photographs and explored their cultural meanings. After my own reading, I brought in participants’ *words* as well as my analysis in previous chapters to examine the multiple meanings of women’s desire.

Discourse analysis investigates how dominant knowledge systems construct our understanding of the social world (Rose 2012). Discourses are powerful because of their claims to be true, and because they are productive – rather than repressive – of their social effects (Foucault 1975). Hence, discourse analysis sets out to explore how a specific view constructs its truthfulness and its effect. Using this method, I examined photographs which embody ideas from popular cultural representations of femininity. I particularly drew attention to two levels of *intertextuality*. The first is individual participants’ visual representations, which indicate their own desire *and* those of others; the second is concerned with how the meanings conveyed by participants’ photographs reflect on those of popular cultural representation. Using discourse analysis, I argue that popular cultural representation has an authoritative effect which displaces sexual desire with dominant ideas of female attractiveness.

While discourse analysis tends to read an image as a whole, semiology pulls apart its different elements and investigates how *signs* relate to each other and create meanings within wider cultural contexts. The central concern of semiology is the ‘social effects of meaning’ (Rose 2012, pp.106–7). A sign is composed of a *signifier* – for instance, the

colour red in an image – and a *signified* – the symbolic meanings of red, such as love and passion. The example I am using only makes sense if the readers share the same cultural knowledge of this meaning. That is, the relationship between signifier and signified is conventional rather than arbitrary. In the examples that Rose (2012) gives, she points out that, in Western culture, women's hair is often used to signify seductive beauty and narcissism (p.115). In Taiwan, however, women's long hair suggests gentleness as an aspect of femininity. The meanings of a sign are multiple (Rose 2012) and potential (Jewitt and Oyama 2001), and the interpretation relies on a viewer's cultural knowledge. Semiology is, thus, mainly concerned with the image, and the meanings produced in compositions and in social relations.

Social semiotics, however, predominantly focuses on how the signs in an image help to *communicate* meanings and values to its inspectors. Thus, it investigates how a point of view is created by an image to engage or distance itself from its audience. For instance, Jewitt and Oyama (2001) suggest that direct eye contact can create an imaginary relationship between the represented and the viewer; and, with gestures, the represented can symbolically demand something from the viewer (pp.145–6). Without direct eye contact, the viewer would be put in an observational position, which is more distant from the subjects. Furthermore, a close-up image creates a more personal, intimate relationship with the viewer than a medium or long shot. These analytical focuses indicate that social semiotics is attentive to the composition of an image and its effect on the audience; in addition, it emphasises the social relations within which signs are formed, who makes the rules and how the codes might be changed. Although discourse analysis and social semiotics are more widely used to research images in popular media such as advertisements, I have adopted them here to explore the potential cultural meanings embodied in participants' photographs.

Finally, with some participants' series of photographs, I used narrative analysis to examine ideas that are significant for an individual participant's desire. Baetens and Bleyen (2010) argue that, although a single image is open to narrative interpretations, a narrative approach is better applied to a series or sequence of pictures. It is true that a viewer can look at a single photo and construct a personal story that is not what the producer intended to represent; hence, it is important to interpret the narrative within its context, and

alongside the producer's written, spoken or other visual account. However, Baetens and Bleyen's criteria for what images can be analysed with a narrative approach are quite restrictive. They ask that pictures under narrative analysis should present a story in which the actions can be explained with causality (Baetens and Bleyen 2010, p.169). This would suggest that the images under scrutiny should be in a sequence, indicating that pictures made by photographers who did not work together should not be gathered to construct a 'narrative' for analysis – as Elena Tajima Creef did with photographs taken by Ansel Adams, Dorothea Lange and Toyo Miyatake in her *Imagining Japanese America* (Creef 2004, cited in Riessman 2008).

A narrative approach focuses on how a writer, a speaker or – predominantly in this chapter – a photographer constructs an event and uses language or images in order to deliver particular messages to their audience (Riessman 2008). Following Riessman's suggestion, I evaluated the possible causal connections, moral judgements, and mood communicated by participants' pictures in order to discuss their comparatively individual – albeit still culturally shaped – stories of desire. Narrative analysis can bring forward particularities and diverse experience into research (Riessman 2008; Woodley-Baker 2009); hence, I hope to discuss different voices of desire in participants' photographic representations. The central idea of this approach once again emphasises that narratives – just like participants' photographs – are always constructed representations rather than 'the truth'. Likewise, readers of this thesis should be reminded that my reading is my subjective interpretation, which has developed and shifted over time, rather than an objective report.

Reading the photographs requires cultural knowledge of signs, and my own scope is limited. Although I have personal experience of living in both Taiwan and the UK, I feel that I still need more cultural sensitivity in order to pick up meanings from the images. My sources of cultural knowledge and analysis include my own understanding, the Internet, discussions with friends, and hints from handbooks of visual analysis. Some of the ideas I explore in this chapter might seem straightforward, but others might be slightly obscure. My intention is to demonstrate my process of interpretation, and my limitations as well as to explore the meanings embodied in women's photographs.

One factor that affected my analysis was how the photographs were presented, and this drew my attention to the way in which viewers' subjective reading is reliant on my representation of the images. Participants' digital images allow me the flexibility to represent them in different sizes and formats for various publications. In this thesis, when I discuss a photograph in detail, I display it as one figure, enlarged to fit the page<sup>124</sup>. A bigger picture can give viewers a more intimate feeling than one of a smaller size; more importantly, it allows them to pay close attention to the specifics, which might be unclear when the dimensions are reduced. When several pictures embodied the same idea, I organised them into one collage. By doing so, I focused on the 'topics' and narratives – rather than the compositions – represented by a larger number of images, sometimes made by more than one participant. So, what are the recurring visual cues in participants' photographs, and what do they mean?

### **Embodying Femininity: The Effect of Popular Culture**

When I examined participants' photographs, I immediately identified many of them as having resemblances to popular cultural representations. By this, I do not mean that participants replicated images of 'sexy women' as seen in mass media, as I used to 'imagine'<sup>125</sup>. The popular portrayals of the sexy female are photographs taken by other people from the viewpoint of an 'outsider', and the images capture their faces as well as their bodies. The photos I discuss in this section, however, embody visual cues which suggest that the photographers appropriated popular cultural materials in order to construct photos of women's bodies that represent desire. The 'female bodies' in the auto-photographers' images are, in fact, their own. The women's decision to represent sexual attractiveness with their own bodies has two implications: it illuminates the concept of embodiment<sup>126</sup>, in particular that the photographers were capable of 'viewing' their bodies as others might perceive them, and it suggests that part of their subjective desire is negotiated through the successful production of desirability.

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<sup>124</sup> In the printed version of this thesis, each of these figures is about A4 size; however, in the digital file, the PDF allows readers to zoom in and out of the photographs, providing a different viewing experience.

<sup>125</sup> See my discussion in the first paragraph of this chapter and in Chapter 1 (page 16).

<sup>126</sup> I discuss Jackson and Scott's (2007) idea of embodiment in Chapter 2 (page 41); and I developed my own thinking on embodiment on page 40, and in Chapters 5 and 7.

The desirability that auto-photographers portray offers a range of culturally permissible qualities of femininity, manifested in certain colours and an ‘ideal’ body image. However, the ‘bodies’ in these photographs are not whole<sup>127</sup>. Maintaining a ‘perfect’ body is a continuous project which requires women to pay attention to details; this led the auto-photographers to scrutinise their bodies in parts to emphasise what they have, or have not, successfully managed. In particular, when the photographers could not reconstruct a desired femininity, they turned to creating a contrasting photo – instead of simply leaving out the idea – to emphasise the unattractiveness. To investigate how these photographs resemble dominant visual discourses of femininity, I introduce images from popular culture – mainly from advertisements and social media – to discuss the potential associations.

To explore the symbols of femininity embodied in popular cultural portrayals, I first return to Rachel’s photograph (Figure 6.1) to read the magazine cover. This cover uses the colour pink to draw attention to its name and headings. Pink is commonly linked to charm, sensitivity, and tenderness, attributes of femininity. In this image, the colour is used to emphasise what it means to be a woman. At the top, the publication proudly declares itself to be ‘Britain’s No.1 women’s magazine’. Following the pink headlines, the concept of ‘women’ is associated with *Glamour* – the name of the publication as well as sexual attractiveness – a celebrity icon, high-street style, beauty and budget, suggesting that femininity is about creating a fashionable sexy look which is guaranteed to be affordable. The colour further directs us to the lips of the central white female figure surrounded by the texts. She has incredibly neat, white teeth, and her skin is flawless. Her facial expression and pose are a deliberate performance which indicates confidence as well as exaggerating the curves on both her cheeks and her torso. Her dress shows part of her flesh, exhibiting most of her legs. This clothed yet revealing body demonstrates her confidence, and it also creates more anticipation than being fully naked. From the text to the left of her shoulder, one learns that she is Kylie<sup>128</sup>, one of ‘the women of the year’. Yet,

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<sup>127</sup> One of the reasons why some participants did not include their ‘whole’ body in the photos may be that they wanted to remain anonymous; thus, they consciously excluded their faces from the images. However, participants were allowed to decide which pictures would not be published; hence, the fact that there are *no* photographs representing any participant’s whole body – except for one of Celeste’s in Figure 6.16 (page 225) which captures *most* of her body – tells a different story: participants tended to scrutinise their bodies in parts.

<sup>128</sup> Kylie Minogue is an Australian-born singer and actress well known in European countries and Australia. She was awarded ‘Glamour Women of the Year’ in 2013.

from viewing this cover, I am not informed of her achievements; instead, I am presented with an image of a woman who embodies this particular 'pink' femininity.

The range of pink hues – including shades close to red and purple – have been adopted by the auto-photographers to represent the desirability of their body parts. One of the practices is to focus on the adorned lips, as seen in Figures 6.2 and 6.3. *Lipstick* (Figure 6.2) is a close-up showing details of a person's lips and skin, so close that one can even observe the lines and pores. The portrait-style image slightly crops out the sides of the lips, leaving more space for the chin and the neck. Although the colour of the lipstick is vibrant, this pair of lips is shut. They appear to be relaxed and not expressing obvious emotion. Hence, the viewer's attention is drawn to the *pink* itself, particularly in contrast to the natural skin colour and the shadows on the face. This close-up gives viewers a sense of intimacy, as if one is nearly kissing the lips, the chin or further down to the neck, body parts of a woman which are 'kissable' – if one thinks of the popular portrayal of heterosexual kisses. Thus, the composition of this photo, and the pink, implies the femininity of this body; however, as the lips are motionless, this body seems to invite the gaze rather than a kiss. The auto-photographer Cherry explained that she used this particular colour of lipstick to 'challenge the world' to look at her and decide that she *was* attractive (journal). That is, putting pink on her lips was a practice with which she boosted her confidence and affirmed her desirability. Although this 'desirability' suggests the extent to which she was desired by others, the confidence she gained and expressed with her lipsticks might allow her to communicate her subjective desire to other people.

The photographer of *My Red Lipsticks* (Figure 6.3) adopted a slightly different approach. She took a landscape picture featuring the lips in the centre of the frame. These lips are slightly parted and coloured close to bright red: a classic representation of 'women's desire'. In a Western context, red symbolises passion. Different shades of red lipsticks have different effects. Bright red is said to be more sexually inviting, whereas darker red seems more mature. Accompanying the full, shiny lips is a piercing stud underneath; it not only attracts attention to the lips, but is also a cultural symbol of sexiness itself. The slightly open mouth embodies a movement which seems to encourage the spectator to take action. I have heard people jokingly say that the mouth should be considered a sexual organ<sup>129</sup>.

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<sup>129</sup> This thinking might stem from Freud's five-stage psychosexual development: the oral is the first stage, with the mouth as the erogenous zone.



Figure 6.2 *Lipstick* (Cherry)



Figure 6.3 *My Red Lipstick (Steel Vagina)*

Indeed, one uses one's lips and tongue to kiss, to create sensations, and to perform oral sex. Hence, posing the bright red lips as represented in Figure 6.3 has a strong sexual implication. This sexually charged image demands that the spectator focuses on the lips and perhaps imagines what pleasure can be gained with them. This indicates that the lips are not just attractive-looking; rather, they can actively communicate desire to the viewer. The auto-photographer pointed out that she was passionate about her lips because of their look, and that they helped her perform well in sexual encounters. Her enthusiasm can be interpreted as narcissistic, as she wrote, 'I often wish I could clone myself so that I could kiss myself' (journal).

Even though Figures 6.2 and 6.3 are both entitled 'lipstick', the auto-photographers did not take pictures of the cosmetic item; instead, they focused on their own lips adorned with lipstick. This practice indicates that the photographers were aware of the use of lipstick to compose a pink-like femininity to make their appearances desirable. It is not the cosmetic item on its own that represents desire; rather, the sexual meaning is reliant on how the adornments are applied to the body – that is, how they are *embodied*. These two photographs, along with their titles, thus imply the ways in which cosmetic products are adopted by women to negotiate their subjective desire<sup>130</sup>. However, it is interesting to observe that, although these two pictures are similar in terms of their titles and their focus on lips, the details of their composition symbolise distinct meanings. In addition to the reading I provided earlier, the title *My Red Lipstick* suggests a sense of possession; when viewed alongside Figure 6.3, it emphasises a more *personal* application of the adornment than *Lipstick* suggests.

Another photograph that also features shades of pink and piercings is *Making My Body* (Figure 6.4); however, this picture embodies mixed messages. A woman is standing against a plain, dark background. The contrasting colours and the composition direct the viewer to look at her purple hair, breasts and pink nipples decorated with piercing bars. While shades of pink indicate femininity in both British and Taiwanese culture, purple has more diverse meanings. In Western culture, purple can symbolise feminism, royalty, creativity and the unconventional; and a woman with dyed purple hair suggests to me that she does not conform to the kind of 'soft', prevailing femininity that pink stands for. This woman's face

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<sup>130</sup> I discuss how consumer products, such as perfumes, were adopted by participants as an essential part of their sexual subjectivity in 'Constituting Sexual Subjectivities with Popular Cultural Products' in Chapter 4.

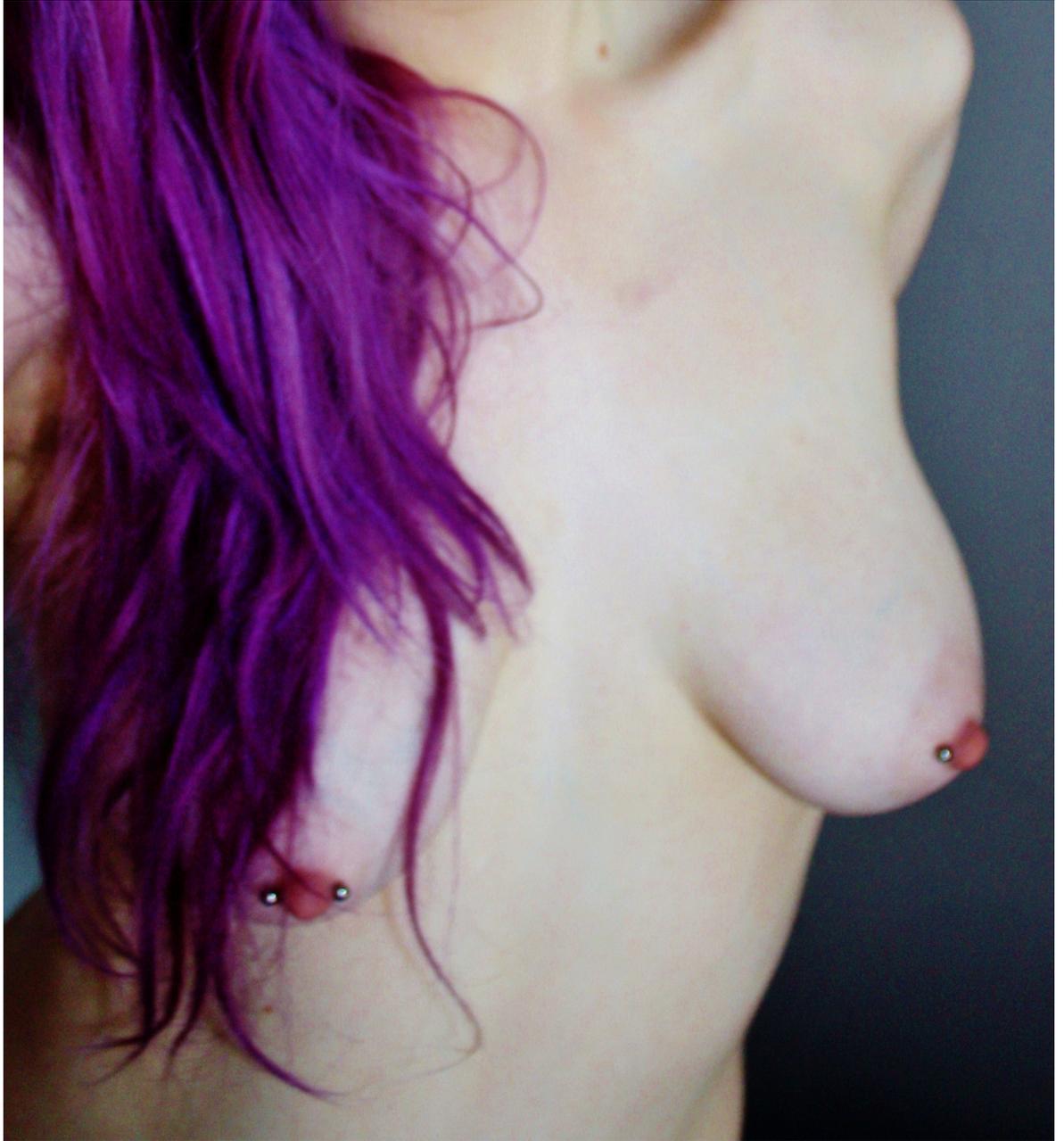


Figure 6.4 *Making My Body* (Rachael)

is cropped from the image; hence, one cannot tell her emotion. However, her body is putting on a performance: her left arm seems to be intentionally hidden to emphasise her body shape, which curves to the right of the frame. This image was taken from a high angle. She straightened her back and leaned forward towards the camera. The woman's act, as well as the composition of this image, is different from pinup-style portraits<sup>131</sup>. Overall, this image indicates a certain feminine sexiness: it is a young, white and fit female body, as often seen in popular cultural representations, with pink nipples and piercings.

Nevertheless, this body and its representation seem to be under the woman's control: the title of this image, *Making My Body*, suggests that the woman chose to fashion her body in this way; furthermore, she is performing for the photo shoot, but not in a conventional manner for the 'male gaze'. Also, the piercings are a part of her embodiment that can enhance pleasure for herself. Hence, this image represents a sense of subjective desire that is negotiated by using ideas of femininity.

The process of making this image seems to have generated a number of thoughts for the photographer. In her journal, Rachael explains that she was reluctant to photograph her partner's body because it was the *person* she desired rather than his physicality. However, in comparison, she felt quite 'natural' looking at herself in the frame. This, as Rachael interpreted it, was the effect of a visual culture in which images of sexualised, naked female bodies are pervasive. However, instead of becoming one of those 'sexy women' portrayed for heterosexual men's desire, *Making My Body* contains visual cues which suggest to me that the photographer represents a *body for herself* rather than for other people. Furthermore, Rachael wrote that the nipple piercings have a more personal meaning to her than just sensuous pleasure: they symbolise a time when she started to explore her sexuality (journal). These ideas further indicate that the photographer was not trying to reproduce conventional femininity; rather, this image represents *her* sexuality.

My analysis of photographs displaying shades of pink also demonstrates that femininity is composed with the use of adornments, such as lipstick or piercing jewellery. Figure 6.5 shows other adornments which shape the body as well as making it sexually inviting: *Corset and Lingerie*. In this image, the corset readily constructed the woman's waist; however, her pose and the angle from which the photo was taken further emphasise the

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<sup>131</sup> See also Rachael's account and my discussion in Chapter 5, page 155.



Figure 6.5 *Corset and Lingerie (Cherry)*

curves of her body. Since the photo was taken from a low angle, and her buttocks were closer to the camera than other parts of her body, the shape of her buttocks is highlighted. The red bow, in contrast to her black underwear, draws particular attention to her buttocks. The bow symbolises gifts and the anticipation that there is something waiting to be unwrapped; in total, there are three red bows and one black knot – although the top two are just decorations – waiting to be unravelled. Furthermore, the woman is bending over slightly in the image. These symbols and gestures are highly sexually suggestive. The lingerie this woman is wearing also includes a bra and a pair of stockings, even though their effects on her physicality are not visible in the image. A bra can push up breasts to make them look fuller and create a cleavage – a sign of femininity. Stockings not only shape legs, but also create anticipation: to take off this pair of stockings, one would touch the skin at the top of the thighs. In this sense, stockings can generate visual and tactile sensations for both the wearer and her sexual partner.

This photo was taken from an *outsider's* – instead of the woman's – point of view, and hence represents this woman as sexually attractive and available for the spectators. However, as the picture was taken in a room, with a closed door in the background, her deliberate sexual/sexy performance can be read as a private event, and an intimate one, as viewers are invited to look at her in such a close-up position. As seen in this photograph, the quality of her clothing seems fair; and this responds to the 'affordable femininity' represented in Figure 6.1: a woman can embody feminine desirability within a budget. Her gender performance requires her to possess visual knowledge as well as the capacity to apply suitable consumer products in order to communicate her desirability – as one can observe from the effect of her pose and the colour-matching clothing. The auto-photographer Cherry admitted in her journal that she enjoyed the way the clothing built her waistline and drew attention to her body figure. She considered her dressing-up in Figure 6.5 to be 'an act of self-objectification' (journal).

The colours of Cherry's corset and lingerie are black and red. Black commonly symbolises power, death, and menace; in fashion, it is associated with elegance. In a sexual sense, a woman who wears black lingerie is represented as sexually confident and alluring. The femininity represented by black and shades of pink are different. Whereas 'pink' femininity embodies a sense of gentleness and innocence, black indicates a more assertive and

empowered sexuality. Black is also a popular colour for BDSM practitioners, probably because of its implications of deviance and domination. Viewing Figure 6.5 alongside another of Cherry's images, *Bondage Tights* (Figure 6.6), I identify a narrative of *kinky* desire as corsets, bondage and the symbolism of the colour black imply an interest in BDSM practices.

Figure 6.6 is a photo taken from the auto-photographer's point of view – taken sitting down and looking at her legs. It captures the mid-section of her thighs all the way to the feet. The woman's shorts, tights and shoes are, again, in matching colours. The colour tone – mainly blue and black – in this image gives a sense of calmness, yet the intense contrast between the black stripes and the white skin seems thrilling. The 'bondage tights' have similar effects to Kylie's dress (in Figure 6.1), in that the legs are partially revealed, to be sexy. Additionally, the woman's legs are crossed and stretched out, implying a femininity that is showy in a reserved way: her legs look long and well-shaped, but not spread apart. However, the cold colours represent a strong, powerful woman who is distinct from the 'soft', pink-like femininity. The woman in black demands her pleasure, and she invites people to *see* her – as suggested by her gesture and the 'open' space this image captures. According to the photographer, this picture was taken at her workplace, after she was complimented for the distinguished look of her tights (Cherry, journal).

My proposed interpretation of 'BDSM' desire is supported by another picture made by Cherry. Figure 6.7 shows bruises on a woman's buttocks<sup>132</sup>. In the picture, she is wearing a grey pyjama top, probably made of chiffon or silk, decorated with small white patterns of stars and moons. She is lying on a bed. At the upper right is her bedding, while the lower half of this image reveals her naked right buttock covered in bruises. The lower left edge of the photo suggests that her left buttock is most likely bruised, too. The image was not taken during the act of spanking; rather, the bruises represent the consequences of spanking. Bruises suggest pain during and after the impact. Both the material of the pyjamas and the bruises (on the woman's body) symbolise the sensations she enjoyed. Spanking is considered a 'kinky' sexual act because pain is regarded as unwelcome by many people<sup>133</sup>,

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<sup>132</sup> Even though this picture – uncommon in popular cultural representation – might fit into my discussion in the next section better, I decided to discuss it here as part of my reading of Cherry's photographs in order to present a more coherent narrative of her desire.

<sup>133</sup> Yet pain inflicted by sports, such as boxing or excessive exercise, is taken for granted.



Figure 6.6 *Bondage Tights* (Cherry)



Figure 6.7 *Bruises* (Cherry)

hence the desire for spanks is deemed ‘abnormal’. This photograph was taken from above her body, an intimate, close-up shot made not from her viewpoint but from another person’s. The bright, natural lighting suggests that the picture was taken during the day, so the colours are clear. It is hard to relate these pink and purple (even slightly black) marks to femininity because the idea of ‘bruises’ instantly makes the image intense. Nevertheless, the mild sunlight creates a sense of comfort across most of the photo, symbolising that ‘spanking’ is neither deviant nor secretive. The auto-photographer explained that this photo, in fact, belonged to the category of ‘not sexually desirable’ because the bruises do not look aesthetically pleasing, even though it is a representation of her first BDSM experience, which she enjoyed (Cherry, interview). With this image, Cherry shared not only her naked body, but also her sexual desire with the viewers in an intimate setting.

Returning to the subject of ‘long legs’, Jessica also displays similar shapes but with her legs uncrossed in her photo<sup>134</sup>. This picture was also taken from the photographer’s viewpoint. The clean-shaved legs are extended and the feet are propped high up on a table. The woman’s skin looks smooth. In popular culture, a pair of long, smooth legs comprises an important part of female sexiness (see, for instance, Figure 6.8); and its sexual connotation probably comes from where the legs lead up to: the female sexual organs. Hence, mini-skirts and hot-pants which reveal more of the flesh of the legs are considered more *sexual* than other lower body wear.

Figure 6.8 demonstrates another example of the kind of female sexiness – one that is associated with long shaved legs and the colour black – that is pervasive in popular cultural scripts. This is a still from a TV commercial made in 2011. I found this picture when browsing images with key words ‘legs’ and ‘adverts’. This still was used in the Daily Mail (Splash 2011) to describe how Jennifer Lopez sells mascara by ‘flaunting her legs.’ It shows Jennifer Lopez sitting in a limousine, and the space is large enough for her to stretch out her legs. The lighting, which focuses on her face, and the long shadow cast over her shins suggest that the photographer looked into the car and snapped a photo of her. Even though the focus of mascara *should be* on the eyes, the image encapsulates her whole body. The classic ‘sexiness’ is shown in her eye contact, slightly parted lips adorned with red lipstick, and her long, exposed legs with their high-heeled shoes. Her adornments and

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<sup>134</sup> Jessica asked for this picture not to be used in this thesis or any other publication.



Figure 6.8 Sultry look: Jennifer Lopez shows off her legs in the backseat of a limousine in the new advert for L'Oreal Paris mascara. Source: Daily Mail, 2011 [Original Copyright Owner: Splash]

clothes are mostly in black and golden colours, which present her as elegant, wealthy and successful. Lopez is sitting in the limousine alone, and her whole body occupies the space in it: her success and this extravagant lifestyle belong to herself. The text underneath associates the brand 'L'Oreal Paris' and the product mascara with Lopez' image, suggesting: this lifestyle and confidence can also be yours, if you choose this brand of mascara as Lopez does.

The popular representation of a kind of sexy, desirable female body – with pushed-up breasts and long shaved legs, for instance – constructs powerful cultural scripts which can persuade women to follow a model of femininity. Women celebrities who embody such sexiness are simultaneously framed as sexually empowered, desiring women who are also sexually available, if one thinks about icons such as Madonna, Beyoncé and – as demonstrated – Jennifer Lopez. This type of representation could be one of the reasons why many participants connected subjective desire with an image of the 'objectified' sexy woman. If a woman identifies with this form of sexual empowerment, then one of the ways to claim that power is by applying her cultural knowledge to compose her own version of embodied desirability with cosmetic products.

And indeed, not all auto-photographers put themselves in their pictures; instead, some of them turn the camera towards consumer products to represent femininity. High-heeled shoes (Figure 6.9) have the effect of reshaping the legs of the wearer, hence reproducing female sexual attractiveness. In Figure 6.9, the pair of shoes seems to be placed on bed linen. This arrangement, in contrast to the magazine left on the floor in Figure 6.1, suggests that the shoes are clean, well-kept and, more importantly, meaningful to the photographer. The sepia toning usually makes a picture look old-fashioned; but here, the strong contrast between the black shoes and the white sheet gives the viewer a sense of classiness. The contrast makes the shoes stand out in the photo, symbolising how they would also draw attention to the legs of the wearer. At the top, part of the shoes was cropped out of the frame. This composition highlights the heels and the shape of the shoes, which are 'stretched' down; for me, the partial exclusion resonates with the ways in which the auto-photographers did not include their whole bodies in their images.



Figure 6.9 Shoes (Lucy)

The photographer noted that this picture represents a ‘complete’ image of herself dressed up, and she explained that she puts on a good-looking outfit for herself to feel confident rather than to cater to other people’s visual pleasure (Lucy, journal). However, as discussed earlier, the image of women’s long legs is already highly sexualised in popular culture. The auto-photographer might have gained her confidence from successfully composing an embodied image of herself which fits into conventional sexiness; however, this would suggest that she had adopted a prevalent way of looking which objectified her own body. My analysis does not claim that Lucy’s subjective feeling of confidence – which is built on successfully recreating an embodied female sexiness – and thus her experience of desire were untrue. Rather, I intend to tease out why Lucy and many other participants would refer to conventional femininity in order to define their sexual desire. Having said that, this auto-photographer took a picture of her shoes alone rather than of herself wearing them. This composition can also be read as expressing that the photographer would rather keep her body outside of the frame than portray it in a partial, objectified manner.

Another key aspect to embodied sexiness is a ‘perfect’ body image, and one photographer represented this idea with her wall (Figure 6.10)<sup>135</sup>. In this image, one sees *nothing* but beige. Only from the title can the viewer learn that the *subject* of the photo is a wall that belongs to the space the auto-photographer inhabits. Her wall is static and unstained, without any decoration or damage. When I tried to associate this image with ‘desire’, I considered what it is *not*: not the black, pink or red femininity I discussed in relation to the adornments. It does not suggest ‘secrecy’ as an enclosed space or a dark background would; instead, there is simply nothing to show apart from, perhaps, its cleanliness (but not as ‘pure’ as white). If one were to associate this picture with body image, then perhaps it suggests a flawless, hairless skin. However, the wall had to have been painted to be beige and untainted, symbolising that a ‘perfect’ skin would be a manipulation.

The auto-photographer used her wall to represent the smooth skin that she finds desirable on herself and on her potential sexual partner (Odinsleep, journal and interview). In fact, in popular cultural images, smooth skin is usually visualised as a bit shiny and vibrant (see Figure 6.8) rather than a plain, static colour. However, viewing Odinsleep’s photographs all

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<sup>135</sup> Reading this image was not easy, and I found it difficult to shake off the explanations I had readily learnt from the photographer because the picture was so unique. Nevertheless, knowing the idea the photographer intended to represent, I still provide my own perspective in this paragraph.



Figure 6.10 *My Wall* (Odinsleep)

together, I realised that she tended to use visual metaphors rather than turning the camera on herself or on other bodies. Furthermore, as I pointed out earlier, the ‘perfect’ skin – clean, without any hair, spots or irritation – is impossible in its ‘natural’ state unless one manipulates the body or edits the photographic image. In fact, it might have been so difficult to photograph smooth skin that six participants – including Odinsleep, Josephine, Rachael, Cherry, Rae and Sarah – elected to take pictures of spots and irritation in order to discuss how they considered these conditions undesirable.

Figures 6.11 and 6.12 demonstrate two examples of the ‘undesirable body’: both photographs represent dry skin, but in different ways. In Figure 6.11, the bare feet are posed purposefully to show the blister-like injuries and the thick areas of skin under/near the toes. Thus, the pink colour of the feet does not remind me of femininity as much as the irritation they have experienced. The arrangement of the photo evokes the sensation of walking on the grass barefoot, signifying the photographer’s contact with lively nature. Green symbolises life and energy; and the ‘pose’ of her feet encapsulates a small area of this nature as if they are embracing this liveliness. Although *Feet* focuses on the pain and the difficulty of maintaining a perfect skin, this image suggests a ‘desire’ to be active and in touch with nature. In Figure 6.12, the auto-photographer has placed her feet on the carpet, indicating that the photo was taken indoors. The colours of her skin – light purple with visible blue veins – resonate with those of the carpet; thus, the overall tone of the image is cold. The woman’s skin colour and her unpolished toenails make her feet look rough. The quality of this photo suggests that the lighting was not strong enough; thus, the long exposure may have blurred the subject with a slight movement of the lens.

Both auto-photographers, Cherry and Sarah, featured both of their feet instead of just one. This emphasises that the injuries or the dry skin are general conditions rather than an exceptional case. These two pairs of feet were closely scrutinised by the photographers from their own point of view; and as there are no signs suggesting a ‘social’ setting, the scrutiny appears to be a private examination by the women. In public, as well as in popular cultural representations, ‘sexy feet’ are usually accompanied by shoes or stockings, adornments that enhance the look of the body and draw attention to certain body parts. However, neither of these two pairs were adorned or reshaped with any product in Figures



Figure 6.11 *Feet* (Cherry)



Figure 6.12 *Untitled* (Sarah)

6.11 and 6.12. They appear to be in their ‘natural’ state, and hence do not fit into the cultural scripts of sexiness.

Interestingly, even though Jessica’s and Cherry’s (Figure 6.6) photos both display feet as an extension of legs, none of the auto-photographers seemed to consider feet desirable. While the women might scrutinise their feet because this part of the body is often fetishised, and hence sexualised, in popular culture, there are more images focusing on legs than on bare feet; that is, the dominant representations can lead viewers to focus on the care and management of certain body parts more than others. In addition, feet appear to be particularly difficult for the photographers to ‘manage’ – they are often covered up on a daily basis, and damaged from wearing shoes that are not always comfortable. As a result, five participants – Cherry, Rae, Sarah, Jessica and Alexia – photographed their feet to show the *undesirability* of their body image.

Participants’ self-perceptions of desirability were also shaped by the idea of *fitness*. This ‘fitness’ is not built on being physically healthy; rather, there is a strong emphasis on the ‘slimness’ – or, lack of fat – of the body. For instance, Figure 6.13 *Weighing Scales* is concerned with weight as well as the woman’s body image. This picture, rather than including a whole scale, focuses on the display. The close-up shot, in contrast to our daily experience of reading the meter from a longer distance, symbolises a frequent surveillance of one’s own body weight. Furthermore, as I imagine myself standing on this scale, my aim would be to know the number shown on the reading. My body is quantified, reduced to a number and stripped of its attributes. The number does not represent my lifestyle; it considers neither my diet nor my exercise pattern. The analogue does not exactly measure the constituents of my body – the composition of fat, fluid, bones and muscles that occupy *me* – instead, it only offers a number for me to compare: between my weight now and then, between me and people around me who share the same anxiety. In this context, the focus on a ‘number’ rather than ‘me’ removes one’s subjectivity, making it impossible for one to desire. In the journal, the photographer Lucy explained that this image represents her *insecurity* about her looks. Since confidence was one precondition for her desire, the weighing scales stand for the opposite emotions, which suppress her sexual feelings.



Figure 6.13 Weighing Scales (Lucy)

A quick search on Google Images reveals that slimness of the body is overwhelmingly represented by the shape and measurement of *women's* abdomens (see Figure 6.14). These pictures, many used by health clinics, associate health with slimness, with the latter defined by a flat abdomen and a small waistline. The pictures in Figure 6.14 are also highly gendered in that the body parts in focus are almost all female. Take a closer look and one would find that some women in these photos are not really taking a measurement; they are merely pulling the measuring tapes around their waists to pose for a photo. These images demonstrate that the actual circumference of a woman's waist is not as important as the look of it. Particularly in the photo in the bottom right of Figure 6.14, the measuring tape is being used to force the waist in rather than to evaluate the size, with a 'thumbs up' as encouragement. These images of 'desirable abdomens' – curved at the waist, flat around the belly, with shaved and smooth skin – are common in popular cultural representations. They are part of the powerful discourses which construct and reproduce a normalised female body image for women to follow; although the effect of such a 'flat' belly is probably reliant on the subject pulling in her abdomen and/or on photo editing.

Slimness is often represented with a fragmented body, as seen in Figure 6.14, and this type of image affects the way in which a woman scrutinises her body. These popular representations of slimness are a crucial part of embodied femininity, and the dominant visual discourse led the participants to draw specific attention to their abdomens. Two of my auto-photographers pinched themselves at their belly (Figure 6.15) in order to emphasise the 'fat'<sup>136</sup>. In both photos, the women are almost violently gripping their bodies with their fingers, creating a rather 'unnatural' look. Both images are also close-up shots that focus on the gestures of the fingers and the twisted skin they are shaping.

Comparatively, Figure 6.15 shows more creases and layers on the woman's belly, because she is grabbing a larger area of skin and has arranged her photo to be taken from a straight-on, front angle. The shadows on her body further emphasise the lines and curves of her belly. The other photo, however, was taken from a high angle towards the side of the woman's belly. The 'fold' is obvious because the camera's flash creates a shadow on her skin. This type of grip on the belly suggests a certain level of dissatisfaction. I am thinking particularly of an image of a mother pinching her child's ear as a punishment. This gesture

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<sup>136</sup> One of the women, Rae, did not wish to publish this photograph; hence, I am not displaying it in this thesis.

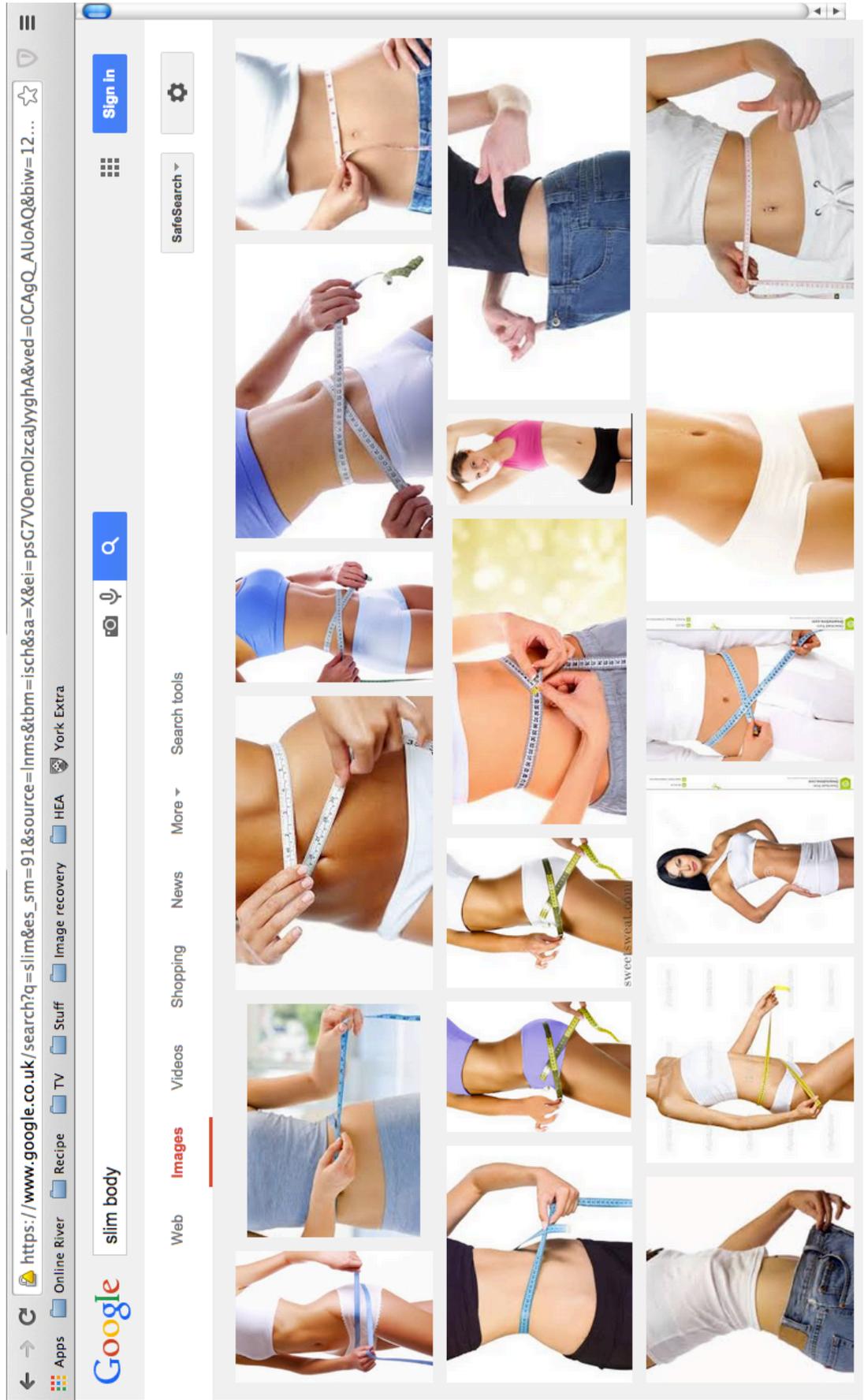


Figure 6.14 A screenshot of the first results of 'slim body' on Google Search Engine (accessed: 18 Jan 2015)

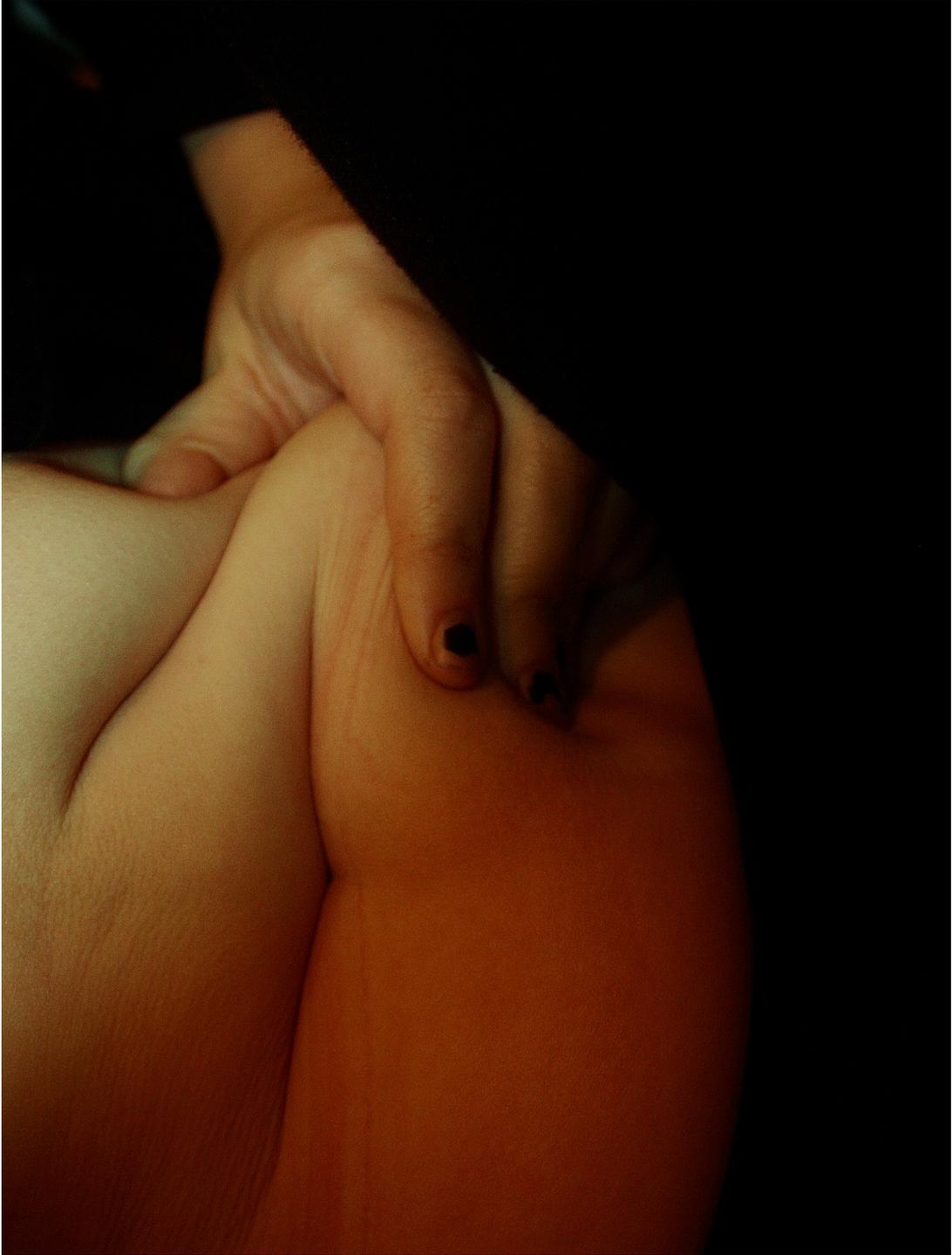


Figure 6.15 *Folds* (Rachael)

indicates that one is blatantly picking out a part of the body that is unsatisfactory, a part that one is eager to get rid of.

Both auto-photographers' pictures, taken with their abdomens against a dark background, form a contrast with the bright colours in the 'healthy and slim' body images shown in Figure 6.14. The two photographers' bodies are hidden in the dark and are undesired; whereas the slim bodies are pictured against bright – if not all white – backgrounds to demonstrate the shape of the waist. The popular images themselves are also bright and clear to symbolise positivity and to welcome the viewer's scrutiny. Compared to the image of Jennifer Lopez in Figure 6.8, which is also taken against a dark background, the participants' bodies are not as visible or inviting of scrutiny as Lopez's. Instead, the pictures of women's abdomens, including those on Google (Figure 6.14), are partial and depersonalised. By picking out this particular part of their bodies, my auto-photographers also seemed to be disconnecting their abdomens from their sexual subjectivities. The importance of slimness in desire, as both photographers explained, was not about how other people look: they did not find other people with 'fat' on their bellies particularly undesirable. Instead, it was more about how they adopted the popular discursive construction of an ideal female body when they came to view their own.

Despite the fact that the auto-photographers mostly scrutinised their bodies in parts, they seemed to have a larger aim to construct an embodied femininity as a whole package, as represented in Figure 6.16. This is a collage composed of six photos made by the same auto-photographer. On the left are pictures of instruments which represent the woman's routine of body maintenance. Razors, scissors and hair pincers are used to trim or shave body hair in order to make the skin smooth. Running shoes indicate exercise to keep fit, not just for the body to look slim, but also for one to feel active and healthy. The composition of this picture suggests movement: the shoes are used, just taken off (instead of being placed neatly like the flip-flops), and the blurred laces look as though they were captured moving. Both shaving and exercise require regular attention and practice to keep up, and the *reward* is to fit into an image of an ideal female body. In the middle are what I categorise as 'adornments.' Shoes and jewellery draw attention to different parts of the body, and can create visual pleasure for the viewer. Perfumes produce olfactory sensations; they can help to 'improve' one's body scent and – as discussed in previous chapters – they



Figure 6.16 A collage of Celeste's photos. From the left, top – down: *Untitled*, *Exercise*, *Shoes*, *Jewellery*, *Perfume*, and *Body* (Celeste)

have had meanings of sexual attractiveness attached to them through popular representations. Additionally, adornments have even become so much a part of sexual subjectivity that, without them, some participants could not prepare themselves to become desiring subjects<sup>137</sup>. Finally, on the right, is a photo of the woman's body taken from the back. She is not naked but is partly covered with her clothes. This is a deliberate performance, as seen in her pose holding a piece of green fabric around her back and arms. Her underwear is a lacework of cut-out flower shapes with gaps in between through which the woman's body can be seen (also see Kylie in Figure 6.1). Her posture makes her look fit and confident. The photo does not appear to be particularly sexual, and it clearly demonstrates the woman's body shape. This photographic narrative demonstrates what it takes to construct an ideal femininity: it is an ongoing process requiring daily scrutiny and modification; hence, it is not as 'static' as each photo would make it seem.

In this section, I have placed much emphasis on the impact of popular culture: the ways in which the auto-photographers negotiated desire by using powerful visual discourses to construct their own version of embodied femininity. Some auto-photographers picked up visual cues from the scripts of conventionally sexually attractive women – whether embodying pink-hued femininity, or *garnished* with black sexual empowerment – in order to create a sexy version of themselves, both to constitute sexual subjectivities and to communicate desire to their spectators. Although popular representations – and I am predominantly talking about those in advertisements and social media – were not the only cultural scripts available to participants, they were certainly effective ones. Nevertheless, I identified another 'category' of photographs which, instead of demonstrating resemblances to popular culture, rather suggest participants' *unseen* – although not unheard of – sexual desire.

### **The Underrepresented Desire – 'Other' Cultural Scripts**

In this section, I examine aspects of participants' desire that are *not* derived from popular representations of a sexy female body. The ideas I explore here are not uncommon in public discourses of desire; however, they have moved away from women participants' constructions of their embodied desirability to a more pleasure-seeking orientation.

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<sup>137</sup> See the section 'Constituting Sexual Subjectivities with Popular Cultural Products' in Chapter 4.

Whereas the ubiquitous popular cultural images led participants to compose a sexy image of themselves, these ‘rarer’ representations of desire are about demanding that other people or objects bring pleasure to participants. Some of these ideas, as I will demonstrate, are shared between many participants; and some are frequently emphasised by individual women. I categorised these ideas mainly by identifying recurring themes in the photographs, then with my background understanding of the subjects of the photos.

The first topic that emerges from the photographs is *personal care*, as represented in the images and titles of Figures 6.17 and 6.18. To contextualise, ‘personal care’ means that these two auto-photographers would only desire a person if he<sup>138</sup> takes care of his well-being, particularly his hygiene and health, as explained by both auto-photographers. In Figure 6.17, four things were pictured to represent this idea. Firstly, soap is used for cleansing; and a ‘natural’ soap is defined as one made with organic ingredients rather than mixed chemicals which might harm one’s skin. *Natural Soap* implies the auto-photographer’s expectation that her desired person should maintain a hygienic standard *and* take care of his body. The other three pictures, then, signify an ‘unhealthy’ lifestyle. The second picture is a slice of bacon, particularly with its fat, to represent *Obesity*. The term obesity is usually linked to an image of an overweight body, and it is commonly associated with health problems. Although obesity has been argued to be a social issue, and many share the understanding that it can be a genetic ‘disease’, obesity is usually stigmatised as a personal failure of self-discipline. This picture shows ‘undesirable’ fat – although the fat here only occupies a small portion of the meat – which signifies a ‘poor’ choice of diet, and represents the potential health risks that obesity brings with it.

Coffee, shown in the lower right in Figure 6.17, signifies cultural meanings such as being a fashionable drink, or that it can be a code for sex. I am picturing a scene where two people stand in front of a door at the end of their date, and one of them asks, ‘would you like to come in for a coffee?’ – a scene that is not uncommon in Western romantic films. However, these do not seem to be the meanings that the auto-photographer intends to communicate. Read alongside the title *Feeling Tired*, the image refers to the use of coffee to keep one awake and focused. In this context, the photo indicates that the person who needs coffee is

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<sup>138</sup> Both Alexia and Odinsleep identified themselves as heterosexual, hence I use ‘he’ here to refer to the person they desire.



Figure 6.17 A collage of Odinsleep's photos. From top left, clockwise: *Natural Soap*, *Obesity*, *Feeling Tired*, and *Look* (Odinsleep)



Figure 6.18 A collage of Alexia's photos. Top to bottom:  
*Lack of Hygiene, Cold Sores, and Stunt Your Growth*

fatigued and lacks energy, which can be a result of illness or stress. A similar implication can also be observed in the last photo, *Look*, in which the fly is distorted and lifeless.

There is another level of *personal care* represented in Figure 6.18. Alongside the idea that her desired person should be capable of looking after himself, he also must not interfere with the auto-photographer's self-improvement. That is, a potential sexual partner's physical *and* mental well-being – the latter manifested in his attitude towards the people and events around him – are both crucial for the photographer. At the top of Figure 6.18, a bar of soap and a scrubbing brush are used to clean in detail. The soap in the picture is running out, giving an impression of regular usage. If a woman desires another person, she might anticipate bodily contact; in this respect, bad personal hygiene could potentially suppress her desire. The photographer Alexia suggests that, in the context of a date, good personal hygiene reflects how much the guy cares for himself and for his partner (journal). In the middle is an image of cream for treating cold sores, and there are several reasons why cold sores are undesirable. When a cold sore breaks out, it is both visually and physically unpleasant for the patient. Its symptom appears on the mouth, so it can barely be hidden from viewers. Furthermore, the virus – herpes – can be transmitted through contact from mouth to genitals. This stigma associated with sexually transmitted disease means that cold sores can put off a potential sexual encounter. Additionally, cold sores suggest that one's immune system is temporarily impaired and needs attention. As a result, one needs to look after one's health before engaging in sexual activities. The cream is still in the package, suggesting that it is brand new. This indicates that the auto-photographer might be highly self-aware of this undesirability; hence, she keeps it in preparation for any possible break-out of cold sores.

Besides physical hygiene and health, a person's attitudes were also important to the auto-photographer. *Stunt Your Growth* and another photo *Glass Half Empty*<sup>139</sup> symbolise a type of unattractive personality. 'Is the glass half empty or half full?' is a typical question referring to a person's attitude towards an event, either pessimistic or optimistic. From previous analysis, I discovered that participants usually associated desire with emotions

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<sup>139</sup> Alexia did not wish this photograph to be published. This picture shows a grey glass half-filled with water in the middle of the frame. It is a close-up shot, and the distance between the camera and the glass of water is about the same as that in her *Lack of Hygiene*.

that were more uplifting<sup>140</sup>. It would seem that a negative approach to daily experience can be quite exhausting, especially for the people around the pessimist. What makes it even more off-putting is when a person tries to hold you back from your own personal development, as suggested by *Stunt Your Growth*. The plant has had the top part of its stem removed, and its leaves are drooping down to the sides. Although its colour still looks freshly green, its lack of movement makes it seem lifeless, reminding me of Odinsleep's picture of a dead fly (Figure 6.17). For Alexia, her desire cannot be generated on the basis of such 'negativity'.

Alexia's and Odinsleep's photo-narratives bring personal care to the fore. The idea of personal care sounds like a criterion for choosing a spouse as much as a precondition for desire. It could be that the auto-photographers thought about desire in relation to their intimate relationships. However, personal hygiene and general attitude are also part of the impression one gives to the public. If the auto-photographers did not enjoy their interactions with a person, it was reasonable that they would not desire him at all. The concept of 'personal care' reflects a broader cultural discourse which emphasises the individual's responsibility for self-discipline. There is a social expectation placed on individuals to govern their own physical and mental well-being, even though health issues are defined and shaped by the social environment. Furthermore, Alexia and Odinsleep share 'East-Asian<sup>141</sup>' cultural backgrounds<sup>142</sup>, and I wondered whether this had an impact on how they positioned self-care as a priority for their desire. In East-Asian cultures, there is a strong emphasis on personal responsibility in various aspects of life. The dominant Confucian teaching, in particular, asks one to perform within fixed social relationships and not to exceed one's social position. As a result, participants who had links to 'East-Asian' cultural backgrounds might place high demands on themselves, and they could also have this expectation of people they potentially desire. I am not suggesting that participants of other ethnicities did not consider self-care important, but this aspect was not emphasised in their materials on desire.

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<sup>140</sup> See the section on 'Sensations' in Chapter 5.

<sup>141</sup> I discuss 'East-Asian' sexualities in Chapter 2.

<sup>142</sup> Odinsleep is Taiwanese. Alexia identifies herself as a Eurasian: partly Chinese.

Partly related to the idea of ‘self-improvement’ is the demand for intelligence: sapiosexuality. In Figure 6.19, I display three out of five participants’ photographs<sup>143</sup> which represent this sexual attraction to intellectual capacity. The books in these photographs are not necessarily sexually arousing; they were mainly used as a symbol to communicate the idea. Books signify intelligence. It is a common understanding that the more one reads, the more knowledge one gains. The four photos of books – *Self-Improvement*, *Sapiosexuality*, *Books* and *Untitled* – suggest that one should continuously learn and accumulate knowledge. I should mention that Alexia’s and Odinsleep’s photographs here also relate to the importance of ‘self-care’: the title *Self-Improvement* suggests that reading is a way for one to invest in intellectual capacity, and the old books in Figure 6.19 signify intelligence and mental maturity. In terms of composition, *Sapiosexuality*<sup>144</sup> displays books that the auto-photographer has purposefully organised, indicating that each book plays an important role in negotiating her desire; this is in contrast to *Untitled* which refers to books *in general* to represent one’s attraction to intellect. Beth’s *Intelligence/Men in Suits* represents two aspects of pleasure: the intellectual pleasure of interacting with a knowledgeable person, and the visual pleasure of viewing a fit man dressed in a suit.

There might be a number of reasons why the desire for intelligence is so prevalent that it has gained its own name. Firstly, it is commonly perceived that intelligent people are more interesting, although there is no definite causal relationship between the two characteristics. Still, people who are capable of engaging in different conversations, responding wittily and humorously are usually seen as clever; and such people might also smartly use innuendo in their conversations to flirt. In short, this personality type is regarded as highly attractive. Secondly, metaphorically, a knowledgeable person is just like a book, which attracts interested readers to dig into its pages and explore what is under the cover. The anticipation is exciting. Additionally, people who are sexually knowledgeable know what they can do to pleasure their partners. They can bring in creative ideas for erotic play; and because they have the experience, they might know better how to experiment with new activities. Finally, I think that *sapiosexuality*, in fact, reflects many people’s own curiosity. These people desire knowledge, desire learning, and they project

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<sup>143</sup> I excluded two photos that participants did not want to publish: Alexia’s *Self-Improvement*, which is a close-up shot of a pile of six books with their titles visible in the frame; and Beth’s *Intelligence/Men in Suits* which is a snapshot of a man in a suit under a graduate gown.

<sup>144</sup> *Sapiosexuality* is displayed as Figure 4.5, page 126.

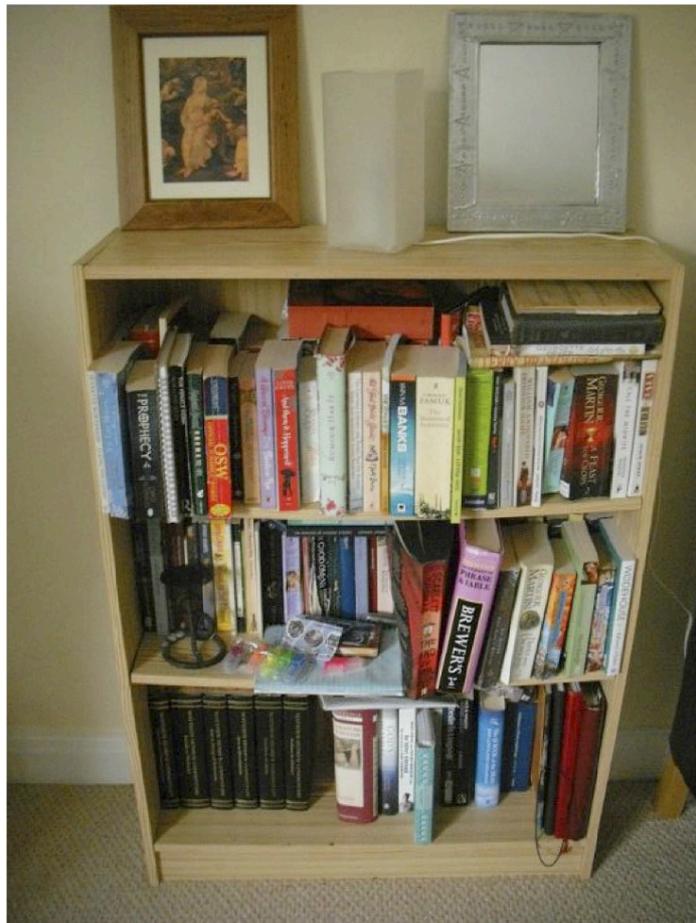


Figure 6.19 A collage of 'Intelligence'. Top to bottom: *Sapiosexuality* (Rachael), *Books* (Odinsleep), *Untitled* (Brigitte).

this desire onto other people who embody this quality. This can be observed in Alexia's and Brigitte's writing about their photographs. Alexia thought that reading helps to improve oneself and make one a better person. This applied equally to herself and to the person she desired. Brigitte described herself as a 'bibliophile,' a term which suggests her love for books; and the suffix -phile has a sexual connotation in modern use. Brigitte loved books, and she associated this fondness with sexual desire.

Another idea I identified is *open air* space, particularly during sunny weather. In total, there are ten photographs taken 'outdoors' by seven auto-photographers. Some pictures are about events or objects that happened to be located outside at the time the photos were taken – running, birds, fruit on a tree – and some capture the space itself in composition. It is the latter that I have chosen to discuss here because of their emphasis on the open air itself. This series represents a sense of freedom, warmth, and perhaps the excitement of outdoor sex. Figure 6.20 captures a wide, open space in nature. The cloudy sky, the moss-like covering on the earth and the water give a feeling of chill. There are no other human beings or animals visible in the frame, so the environment presented here seems quiet and peaceful. Being in such a 'natural' environment indicates that the auto-photographer was away from the conventions and hassles of the cultural world. In contrast to all the rules and limitations set in human society, nature presented an opportunity for her to feel free, to be who she *was* and do what she wanted. This image also signifies that desire is part of 'human nature'; however, a woman's subjective desire is usually silenced in modern society. The visual discourse of women's sexuality in mass media, as I have discussed in the previous section, is more about reproducing a conventionally sexy female image than showing diverse women actively pursuing pleasure. Thus, to be in the open air in nature offers an escape from social expectations to the freedom of embracing one's own desire.

Taken by the same photographer, Figure 6.21 displays sunshine and a bright green colour. The image looks warmer and livelier than Figure 6.20. Green symbolises growth and well-being. These cultural meanings are derived from the livelihood of plants: at the height of summer, the leaves and grass are green and flourishing; when they start to wither, they turn yellow and brown. Pictures taken by another auto-photographer, Figure 6.22, also demonstrate a similar energetic and summery atmosphere. The glorious weather and



Figure 6.20 *Untitled* (Brigitte)



Figure 6.21 *Untitled* (Brigitte)



Figure 6.22 A collage of Lucy's two photos. From the top: *Flowers and Memories* (Lucy)

vitality generate 'positive' emotions which help to develop the photographers' desire. Sexual desire, after all, is about actively wanting and pursuing pleasure.

Returning to Figure 6.21, the *open air* also signifies alfresco sex. The trees and their shadows distributed around the frame encapsulate the grassy area in the centre. This space is unenclosed but relatively private, hidden away from the crowd and somewhat screened by plants. It appears to be a good place for outdoor sex: warm in the sunshine and remote from other people. Having sex in public is not an uncommon fantasy or practice – Beth also wrote about this in her journal. This desire might stem from the excitement of having sex in an unconventional setting. It challenges the cultural boundaries of the 'normally' private, indoor sex. The risks of getting caught and the thought that 'I can get away with it even if I am discovered' make alfresco sex all the more desirable for some people. There is no doubt that outdoor sex is not always immersed in nature; however, the connotation of sex and desire being humankind's *natural* condition might provide a justification for having sex in the wild. Brigitte's two pictures form a strong narrative of her relationship with open nature: she found her desire outside of cultural norms.

Also taken outdoors under the sunshine, *Runner in the Park* (Figure 6.23) represents the excitement of both challenging the boundaries and voyeurism. This picture is full of energy and movement. A man is running in the open air under the blue sky on a sunny day, and the flourishing plants further add to the vitality. He is wearing nothing but his running shoes and a tiny pair of shorts. The cars along the road, the building in the background, and the existence of other people in the frame suggest that the park is frequented; however, this runner does not seem to care about the public's perception. Almost naked, he would most definitely attract attention, and he has certainly caught the auto-photographer's eye. His behaviour embodies a sense of freedom and courage which might be interpreted as arrogant by some people: he is not exactly wearing the most appropriate running gear in a Western culture. Nevertheless, a man's disregard for cultural conventions can be quite sexually attractive, if one associates this with the popular media portrayal of a powerful man who is above the rules – a kind of empowerment to which women have much less access. Hence, the idea of 'breaking rules' might generate the auto-photographer's desire, not only because of the sense of empowerment it signifies, but also because of the excitement generated by misbehaving.



Figure 6.23 *Runner in the Park* (Steel Vagina)

Additionally, the runner is exposing his body – fit because he exercises and because he *is* working out – openly for the public’s gaze. His body is objectified and sexualised as a visual treat for the onlookers. His movement stimulates the voyeurs’ imagination about what he is capable of doing sexually. The runner represents an object for the auto-photographer’s desire, if he was not already one. Steel Vagina wrote in her journal that when she noticed this runner, she had to quickly snap a shot before he got away. She noted how his body was tanned and sculpted, and that she saw ‘his junk jiggle and bounce under his shorts’ (journal) as he ran past. This man was showing off his masculinity in public. His potentially narcissistic behaviour seemed to cater to Steel Vagina’s desire.

I understand that a well-built male body image is constantly reproduced in popular culture as sexually attractive; as a result, this representation might seem not to fit into a section on ‘unseen’ women’s desire. I am also aware that, in advertisements and Hollywood films, it is not uncommon to see female characters actively pursuing their desired men. Even on some TV shows in Taiwan, female hosts can seem to prey on attractive male pop stars. However, these female celebrities are spectacles, and their lives in popular representations do not exactly mirror the experience of an ‘ordinary’ woman. As I discuss in the first chapter, women are punished for being upfront with their sexuality in everyday life<sup>145</sup>; and some auto-photographers also felt intimidated about sharing their sexual desire in public forums. Compared to the extent to which the women participants scrutinised and disciplined their own body image, the voice of ‘I desire this male body’ is relatively quiet. In fact, the photographs suggest that most of the auto-photographers did not sexualise or objectify another person’s body; their materials more often focus on desired personalities and another *embodiment*.

Only two heterosexual participants stated clearly that they took visual pleasure in a man’s well-built body image. Whereas Steel Vagina got a picture of the runner (Figure 6.23) by chance, Beth took a medium-distance shot of a man (Figure 6.24) to represent a masculine body shape she desired. The title, *The Triangle of the Fit Male Form*, points out the main subject of the image: an objectified male body built with muscles and displayed for the spectator’s viewing pleasure. Under the dim light, the man is standing still, waiting to be photographed. This image is sexual and embodies a sense of anticipation: his posture

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<sup>145</sup> See page 11.

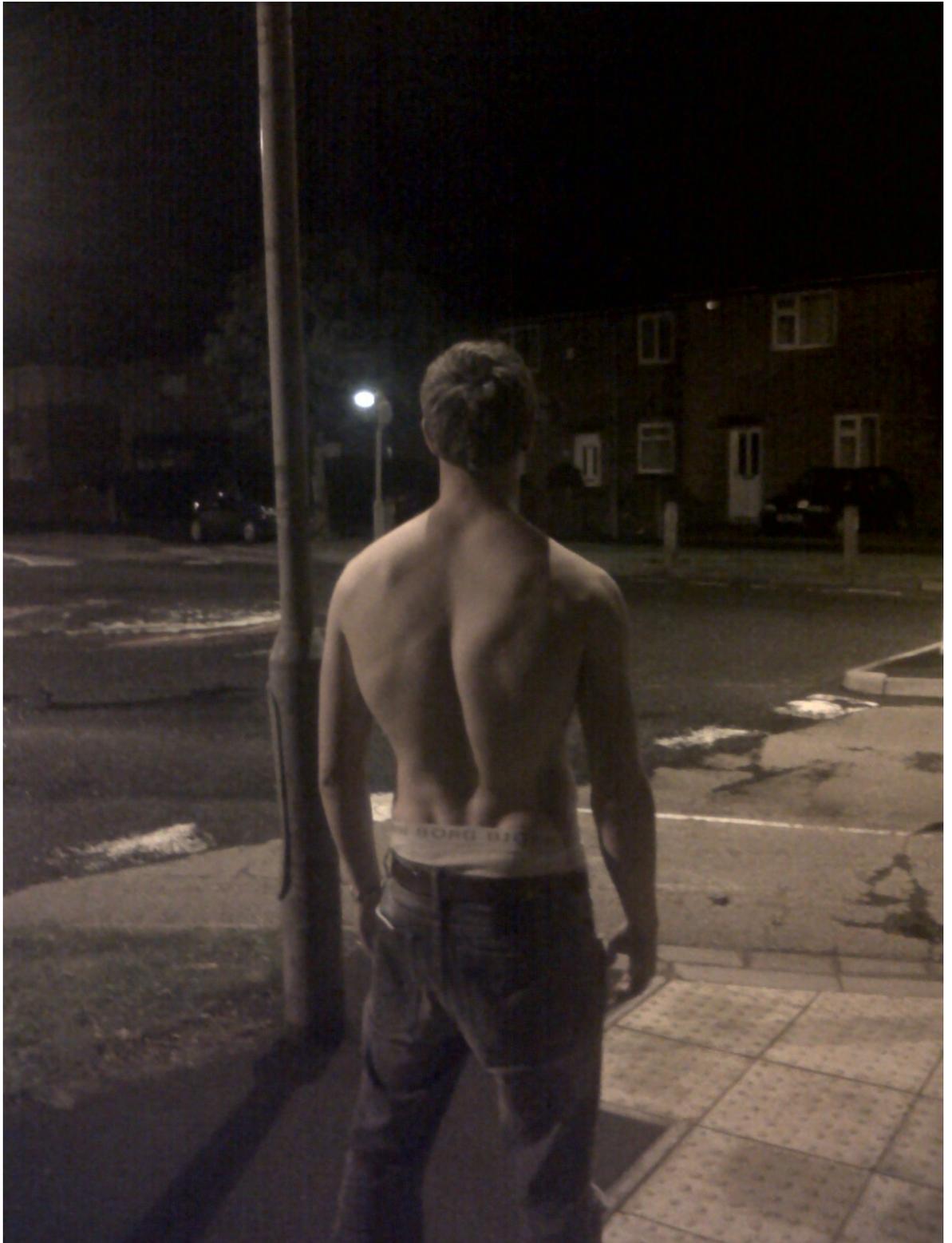


Figure 6.24 *The Triangle of the Fit Male Form (Beth)*

resembles that of the lamppost which is erect in front of him; additionally, his low-rise jeans reveal part of his boxers and his lower back. As he stands topless on a random street, he welcomes spectators to look at his body; although in such darkness and a quiet environment, this viewing becomes a rather private event. The lighting was not enough to show the contrast of colours, but good enough to reveal his body configuration. The colour tone of this picture reminds me of advertisements for men's perfumes, many of which are monochromes and seem to sell masculinity alongside their products (see examples in Figure 6.25). The man in the photo has broad shoulders and a muscular back that leads down to his well-trained waist. Building this type of body requires constant training and a level of self-care. A well-built man's body is defined as a sexy, masculine one when represented in popular culture. This body image depicts strength, a quality that is said to be desired by many heterosexual women. In the interview, Beth disclosed that it was both the visual impact of a muscular body and the idea of a strong, protective man that she desired. However, she felt a bit embarrassed to be upfront about it. In the interview, she laughed and told me that she had to have a few drinks before finding the courage to ask for her friend's permission to take this photograph of him.

A few other auto-photographers also visualised the physical pleasure they desired in their photographs. Figure 6.26 subtly portrays one sexual activity: oral sex. The image focuses on the green hair which dominates the centre of the frame. This focus is where the colour – as well as the sexual pleasure – is the brightest and most vibrant. Next to the green hair, on both sides of the frame is the colour of the skin. On the edge to the left, the skin has been grabbed by a few fingers; and in the lower half of the picture, a hand is holding onto a dark background. These gestures indicate strength and control. Surrounding the centre of pleasure, these movements suggest secondary, yet still powerful, sensations gained from the body contact. The image is quite implicit and obscure in itself. Although, after a closer look, one realises that it is a close-up shot from the auto-photographer's point of view to capture oral sex being performed on her.

*Hands and Green* represents desire in several respects. The first is straightforward: the picture depicts a sexual activity, and the auto-photographer is the one who is supposedly being pleased. Hence, it is a portrayal of *her* desire. Secondly, this photo seizes a moment during a sexual activity, in which the auto-photographer was not only one of the

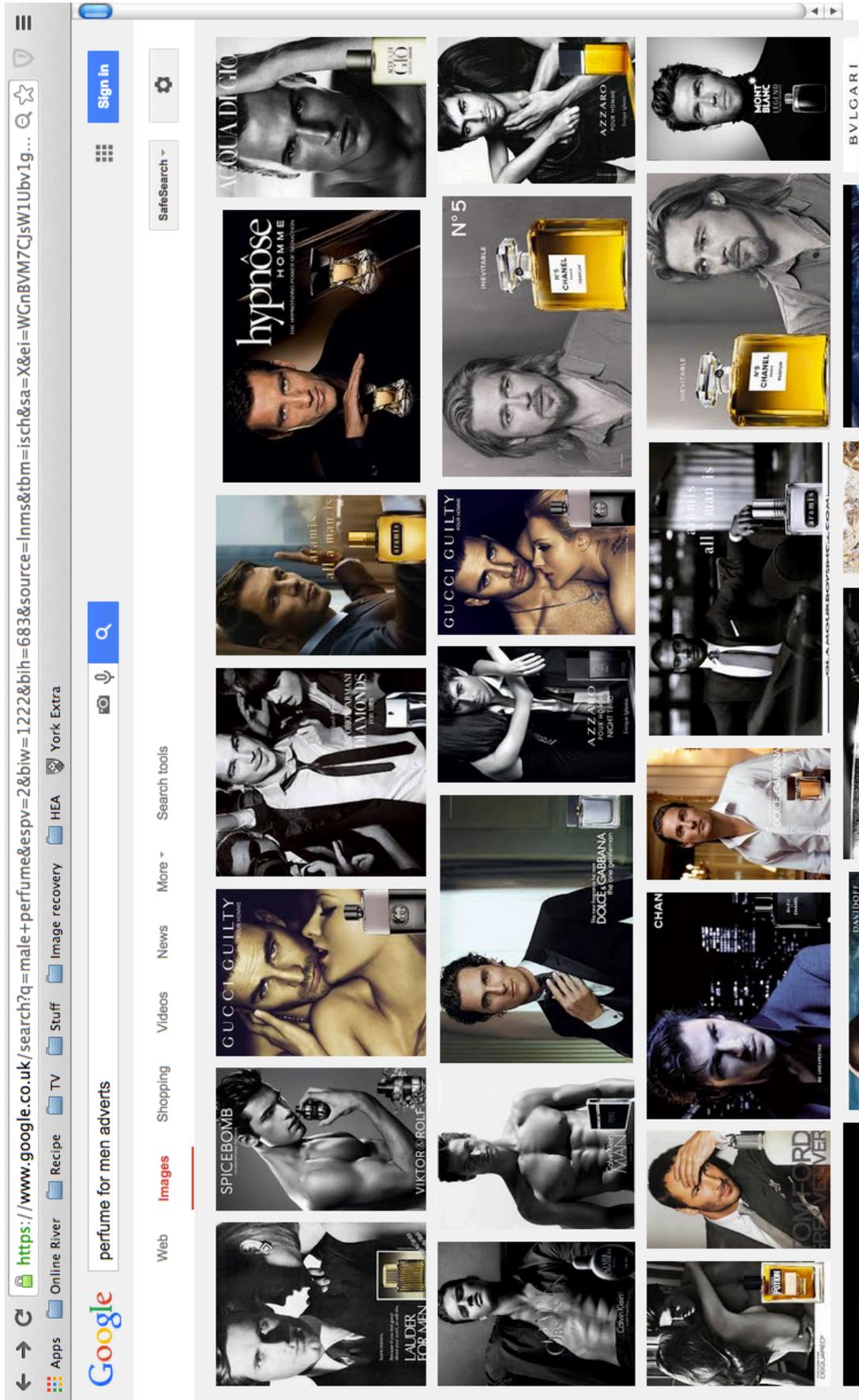


Figure 6.25 A screenshot of the first results of 'perfume for men adverts' on Google Search Engine (Accessed: 18 Jan 2015)

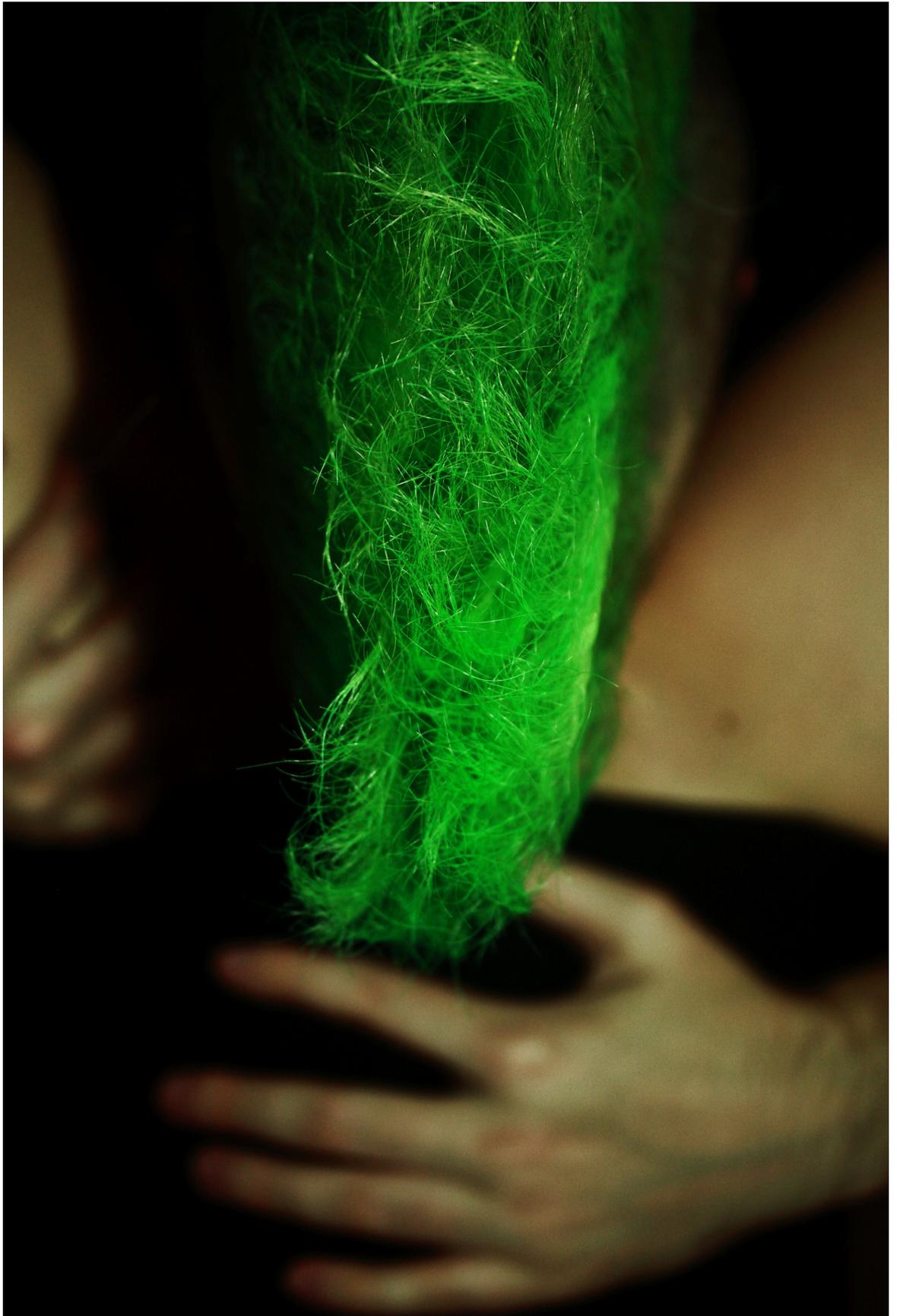


Figure 6.26 *Hands and Green* (Rachael)

participants, but also the one occupying the subjective position of viewing. Hence, when she revisits this image later, it can function to recreate the event – that is, the photo can offer visual pleasure for the auto-photographer. Furthermore, this close-up shot locates the viewers in her position, rather than her sexual partner's, to intimately identify with her desire. As the background is mostly dark, and the auto-photographer's body is covered by a black fabric in the lower half of the image, the viewing attention is drawn to the action instead of the physicality of either of the participants. Finally, the shape of the green hair indicates the mohawk style – a head shaved except for a stripe in the middle leading from the forehead to the back, and the hair stripe is usually erect and stiffened. Thus, the mohawk hairstyle is a symbol for male erection. As the auto-photographer humorously wrote in her journal, 'I'm quite pleased about [the photo] as it remains quite true to my experience – my partner really was all mohawk!'

Another auto-photographer adopted a different approach to 'demonstrate' her subjective desire. In Figure 6.27, the mirror frames divide the woman's upper body into halves and demonstrates her two simultaneous actions: at the top, one sees her holding the camera with her right hand, taking a picture of her reflection; and in the centre of the picture where the main focus is, she is pinching her nipple with her fingers. The background suggests that the woman is in a bathroom, and she invites the viewer into this closed space to look at her body from her perspective. The image here is partly what she would see when she looks into the mirror, except that her eyes have been replaced by the camera lens. The medium shot draws viewers to observe her breasts and her action of 'pleasuring' herself. However, the presence of the camera in the frame distances this viewing. The image suggests that the auto-photographer is only pinching her nipple as a *demonstration* for the spectator. The eye of the camera – the lens – seems to be looking back at the spectator, making me aware of my own gaze, and turning my gaze back at me.

Even though Figure 6.27 displays a woman's naked breasts, which are highly sexualised in modern Western culture, it does not look particularly 'sexual'. As I mentioned earlier, this photograph is a demonstration, telling its viewers 'let me show you how I like it'; hence, it illustrates the photographer's subjective desire. Her gesture of pinching her nipple indicates that she enjoys pain in sexual settings. Nipples are sensitive as they are sites of nerve endings, and the sensations they receive can be sexually arousing. As her left hand

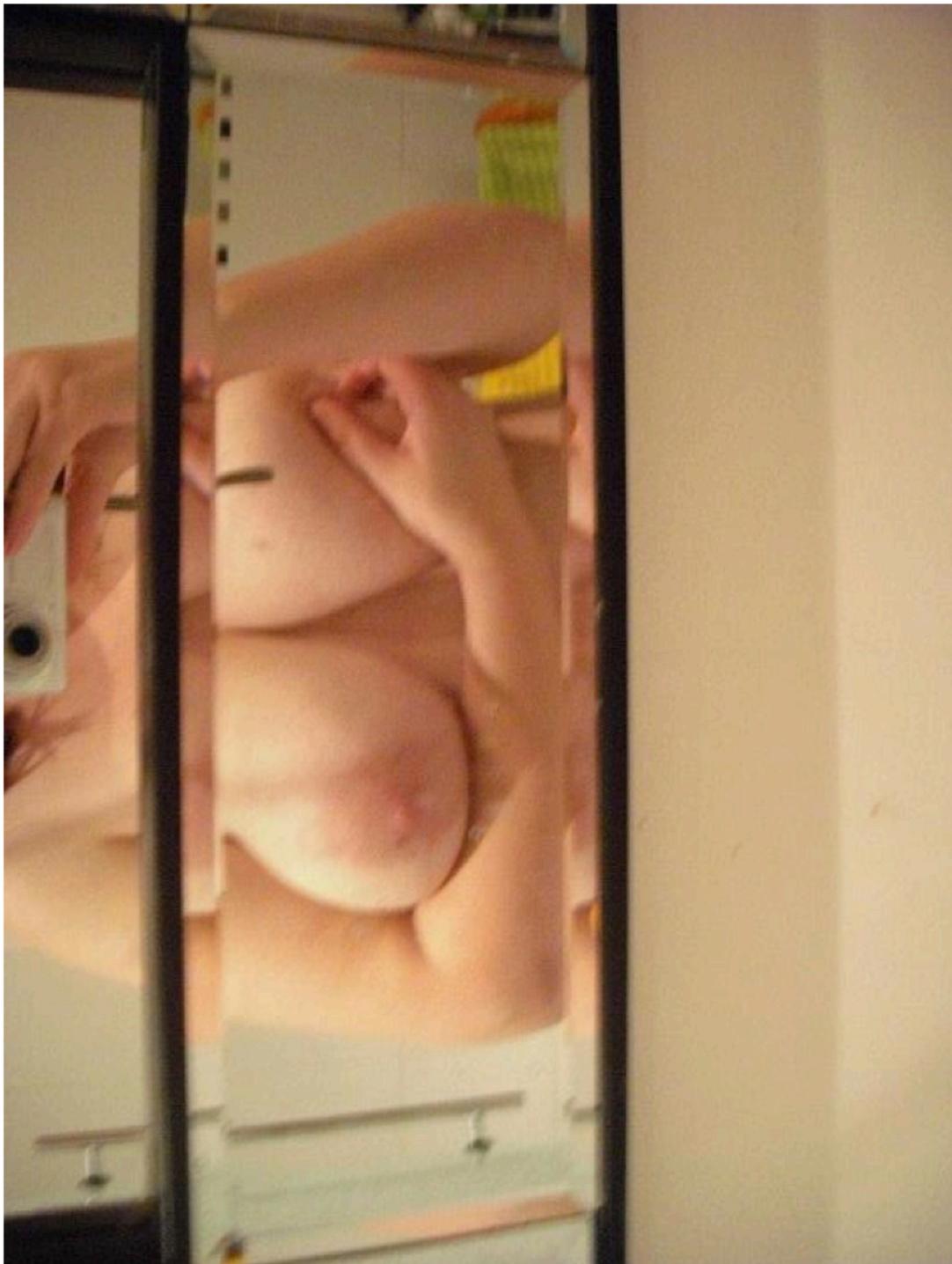


Figure 6.27 *Untitled* (Brigitte)

reaches to her right nipple, her arm supports her bare left breast, and hence emphasises its fullness. This pose is both confident and relaxed. The colours are bright in this image, so the body is not hidden. The photo gives a very different impression from Rae's and Rachael's (Figure 6.15) pictures of them grasping their bellies. The auto-photographer might not consider all kinds of pain equally desirable, but she certainly desires the pain she initiates for her sexual pleasure.

Last but not least, Pumpkin's photo-narrative of food (Figure 6.28) establishes a link between eating and desire. This auto-photographer sent through four pictures<sup>146</sup> of food: two scoops of ice-cream in a cone (Figure 6.28, left), a scone and a jar of preserves (Figure 6.28, right), three pieces of cake and a macaroon on a plate, and four pieces of fried fish with tartar sauce in a paper food container. These four types of food embody very different flavours and temperatures, which provide a range of sensual pleasures when eating. They have all been processed – rather than being raw ingredients – and can be eaten at once. The food was presented as nibbles rather than formal dishes and, particularly with the 'street-food' type of shots of the ice-cream and the fried fish, these photographs indicate spontaneity and immediacy – just as the experience of desire is sometimes sudden and impulsive.

Probyn (2000) suggests that the process of making and eating food is sensual and sometimes sexual. The procedures involve all sorts of senses; the smells, textures, tastes and the looks of food evolve during the preparation, and they continue to develop and stimulate once I bite, suck, chew and swallow the food down my throat. The embodied experience of eating, according to Probyn, shares the same 'opening up of the body to reveal a multitude of surfaces that seek out contact with other surfaces near or far' (p.61) as sex. Additionally, the pleasure of eating is multilayered. Even the visual pleasure of eating is not restricted to how the food is presented, but extends to the ways in which people enjoy it. The licking and tasting of ice-cream in a cone, for instance, is an image that can be highly sexualised. A person can act in a sexually provocative way by playfully moving the tongue and lips over the ice-cream to imply oral sex. Tasting delicious food is also a pleasure; it can be satisfying physically and emotionally; however, it can also lead one to

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<sup>146</sup> Two of these photos were not taken by Pumpkin herself – although she participated in the events in which they were taken – so she thought it was inappropriate for them to be published in this project.



Figure 6.28 A collage of Pumpkinkin's two photos of 'food'. Left to right: *Untitled*, *Untitled* (Pumpkin)

crave more of this sensuous gratification. In this sense, food is not just a fitting metaphor for sensual pleasure; it can also initiate desire in a person<sup>147</sup>.

There is another cultural link between food and desire. In 'East-Asian' countries, specifically in my knowledge of China and Taiwan, food is usually *shared*. Traditionally, each person at the table holds a bowl of rice, and people can take food from every dish on the table as they work their way through the rice. Food is not distributed onto each person's plate in advance. As a result, people who eat together not only share food, but also potentially contact each others' saliva. However, dining in this manner involves politics. When a new dish is served, the most respected people (usually the elders in the family and any guests) get to dig in their chopsticks first. In this context, offering food to each other or sharing food equally signifies an intimate relationship between two people<sup>148</sup>. The act of sharing demonstrates selflessness and experiencing something together. Furthermore, sharing good food is sharing pleasure; cooking, then, symbolises the effort to create pleasure for other people. Here, it is the intimate relationship signified by the act of sharing which links food to desire.

A close reading of participants' photo-narratives has led me to explore their subjective desires, which are relatively unseen in popular representations. In the process of investigating these ideas, other issues have also been highlighted, such as the particular desire for intelligence and freedom, and the cultural conventions embodied in participants' ideas of sexuality. My reading of these photographs suggests that these comparatively subdued personal desires are culturally shaped. Meanwhile, I observed participants taking control of the camera and turning the gaze away from their body image in their attempts to capture their active desire.

## **Conclusion**

By adopting a mixed method to read participants' photographs, I uncovered multiple meanings embedded in them. Firstly, these images demonstrate the various approaches taken by auto-photographers to negotiate their representations of desire by using cultural

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<sup>147</sup> See also Brigitte's use of food as a metaphor of desire in Chapter 1, page 15.

<sup>148</sup> This mirrors the 'mutual feelings' that participants emphasised in their intimate relationships. It particularly responds to Pumpkin's dislike of patronising men (page 182, Chapter 5).

materials. Even when participants' photographs resemble the popular cultural portrayal of a 'sexy' femininity, they embed individual choices about composition, hence suggesting different webs of sexual meanings. The powerful visual discourses encourage auto-photographers to closely scrutinise their bodies in parts, demanding them to constantly discipline and modify their bodies. Some participants adopted popular visual cues of 'sexiness' to create their distinct embodied *desirability* – quite often they were adorned with consumer products such as lipstick, lingerie and jewellery, displaying colours which signify different types of 'sexiness' – in their photographs. This *desirability* became part of participants' sexual subjectivities and allowed them to communicate their *desire* to the social world. When auto-photographers could not reproduce the 'ideal' image with their bodies, they turned to visual metaphors or created a 'contrasting' photo in order to represent the desirable femininity they had learnt from popular culture.

The other category of photographs, which I identified as lying 'outside' of popular cultural representations, tells fascinating stories of participants' subjective desire. These images indicate that some women actively demanded pleasure for themselves: Beth asked her friend to strip off his top so she could take a photo of his muscular back; and the result represents her, a heterosexual woman's, viewing pleasure. Brigitte demonstrated to the spectator that pain was part of her desired pleasure through a photographed mirror image, which cleverly turned the gaze back onto the spectator with her camera lens. More importantly, many of these pictures implicate the auto-photographers' desire to reject cultural conventions, a desire to move away from social norms which impose 'acceptable' sexualities. These photographs embody a sense of freedom, a disregard for other people's judgements, and participants' experimentation with various sexual acts. Brigitte's photographs of open air venues in nature led viewers away from social constraints and brought the anticipation of alfresco sex. Steel Vagina photographed an almost-naked runner to represent her visual pleasure as well as the sense of empowerment he embodied. Furthermore, both Brigitte and Cherry invited viewers to inspect their BDSM desires from an intimate viewpoint.

Interestingly, many images in the latter category capture items and spaces in the centre of the frame, a simple and straightforward composition which brings the focus onto a picture's main subject. This leads me to think about the more arranged, manipulated

images that include women's *embodied* desire. It seems that these auto-photographers are accustomed to using their bodies in their gender performances; hence, they were able to apply visual cues such as colours and poses with their bodies to communicate complex meanings of femininity *and* desire, even though they might not always be conscious of the details of their performances. Of course, the differences could also stem from each auto-photographer's distinctive approach to the representation of desire. For instance, Cherry focuses more on her embodied femininity, whereas Odinsleep and Alexia tend to photograph items which can symbolise their ideas.

Participants' photographs support the metaphor of the *web* of desire. On one hand, even though, in my interpretation, popular culture has a strong influence on participants' photographs, each participant made her own personal decisions about how she used these visual cues to compose. For instance, Cherry and Steel Vagina both took a close-up shot of their lips adorned with lipstick; however, the different colours and compositions communicate distinct meanings about their sexuality. On the other hand, some participants' visual narratives of seemingly 'personal' desire can be viewed together to identify particular cultural ideas, such as Odinsleep's and Alexia's focus on 'self-care' which is represented by various items. Participants' photographs and their rich meanings suggest that their webs of desire were interwoven by diverse sexual scripts as well as their personal decisions.

## Chapter 7

### Weaving the Web of Women's Desire

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The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful. – Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

This quote has been my favourite since I learnt about Wilde and his work during my undergraduate studies. In fact, I liked it so much that when I first registered on the social networking website Facebook, I cited it on my profile. This act, in retrospect, suggests more than my profound interest in sexuality: I thought this quote represented me, or an attitude towards desire ('temptation') which I wished to adopt. As a young woman, then in my early twenties, the idea that I could pursue and freely communicate my desire – supported by a well-known and much-loved (Western) writer – was extremely appealing.

At that time, however, I did not read deeper into Wilde's words. It was only recently, after a few years of researching 'women's desire', that I thought again about his famous writing and reviewed it. This extract suggests that desire is part of the human nature over which people try to take control; and this seems to remain so even a hundred years later<sup>149</sup>. As Wilde puts it, however, this temptation is only 'monstrous' because it is *defined* as such, suggesting an understanding that a person's feelings and interpretation of desire are both shaped by culture. Furthermore, Wilde's encouragement for one to give in to temptation, particularly for one man to desire another, challenges the cultural norms of the Victorian era. More interestingly, Wilde indicates that desire is located in the mind rather than the 'body', as the quote above is followed by:

It has been said that the great events of the world take place in the brain. It is in the brain, and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place also. You, Mr. Gray, you yourself, with your rose-red youth and your rose-white boyhood, you have had passions that have made you afraid, thoughts that have filled you with terror, day-dreams and sleeping dreams whose mere memory might stain your cheek with shame. – Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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<sup>149</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was first published in 1890.

These overt, seductive lines emphasise to me how desire is experienced through *embodiment* – the mind and emotion as part of the body rather than separated from it. The temptation is associated with ‘thoughts’ and ‘passion’ that can elicit other complicated feelings; and the construction of sexual fantasies can also evoke sentiments that surface through physical changes. Furthermore, these lines are ‘spoken’ by Lord Henry to provoke Dorian Gray, meaning that the speaker is knowledgeable about the effect of temptation, and is capable of using this understanding to anticipate certain responses from the listener in a social scenario – an example of a person facilitating scripts to gain pleasure for themselves. Additionally, Wilde uses colour symbols in this representation of desire: Lord Henry’s description of ‘rose-red youth’ and ‘rose-white boyhood’ signifies a young man’s simultaneous rapture and innocence. These symbolic colours, ‘red’ and ‘white’, are commonly used in English literature, and can bring out multiple meanings of desire – such as the fact that red is also associated with love, and in modern times linked to a certain type of femininity.

Wilde’s ideas about ‘temptation’, although embedded in a fictional scenario of a male character teasing another man in the Victorian era, significantly mirror my analysis of women’s desire in the 2010s in many ways: the lines quoted above suggest that a person’s sexuality is constructed by dominant discourses, and that desire is experienced through embodiment. In addition, Wilde’s literal representation is composed of symbols and associations which indicate the rich meanings of desire, while at the same time it confronts cultural mores. It is from these three aspects that I discuss the important findings, challenges and potential future development in my research: women’s negotiation of desire within cultural *scripts*, particularly with an extensive emphasis on popular culture; the importance of *embodiment* in shaping women’s personal sexuality, including a strong sense of subjectivity and control, and the difficulty of theorising ‘embodiment’; finally, women’s auto-photographic *representations* – although Wilde used only words – which reveal the heterogeneity of desire, and the ways in which this practice might be empowering in different contexts. Rather than summarising each chapter in order, in this concluding chapter I pull together the important and recurring ideas in this thesis to demonstrate the development of my thinking.

## Weaving in the Sexual Scripts

My project recruited women to explore sexual desire. While I am aware that *women* are not a homogeneous group, I am concerned with women's lived sexuality that is embedded in patriarchal societies. As a result, with participants from diverse backgrounds, I generated wide-ranging materials which indicate both the varying ideas associated with desire, and the difficulty of pinning down its meaning. Queer theorists such as Judith Butler (2004) argue that both identity and desire are multiple and fluid<sup>150</sup>; however, the demographic information provided by participants demonstrates that, although they seemed more flexible in locating their *sexuality*, their gender identification appeared to be stable. Even though this 'stability' amongst participants could be a result of my call for 'self-identified women', the different attitudes towards their gender and sexual identifications mirror Vance's (1984) narrative, which suggests that the category of *women* is often taken for granted while she argues that sexuality is ever-changing<sup>151</sup>.

The identity of 'women' plays a crucial part in shaping participants' sexuality. Adapting Gagnon and Simon's (1973) scripting theory<sup>152</sup>, I argue that a woman's desire is a web woven by her negotiations within cultural and interpersonal scripts, threads that comprise varying and conflicting ideas, which are also gendered. This 'weaving' is an ongoing process in which the existing threads can be cut loose while new ones are brought in to her lived sexuality. Composing this web requires *embodiment*<sup>153</sup> – the interwoven relationship between the body, emotions, mind and self-reflexivity – to experience desire as well as interacting with sexual scripts in cultural and interpersonal scenarios. The effectiveness of scripts is thus dependent on the sites in which they are embedded, the extent to which women are exposed to them, and the ways in which women judge their personal sexual feelings and the dominant discourses.

In Chapter 4, I discussed the sites that provided participants with scripts to weave their webs of desire, both in terms of their feelings and their understanding. These sites include religion, ethnicity, popular culture and feminist ideas, which are delivered through different

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<sup>150</sup> See 'Queer Theory' in Chapter 2.

<sup>151</sup> In 'Sexuality – at the heart of Feminist Debates' in Chapter 2.

<sup>152</sup> See 'Symbolic Interactionism and Sexual Scripts', Chapter 2.

<sup>153</sup> I discuss ideas of embodiment in Chapter 2, page 40–42; and in Chapter 5.

languages<sup>154</sup>. Languages embed meanings, local knowledge and power<sup>155</sup>; thus, they have an impact on how one makes sense of desire and the ways in which one ‘deals with’ it, particularly within gendered culture. In Mandarin Chinese, for instance, there are a few terms that are compatible with the English word ‘desire’; however, the term which connotes emotional attachment is more often used by women and understood to be ‘feminine’. Yet, the language for desire has its limits. For one, dominant discourses of ‘sexual orientation’ are based on gender dichotomy; thus rendering sexual attraction beyond the two genders incomprehensible. In addition, desire appears to be a concept that is too fluid to be defined; hence, participants had to talk *around* it by using metaphors. My discussions about languages with a few friends and participants suggest that *in general* sexual desire is exploratory and connotes a strong passion for other people.

Despite its limitations, language is the predominant method for human communication; hence, it is one of the ways in which sexual scripts are effective in shaping sexuality. The two self-identified Christian participants referred to the scriptures in the Bible to elaborate upon the ways in which they negotiated desire; whereas participants who considered ethnicity influential explained how people around them communicated sexuality. The perceived Christian scripts and ethnic norms were effective because they were part of participants’ upbringing, and these discourses were reproduced in participants’ social relationships, centred around their families and friends. Nevertheless, participants’ reflexive accounts demonstrate that they did not just weave in the scripts presented to them; rather, they engaged in a complex process of evaluation, adaptation, rejection or struggle with the ideas.

In contrast to participants’ awareness of the sexual scripts from their religious beliefs and ethnic backgrounds, they were less critical of the ideas they already personified from feminist theories and popular culture. Participants in this project were gender-aware and familiar with some forms of feminism. They mobilised their ‘feminist understanding’ to criticise patriarchal norms and the double standard which regulate women’s communication of desire. However, some participants’ criticism was also directed at what they perceived as ‘radical feminism’ and the anti-pornography movement, suggesting that

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<sup>154</sup> See Chapter 1 for my examination of what desire means in different languages and participants’ use of metaphors.

<sup>155</sup> I discuss Lacan’s use of ‘language’ and Foucault’s discursive power in Chapter 2.

they prioritised their subjective sexual feelings over discourses which denounce their heterosexual desire.

While I appreciate that participants' personal histories and choices led them to reject certain feminist theories, in retrospect, I also wonder if their outlook on feminism was also shaped by *popular culture* (see Hollows and Moseley 2006). Participants' materials indicate that popular culture provides them with extensive and messy sexual scripts to work with. In fact, although I had no intention of particularly focusing on the effect of this site on women's sexuality, popular culture became one of the overarching themes throughout this thesis because of participants' overwhelming references to it. For instance, women's magazines and popular health journals widely distribute psychoanalytical notions of desire, which led participants to characterise it as an intrinsic, uncontrollable drive. Participants' use of adornments to constitute their sexual subjectivity indicates the advertisers' success in attaching sexual meanings to their commercial products. Pornography, particularly video, continues to portray sexual pleasure from the male viewpoint, leading participants to seek their indulgence in 'erotica', a genre deemed to be 'for women'<sup>156</sup>. Nevertheless, it seems that the most influential scripts come from popular representations of women's bodies that reinforce a type of femininity built on slenderness (Wykes and Gunter 2005), modification, and adornments<sup>157</sup>. Given that *popular culture* is essentially related to 'modern' thinking and associated with consumerism, it is not surprising that popular media portrays certain notions of feminist values (McRobbie 2004) and female *empowerment* which appeal to viewers as well as shaping their understanding of feminism.

Women's responses to popular culture, just like the scripts it provides, are ambivalent. The theorisation of women's relationship with popular culture is complicated by each participant's unique interaction with the available scripts, and by the mixed messages and broad media landscape embedded in this site. While some participants accepted certain dominant discourses of 'women's desire' and femininity, others expressed their struggle and resistance: it was not uncommon for participants to identify the unwelcome patriarchal control over their sexuality while they painstakingly pointed out that this desire, even

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<sup>156</sup> I discuss these topics in detail in 'Gendered Sexual Representations' in Chapter 4.

<sup>157</sup> Refer to 'Perception of Body Image' in Chapter 5, and 'Embodying Femininity: The Effect of Popular Culture' in Chapter 6.

though shaped by the unwanted cultural norms, ‘felt true’. Nevertheless, as my analysis has demonstrated throughout this thesis, there is no doubt that popular culture plays a crucial part in women’s negotiation of their sexuality, particularly the ways in which participants appropriated conventional femininity to weave their webs of desire.

As early as the 1960s, feminists had already identified media representations of women as unrealistic and misleading (Waters 2011); however, the postfeminism perpetuated in popular culture leads many women to accept or even embrace femininity as a form of empowerment. In popular cultural portrayals, women’s desirability is the key to social success and sexual power; and one way to achieve this femininity is through purchasing clothes and cosmetic products, or through surgery (Genz 2011). The pursuit of female attractiveness is often constructed as a choice, freedom or agency (McRobbie 2004), while clothing and femininity are framed as part of individuality (Gilligan 2011). Moreover, as Genz (2011) argues, TV programmes such as make-over shows reshape femininity as a woman’s ‘authentic’ self, thus proposing that any ‘falseness’ in her appearance should be fixed in alignment with her ‘feminine beauty’. The postfeminist association between attractiveness, sexual subjectivity and identity can lead women to equate the repackaged patriarchal norms of femininity with empowerment (Gilligan 2011; Smith 2011). This might explain why participants placed so much emphasis on body image in their narratives of desire, both as a precondition<sup>158</sup> and in their visual representations<sup>159</sup>. However, despite participants’ adaptation of conventional femininity, many of them recognised the contradiction between their composed desirability and feminist ideas.

As I discussed earlier, each of the women’s attitudes towards popular cultural scripts is ambivalent; meanwhile, each woman has her own unique judgement of the same scripts. In my project, although most participants ‘gave in’ to conventional femininity as it is manifested in body image, they used their feminist ideas to criticise pornographic representations. As this research coincided with the publication of the book *Fifty Shades of Grey* in 2012, five participants (and many others of my friends) and I discussed this book in our conversations. Despite its accepted popularity with women in mass media, all five participants said the book did not arouse their desire. This book represents its female

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<sup>158</sup> See Chapter 5.

<sup>159</sup> Refer to Chapter 6.

protagonist as unknowing and obedient, contrasting with images of ‘empowered women’ in (other) films<sup>160</sup>, commercials and women’s magazines. Furthermore, the portrayal of a young, naive woman’s submission to an older, powerful man was rejected by my participants, but it seems to have been adopted by other female readers to weave their own desire.

The analysis of sexual scripts presented both challenges and possibilities for me. On one hand, the ideas of desire embedded in languages and cultural sites are very diverse, as participants’ narratives suggest; and many of them I am unfamiliar with. For instance, as I am not fully acquainted with Christian dogma or the Bible, I relied on my conversations with Christian friends and my supervisor to learn about different interpretations of the scripture. The messy sexual scripts embedded in popular culture readily elicited different interactions from participants; adding to this complexity is the changeability – what is currently trending – the local contexts and the wide media landscape of popular culture, which made it difficult to follow the details. In order to understand popular materials – such as certain music, literature or pornographic videos – and their cultural meanings, I appealed to social media for comments and reviews. These challenges, on the other hand, demonstrate to me that, for a future project, I could consider focusing on a specific cultural site and its relationship with women’s sexuality by recruiting women from, for instance, a specific religious community or the same ethnic group. By doing so, I would be able to study their sexual scripts in more detail and provide my own interpretations alongside participants’.

### **Embodying the Web of Desire**

In the previous section, I argued that a woman’s weaving of desire is reliant on her *embodiment*. My thinking is opposed to body-mind dualism, a line of philosophy and popular discourse which suggests that the body and the mind are separable. Instead, I consider the concept of embodiment helpful for understanding women’s lived sexuality: one needs the physicality of the body in order to perceive the outer world, while the mind, located within the body, continues to interpret scenarios in order to appropriately engage in social interactions and understand sexual meanings. Furthermore, this process can be

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<sup>160</sup> *Fifty Shades of Grey* was adapted into a film, released in 2015.

fuelled by emotions – including desire as a sexual feeling – and self-reflexivity; thus, women are able to make sense of sexual scripts and evaluate which are pleasurable or arousing to them. It is through this complex *working* of embodiment that participants were able to question certain scripts, such as those stemming from their perceived Christian values or ‘radical feminism’, for contradicting their feelings. Additionally, participants were *capable* of identifying and adapting to the shift of scripts as they moved from one culture – and its embedded communities – to another<sup>161</sup>. Thus, conceptually, embodiment is not only a ‘noun’ referring to the interconnection between the body, mind, emotions and self-reflexivity; but also a *verb* which suggests the interactions within this relationship.

In Chapter 5, I discussed four important preconditions for women’s experience of desire – perception of body image, sensations, fantasy, intimate relationships – and their various interactions with embodiment. Perception of body image is concerned with participants’ understanding of conventional female desirability and how they felt about their bodily appearance. When participants were satisfied with their appropriation of femininity on their physicality, they gained confidence, which encouraged them to become desiring subjects. As another precondition, sensations are mainly about the body perceiving stimulation from the broader environment, thus generating sexual feelings or ‘positive’ emotions that can lead to desire. Participants’ narratives further suggest that they were equipped with knowledge of how sensations work; hence, they actively mobilised sensory cues to elicit desire. The third precondition, fantasy, provided an imaginary space for participants to develop desire and enhance pleasure; therefore, it is predominantly the mind that initiates sexual emotions, which can be further enhanced with physical acts. Contrary to the common conception that women ‘need’ emotional attachment to experience desire, within an ‘intimate relationship’, participants *invested* in interpersonal sexual scripts for their own pleasure. This last precondition involves a complicated working of embodiment: based on trust and a feeling of intimacy, participants communicated physically and emotionally with their partners to evoke mutual arousal, which can further intensify their own desire.

My theorisation of embodiment, however, has its limits. I use embodiment to emphasise that the web of desire is not just located in the *physicality* of the body, but is also entangled

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<sup>161</sup> See ‘Ethnicity’ in Chapter 4. Also refer to page 47, Chapter 2 for case studies.

with one's feelings, thoughts and reflections, as one experiences the world as a subjective being. In order to provide a coherent analysis of the preconditions, I discussed these elements as if they were separate entities; however, their relationship within embodiment is closely interwoven. For instance, in participants' narratives, sensations usually start with the body perceiving stimulation; however, this perception may simultaneously depend on the mind to make sense. When I discussed 'pain' with Rachael in our interview, she told me that experiencing pain in a sexual interaction can be very arousing for her; however, she considered period pain extremely undesirable. In this scenario, one relies on the body *and* the mind to interpret whether a perception can be sexually arousing, or even wanted. Another example is the 'trust' established in participants' intimate relationships. Trust can comprise a sense of reassurance, which is an emotion, and participants' judgement of their partners, a thought located in the mind. Thus, participants' embodied desire should be reconsidered as a more *incorporative* result.

My thinking was inspired by Jackson and Scott's (2007) concept of the three levels of embodiment: the objectified, the sensory and the sensate<sup>162</sup>. While my ideas were largely drawn from how I experience events with my body as a sexual being, Jackson and Scott's theory signifies the ways in which embodiment engages in personal processes and social relations. Objective embodiment refers to a more passive physicality which is perceived and acted upon in social space, whereas the sensory involves a more active experiencing of the outer world, including the perception of another embodiment as sexual. While these two embodiments partake in social interaction, the sensate undertakes more personal feeling and interpretation, such as making sense of certain bodily experiences as sexual. When applied to examine the preconditions, this concept draws particular attention to how women's desire is evoked within a matrix of the personal and the cultural. For instance, fantasy is predominantly – yet not exclusively – private and located in the sensate, while intimate relationships are involved with all three levels of embodiment, suggesting that desire needs to be negotiated within interpersonal scenarios as well as within oneself.

Jackson and Scott's (2007) concept of embodiment indicates a learning process which hints at the 'non-conscious', and this is one issue I want to address. Although participants provided stories of how their desire *came to be*, these stories are their construction of the

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<sup>162</sup> See page 41, Chapter 2.

past, and they suggest that participants were not always aware of the process in which their webs of desire were woven – this is what I mean by the ‘non-conscious’<sup>163</sup>. To explore how embodiment, as a process, might engage in non-conscious cultural practices<sup>164</sup>, I briefly consider Bourdieu’s (1977) *habitus*. The theory of habitus is complicated, and here I only introduce the key ideas that inform my thinking. Bourdieu argues that habitus is *embodied*, and this embodiment refers to the body as a *being* in the social world. He proposes that habitus is acquired by a social agent through the recurring and persistent instillation of the objective structure (Green 2008); that is, one internalises the social order as one’s disposition. Habitus is both the effect of social practice and a generative principle which reproduces the social orders that regulate the said practice (Bourdieu 1990). Furthermore, in Bourdieu’s theory, social agents do not have the ‘conscious mastery’ of their intentions (Bourdieu 1977, p.79), thus their actions are beyond their will-power (Skeggs 2004). This limited ‘social agency’ mirrors Butler’s (2004) idea of the performativity of gender<sup>165</sup> which indicates that one’s subjectivity is readily normalised; thus, one’s gender practice always occurs within social constraints.

Applying *habitus*, I contemplate how women’s negotiation of desire can be a result of the inculcation of the social order. Indeed, being a woman within existing social norms means that each participant is exposed to sexual scripts that are gendered as *female*; thus, there is the possibility that women non-consciously weave in the normative ‘female desire’ as their own. However, as my analysis demonstrated, my participants were much more ‘conscious’ and critical of social conventions than Bourdieu suggests. Although one may argue that their critiques originated from existing discourses, this does not deny the fact that participants actively explored and developed their own ideas of desire: some challenged dominant discourses of female desirability, and many of their photographs embed sexual meanings that are cultural, but not specifically deemed ‘female’<sup>166</sup>. One way to appropriate habitus without rendering desire as ‘dictated’ by the social structure is, perhaps, to consider the agent’s ‘subjective sense of location within the social order’ (Green 2008, p.614).

Drawing ideas from Bourdieu’s habitus and scripting theory, Green (2008) uses ‘erotic

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<sup>163</sup> I briefly discuss my thoughts on the relationship between embodiment and the non-conscious in Chapter 5, page 188.

<sup>164</sup> See, also, my discussion on page 151.

<sup>165</sup> See ‘Queer Theory’, Chapter 2.

<sup>166</sup> Refer to ‘The Underrepresented Desire – “Other” Cultural Scripts’ in Chapter 6.

habitus' to establish a connection between social ideation and intrapsychic desire. By recognising that individuals' distinct locations in the social world give them different experiences, Green argues that erotic habitus provides a way to theorise desire as both subjective – yet not unique – and embedded in – instead of determined by – the social order.

Although Green intends for *erotic habitus* to incorporate the micro-level of personal sexuality and the macro-level of social structure, his theory focuses on how the latter is internalised as psychic structure – the unconscious source which is understood as subjective choice (2008, p.621). Thus, Green's theory regards any personal resistance or struggle to be a result of the introjected social order. In light of the feminist idea that the personal is political<sup>167</sup>, I suggest that Green's erotic habitus renders social change impossible, as any personal politics, within this theorisation, is merely a reflection of the established inequalities. Green's theory, despite its focus on sexual desire, does not fit in with my research, which engages women's subjective analysis in co-creating knowledge<sup>168</sup>.

Participants' strong sense of subjectivity is suggested in their narratives of 'control'. Despite my discussion of the non-conscious or participants' perceived psychoanalytical definition of an 'uncontrollable drive'<sup>169</sup>, the sense of control is prevalent in their representations of desire. This controllability is different from the disciplining of sexual feelings found in some interpretations of Christian dogma<sup>170</sup> or in Wilde's literature; rather, participants focused on their capacity for self-fashioning and their active involvement in sexual scenarios, both of which emphasise their subjective action to evoke desire for themselves. Participants' self-fashioning is concerned with the ways in which they appropriated femininity into their embodiment in order to become desiring, both through body modification and with adornments<sup>171</sup>. This practice should be read as participants'

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<sup>167</sup> See 'Sexuality – at the Heart of Feminist Debates', Chapter 2.

<sup>168</sup> Feminists have reappropriated Bourdieu's social theory to argue for a more complex subjectivity and reflexive awareness by recognising the instability of gender norms in contemporary society and through the analysis of field crossing (see, for instance, McNay 1999; McLeod 2005; Thorpe 2009).

<sup>169</sup> See the section 'Popularising the Sexual Drive', Chapter 4.

<sup>170</sup> Refer to 'Christianity' in Chapter 4.

<sup>171</sup> In 'Perception of Body Image' as a precondition for desire, Chapter 5; and 'Embodying Femininity: The Effect of Popular Culture', Chapter 6.

negotiation of desire within patriarchal norms rather than their conformity, as their narratives suggest that they evaluated their sexual feelings alongside the scripts. Participants also enjoyed playing an active role in their sexual scenarios; thus, they took pleasure in directing their own fantasy, initiating their partners' sexual desire<sup>172</sup>, and even in reaffirming their sexual subjectivity through their photographs<sup>173</sup>. This *control* corresponds to participants' critique of patriarchal 'control'<sup>174</sup> and pornography<sup>175</sup>, in which women are acted upon instead of being subjects of desire.

Why does a sense of control prevail in this project? One reason might be found in the ways in which participants talked about desire. Some participants frankly told me that they would distance themselves from disclosing intimate details of their sexual lives to a researcher; therefore, they might be reluctant to talk about their 'private' sexual stories – which potentially involve submission or random sexual encounters – that occurred either in their heads or in social interactions. For instance, when participants and I discussed fantasy as a precondition, they focused on the circumstances in which they used it and how this imaginary scenario worked instead of what they fantasised about; as a result, participants emphasised the importance for them to *lead* their own fantasy.

A more probable explanation is that my methodology encouraged women to take control, and this controllability is manifested in participants' materials. By inviting participants to take their cameras and make their own images of desire – as opposed to taking snapshots – I was also asking them to capture the ideas they were aware of, not only because the images need to 'make sense', but also because they had to elaborate on their thinking in journals and interviews. This method also invited participants to select and construct images of *their* sexuality, suggesting that they are in charge of the means of communication as well as the representation of their sexual selves. Thus, participants derived an embodied controllability from the auto-photographic method, a practice that required them to develop an acute awareness in order to develop ideas of their lived sexuality and initiated active communication of desire through self-representation. More

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<sup>172</sup> See Chapter 5.

<sup>173</sup> See my analysis of participants' visual representations in Chapter 6.

<sup>174</sup> See 'Feminist Ideas' in Chapter 4. Also refer to participants' struggle between their feminist ideas and patriarchal control in the section 'Perception of Body Image' in Chapter 5.

<sup>175</sup> In 'Gendered Sexual Representation', Chapter 4.

importantly, this controllability signifies a sense of empowerment with which participants felt reassured about what they could do rather than being an object that was acted upon.

### **Auto-photography as a *Loom***

In this thesis, I have used auto-photography as a *loom* to weave women's desire in several ways. Primarily, I adopted auto-photography to appeal to women and invite them to co-weave knowledge of desire. As a method, the self-imaging and self-analysis generated rich research materials which suggest that the sexual scripts and embodied experiences that were negotiated are the threads for participants' lived sexuality. Furthermore, this practice raised the consciousness of the auto-photographers, thus demonstrating the potential to evoke activist work; that is, this process can potentially *empower* women – although the idea of empowerment is complex. Last but not least, the productions – particularly the visual representations – embed the multiple sexual meanings that the women (and I) have woven into the webs, including those that are not specifically accounted for. As I have discussed sexual scripts and embodied desire in previous sections, here I provide some thoughts about 'empowerment', the heterogeneity of desire evoked by auto-photography, and the use of other innovative methods.

In Chapter 3, I explored the critical contexts of auto-photography and hinted at the potential for participants to be *empowered* through this practice<sup>176</sup>. The idea of empowerment is complicated and should be discussed within different contexts. To take my own experience as an example, when I was an undergraduate student, being able to tell my sexual stories made me feel liberated<sup>177</sup>. In retrospect, my sense of emancipation might have stemmed from the fact that I was doing something forbidden to a woman in Taiwanese patriarchal society, and that I felt as though I was being subversive and 'modern'. Over the years, however, my thinking has developed. I became aware that a personal feeling of empowerment does not equate to social change. Although a sense of empowerment can be important to individuals – and it is okay to feel good – it can lead one to overlook social inequalities. Thus, when discussing the potential of empowerment in different contexts, I particularly draw attention to how auto-photographic practices might bring changes to personal lives and social relations.

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<sup>176</sup> See Part One of Chapter 3.

<sup>177</sup> I discuss this part of my personal history in Chapter 1, page 10.

This project originated from my personal agenda. I wanted to learn more about ordinary women's desire; additionally, as I was convinced that my personal *feeling* of liberation was too insignificant in the social matrix of power, I wished to explore whether a 'collective' effort might make a difference, or at least draw the reader's attention as a start. In the process of doing this research, I encountered some books collecting *women's stories*, such as *What Can a Woman Do with a Camera?: Photography for Women* (Spence and Solomon 1995), *Jane Sexes it Up: True Confessions of Feminist Desire* (Johnson 2002) and *My Secret Garden: Women's Sexual Fantasies* (Friday 1973). These books gave me access to aspects of other women's lives of which I was previously unaware. Johnson's and Friday's collections revealed to me that there are diverse types of desire; more importantly, they suggest that these desires are 'normal', and that it is okay for women to communicate their sexual feelings and imaginations<sup>178</sup>. The auto-photographic projects in Spence and Solomon's volume<sup>179</sup> allowed me to read women producers' own interpretations of their lived experiences, and they further enlightened me about the different ways in which photography can be mobilised to generate self-analysis.

For me, women's collective narratives, in their published form, can be empowering. Once published, like the books I mentioned above, these stories can reach out to a wider audience and raise the consciousness of readers. Then, perhaps in a gradual, subtle way, they can reshape the social climate. Hence, I consider my participants' narratives of desire to be an asset which demonstrates the diverse, underrepresented meanings of women's sexuality. Their photographs, in particular, can counter the ubiquitous popular portrayal of 'female desirability' at a time when visuality is prevalent<sup>180</sup>, and can personify ordinary women's subjective desire – as opposed to that of celebrities – which is usually unseen in mass media. I also hope that this auto-photographic project can reach out to encourage more women, and people from marginalised groups, to carry out their own practices. Through self-imaging and self-analysis, one can become more aware of one's living

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<sup>178</sup> Friday's book of women's fantasies was first published in 1973; however, more than three decades later, Johnson (2008) still addressed the risks women face when they are courageous enough to share their sexual stories (page 51).

<sup>179</sup> I discussed many of these projects in 'Raising Consciousness for Auto-photographers', Part One, Chapter 3.

<sup>180</sup> Also see my discussion of the 'selfie' – a recent phenomenon of popular self-photography – in Chapter 1, page 18–20.

conditions; and their production can be influential to others when published on different platforms such as social media websites or zines.

Although this project can be seen as part of a movement to change cultural conventions, and thus reshape the lives of social agents, I am not sure whether auto-photography empowered my participants – that is, I am uncertain whether the practice brought any obvious changes to their daily sexuality. I understand that my account is ambivalent: I suggest that this project is potentially liberating, yet I cannot provide any proof. In the interviews, most participants told me that the practice led them to rethink their lived sexuality, especially how they could represent it; that is, auto-photography did generate a profound self-analysis. However, participants joined this research with their own agenda: most of them did not take part *in order to* undermine social conventions, and some participants simply did not regard communicating desire a means to liberation<sup>181</sup>. In fact, only Rachael overtly pointed out that she intended for her photographs to challenge normative femininity. Moreover, with my current research design, it is difficult to evaluate how auto-photographic practices *affected* the participants. Thus, it would be arrogant of me to claim that my method empowers my participants in their everyday lives.

Having thought that my methodology might not have brought changes to participants' lives, I consider, from a theoretical aspect, how my project can still be an activist work. By using auto-photography as a research method, I am writing women's lived sexuality, as they – and I – depicted, into discourse. That is, my project, which considers the participants' self-representations as significant materials that form the knowledge of women's desire, can be powerful in shaping people's understanding and experience of sexual emotions<sup>182</sup>. Furthermore, auto-photography as a practice could have reshaped participants' sexuality as they were encouraged to explore it in-depth. As I argue in this thesis, both women's webs of desire and *embodiment* are constantly in process and engaged with reflexivity. Thus, the participants' self-analysis through imaging and words could have created some nuances to their embodied sexuality – although the effects might be too implicit for me to evaluate in this research.

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<sup>181</sup> I discuss participants' views on women communicating desire in the cultural site 'Ethnicity' in Chapter 4.

<sup>182</sup> This responds to Foucault's analysis of discursive power, as I discussed on page 30–31; and how language has an impact on our understanding of desire in Chapter 1.

I have encountered a few research projects which, by using participant-generated materials to raise the consciousness of local communities and to propose policies, arguably brought positive changes to participants' lives, and thus *empowered* them (see Wang and Burris 1997; McIntyre 2003; Kolb 2008; Haaken and O'Neill 2014). To take Kolb's (2008) and McIntyre's (2003) studies as examples, both researchers used auto-photography to approach participants' needs with the aim of designing strategies to improve their living conditions. Kolb's (ibid.) research investigates local residents' perspectives on their community culture and their surrounding environment in projects set in China and in Mediterranean countries. She argues that the materials generated by her auto-photographic method can provide practical suggestions for local government to develop policies that benefit residents.

The other project, by McIntyre (2003), explores how a group of working-class women in Belfast experienced the place where they lived, particularly how their personal relations with the place are gendered, classed and mediated by religion (p.47). She initiated an auto-photographic project with local women and collaborated with them to curate a photo-text exhibition at the *West Belfast Festival*. McIntyre argues that auto-photographic methods not only enable participants to express themselves with a series of 'images, words and reflections' (p.48), they also enrich researchers' understanding of participants' perceptions of self. McIntyre's project united women participants as a group to share their perspectives with each other, to engage in a nuanced reading of their daily lives, and to be involved in a socially and emotionally supportive process. As both Kolb's and McIntyre's projects were designed to work with participants within specific local communities in order to set up strategies for them, it was possible for these researchers to evaluate the outcome and judge whether or not auto-photography is empowering.

In the context of the researcher-researched relationship, auto-photography allows participants to take a much more active role in shaping the project; thus, it can change the power dynamics and potentially *empowers* participants. Auto-photography encourages participants to create materials representing ideas that they deem significant; thus, the method helps the researcher to gain insights into participants' perceptions (McIntyre 2003; Clark-Ibáñez 2007; Croghan et al. 2008). In addition, this method engages participants in in-depth meaning-making (Samuels 2007), which is important for understanding their lived

culture<sup>183</sup>. Particularly in this project, women did not just tell me what they desired; rather, they disclosed the processes of negotiation and struggle which are meaningful for their lived sexuality. Furthermore, as my method encourages flexibility for the participants to contribute ideas and representations *as they developed*, they brought in meanings that were outside of my purview, thus reshaping my research agenda. In this sense, my project does not simply ‘study the research subjects’, but invites participants to co-create knowledge. In this context, I locate ‘empowerment’ in the renegotiation of power dynamics between my participants and me.

One thing I could have done to further *collaborate* with my participants was to engage them in my photo-reading. As I explained in Chapter 6, I experimented with reading participants’ photographs before bringing in their given contexts in order to explore the multiple meanings embedded in the images<sup>184</sup>. I was, in fact, curious about how participants might respond to my analysis – would they agree, disagree, or develop more ideas based on my reading? I had the opportunity to share my *exploration* with participants on two occasions. When I had to double-check with Brigitte for her consent to publish a photo<sup>185</sup> (Figure 6.27, on page 246), I enclosed my reading in the e-mail to explain the importance of this image in demonstrating women’s subjective desire. In an informal chat later, Brigitte very briefly mentioned that she agreed with my analysis. On the other occasion, I met Steel Vagina at a wedding, and she expressed her interest in a collaborative reading of her photos. However, I never heard back from her after sending her my analysis. Rather unfortunately, I could only get this far. Frankly speaking, my auto-photographic method was greatly demanding of participants’ time and effort. Hence, even though the idea of collaborative visual analysis was very appealing, it was difficult to put into action, and it would probably be unfair of me to ask more of my participants.

Thus far, I have thought about how auto-photography can empower participants in different contexts; nonetheless, I am also curious about what this method means to me. I

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<sup>183</sup> See ‘Benefiting Social Research’ in Chapter 3 for my discussion of how auto-photographic methods generate representations *of* participants’ culture.

<sup>184</sup> I apply a mixed method, integrating techniques from discourse analysis, social semiotics and narrative analysis to read the photos. See section ‘My Visual Analytical Methods’ in Chapter 6.

<sup>185</sup> The fact that a digital copy of this thesis will be online adds complexity to the ethics. I discuss my approaches to establish consent for different forms of publication and my decisions about which photographs to display in ‘Ethics’, Chapter 3.

wanted to conduct empirical research that makes sense of women's sexuality from women's own perspectives. Therefore, I designed my methodology to encourage women to construct conceptualisations and representations of desire which I appreciate as valid knowledge. As I once hoped that women's (communication of) desire could challenge patriarchal norms, I wonder if this thesis provides a space for women to voice their subjective sexualities in a way that is usually unheard of in popular media, and whether this act can have a political effect – that is, to respond to the call that *the personal is political*. Particularly in light of my thinking that the publication of women's stories can raise awareness, challenge dominant portrayals and reshape the social climate, I entertain the idea that I can be an activist researcher who elicits, collects and publishes women's subjective accounts of desire which will then bring about social change. This process also made me aware of my own limitations and contradictions, and enabled me to recognise that such tensions are a 'natural' part of human experience<sup>186</sup>.

Turning my focus to the auto-photographic production, I argue that participants' visual representations weave knowledge about *women's sexuality*. My thoughts are informed by Haraway's (1988) *situated knowledges*, a theory in which she uses the metaphor of 'vision' to challenge scientific claims to objective knowledge<sup>187</sup>. Haraway points out that everyone looks from their own positions, and thus can only interpret and create a vision of the world from their subjective point of view. Nevertheless, these seemingly diverse ways of viewing contain resemblances which form 'webs of connection' (Haraway 1988, p.584) that help us approach the social world. As I demonstrated in Chapter 6, my participants' photographs bear some resemblances to one another yet are also distinct, thus suggesting the women's personal negotiations within cultural ideas. For instance, some participants made pictures of their bodies that they fashioned in their own ways. These photos were also composed differently, indicating that participants made their own decisions during the auto-photographic process. Yet, these 'body images' carry visual cues of femininity which correspond to those represented in popular media, one major site from which participants acquired their cultural knowledge of desire. In addition to these pictures of their bodies, participants also made photos embedding notions that are important to their *personal*, subjective pleasure, such as a sense of freedom and intelligence – although these meanings

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<sup>186</sup> I addressed this complexity in the introductory paragraphs of Chapter 2, page 24–26.

<sup>187</sup> I discuss how Haraway's theory informs my thinking in more detail in 'Auto-photography: the Personal Desire within Cultural Construction' in Chapter 2.

are not unheard of in cultural discourse. Thus, auto-photography, as a way of mobilising their vision, can weave *situated knowledges* of ‘women’s desire’ which is composed of multiple meanings from diverse perspectives.

The diverse and insightful materials my participants produced lead me to rethink about my rather ‘unrefined’ demographic questions (see Appendix 5), and the possibility of developing a *feminist* – rather than taken-for-granted – classification system for composing participants’ biographies in my future projects. I acknowledge that participants’ social categories can have a strong impact on their experience and understanding of desire; most notably, this research focuses on the meaning of gender in the shaping of women’s sexuality. However, many of the classifications I set up were not the most influential to the participants. For example, Josephine’s experience and feeling of desire were reduced by her identification as a Pentecostal Christian<sup>188</sup>; however, I did not ask about participants’ religious beliefs in my Demographic Questions Form. Likewise, Pumpkin provided particularly profound narratives of her conceptualisation of desire – as I quoted at the start of Chapter 4 and 5. As she pointed out, her analysis was reliant on her being a student in *anthropology* (Pumpkin, journal<sup>189</sup>). In this instance, it was her *disciplinary background* rather than being a student – as most of my participants were – that allowed her to develop her thinking. Thus, establishing a way of grouping based on the relevance to participants’ desire will enable further comparisons and theorisations of women’s sexuality.

In order to compile participants’ biographies in a way that will be more relevant to the research subject, I propose to make the demographic information form more ‘flexible’ with open questions. I intend to ask, for instance: ‘when thinking about “social identities” – such as gender, educational/disciplinary background, religious and political views, etc. – which ones are the most significant to you? What are the issues that you are more concerned with in relation to this subject?’ Then, I shall organise each participant’s answers alongside the information they provide in other materials – such as in their journals and interviews – to write a personal biography. This biography will be sent to the participant so they can edit as they deem appropriate. By doing so, I wish to provide a more personal account of each participant than I did in a ‘List of Participants’ (Appendix

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<sup>188</sup> See page 108, and my discussion about Christianity as a cultural site in Chapter 4.

<sup>189</sup> This piece of journal is quoted in full in Chapter 5, page 144.

2), and making a better connection between each participant's background to my analysis. This method will also allow participants to have some choice in the ways they are represented. Furthermore, I want to make sure that as a researcher, I am providing sufficient and relevant profiles of my participants, while I avoid revealing any information that they do not wish to declare. This is particularly important if one conducts research with friends<sup>190</sup> – as the researcher might unknowingly include details gained from personal knowledge.

Finally, as a visual method, auto-photography has been used by my participants to represent other senses, such as the olfactory (scents) and the aural (music)<sup>191</sup>. This leads me to consider the potential of mobilising other senses as social research methods. For instance, I could probably ask participants to craft materials, such as producing sounds<sup>192</sup> or putting together textures (which can generate tactile feedback) to represent their desire. In fact, using crafts and mobilising the senses seems to be a common practice in arts-based research wherein participants are encouraged, for instance, to perform, both as a method of data generation, and as a representation to further evoke the audience's response (see, for instance, Leavy 2009). However, my understanding of arts-based methods, which are involved with many different genres such as music, poetry and dance, is still underdeveloped. Additionally, photography seems to be a more approachable method as human beings have developed the technology and are familiar with the skills to preserve the visual. Situated in modern visual culture – and in parallel to the recent selfie phenomenon – auto-photographic methods seem appropriate for investigating the ways in which one constructs a sense of self that is negotiated between individuality and social popularity.

*Photographing Desire* is a project that I developed to explore two of my academic interests: the application of visual methodology and the investigation of human sexuality. The practice of using a camera to capture a concept – something without a physical form –

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<sup>190</sup> I discuss the ethical concerns of doing research with friends on page 94–95.

<sup>191</sup> See my discussions of 'Sensation' and 'Fantasy' in Chapter 5.

<sup>192</sup> When I was an undergraduate student, I had a few interesting conversations with my male friends about the 'sounds' that actresses make in Japanese and 'Western' pornographic films. These sounds are 'culturally variable' and have been interpreted in different ways. Whereas my male friends considered the Japanese actresses' 'pleasurable sounds' arousing, I perceived them as painful and unwilling. I remember telling them that I preferred the noises women make in 'Western' porn because the sounds seem more active and indicative of enjoyment; however, they told me that those noises were 'too aggressive' for them.

is difficult; nevertheless, many women took on the challenge and generated fascinating materials to represent their sexuality. Desire is fluid, so that it slips past linguistic definition and can only be discussed by employing metaphors, such as participants' 'food' and 'water', and my 'web'. Using photography, in fact, is just another roundabout way to *represent* desire: to have its multiple meanings delivered through the symbols embedded in women's images. By recognising the fluidity and multiplicity in the web of desire, I also learnt to acknowledge the conflicts and ambiguities that are inevitable in my own analysis. Furthermore, despite the difficulty of 'grasping' desire, my women participants' narratives suggest a strong sense of subjectivity, demonstrating their active pursuit of pleasure. It is with this *social* finding that I now return to a *personal* question: do I feel liberated?

I am still not sure. But it feels good that I can do research into women's desire.

## Appendix 1: Email Call for Participants

**Subject: Call for participants – feminist research on women's sexual desire**

Hi,

My name is Evangeline, and I am a PhD student at Centre for Women's Studies, University of York. My research project explores how women represent and talk about their sexual desire. It is a feminist research which builds on women's experience and engagement. The project uses auto-photography as part of its research methods, and participants will use their own cameras, alongside journaling and individual interviews, to express their ideas of desire.

I am looking for women participants age above 18, currently living in the UK or in Taiwan to join this project. I have set up a project blog which includes detailed information, examples from pilot interviews, and my research journal: <http://photographingdesire.wordpress.com/>. If you are interested, or if you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at [kt603@york.ac.uk](mailto:kt603@york.ac.uk). I will also appreciate it if you can forward this mail to your friends who might take an interest. Thank you very much.

Kindest regards,  
Evangeline.

您好：

我是曹開雯，目前為英國約克大學女性研究中心的博士班學生。我目前進行的研究計畫旨在以女性受訪者的經驗為主軸，邀請受訪者積極、熱衷參與研究過程，探索女性如何再現、敘述自身的慾望。本計劃以「自傳式攝影」(Auto-photography)作為研究方式之一，因此受訪者將利用自己的相機拍照，同時以做筆記、受訪等方式表達何謂「慾望」。

我希望能邀請現居台灣或英國、年齡十八歲以上之女性參與此研究。您可以至本計畫的部落格：<http://photographingdesire.wordpress.com> 找到更詳盡的資訊，包括參與範例、我個人的研究日誌、如何參與此計畫等。如您有興趣參與，或有任何疑問，請以e-mail與我聯繫：[kt603@york.ac.uk](mailto:kt603@york.ac.uk)。也歡迎您將此資訊轉達給有興趣參與的朋友。非常感謝您。

曹開雯 敬上

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K.W. Evangeline Tsao

Centre for Women's Studies  
University of York [livepage.apple.com](http://livepage.apple.com)  
York  
YO10 5DD

[kt603@york.ac.uk](mailto:kt603@york.ac.uk)

## Appendix 2: List of Participants

Number	Pseudonym	Gender	Age (in 2012)	Nationality	Occupation	Lives in:	Race/Ethnicity
P1	Jessica	Female	27	USA	Student	York, UK	White
P2	Sarah	Female	27	British	Full time postgraduate student	York, UK	White British
P3	Celeste	Female	50	British	Student	Bradford, UK	White British
1	Mina	Female	26	Norwegian	Graduate Student	York, UK	White
2	Brigitte	Female	34	British	Student	York, UK	Scottish
3	Beth	Female	24	British	Student	York, UK	White British
4	Rachel	Female	25	British	Student	York, UK	White
5	Odinsleep	Female	27	Taiwanese	Student	York, UK	Asian
6	Alexia	Female	26	British	Market Researcher	London, UK	Eurasian (White European & Chinese)
7	Josephine	Female	N/P	British	N/P	York, UK	Black African
8	Cassandra	Feminine-ish	33	Yorkshire (British)	Student / p.t. Lecturer	Leeds, UK	White European
9	Rachael	Female	21	British	Student	York, UK	Caucasian
10	Lucy	Female	27	British	Student	York, UK	White British
11	Cherry	Female	26	British	Administrator	York, UK	White
12	Rae	Female	19	British	Student	York, England	British Caucasian
13	Steel Vagina	Woman/Queer	24	Scottish	Jane of all trades	Edinburgh, UK	HAN
14	Pumpkin	Female	27	Chinese	PG student	Edinburgh, UK	Chinese
15	Gilly	Female	24	French/American	Student	York, UK	White
(P: Pilot)	Notes	Include participants who wrote 'F'					

## Appendix 2: List of Participants (continued)

Number	Pseudonym	Sexuality	Social Class	Disability?	Others
P1	Jessica	Heterosexual	Middle	No	N/P
P2	Sarah	Heterosexual	Middle class	Yes - chronic fatigue syndrome (ME), depression, anxiety	N/P
P3	Celeste	Currently in a same-sex relationship	Middle	No	N/P
1	Mina	Straight	Middle	No	N/P
2	Brigitte	Bisexual	W/Class	Dyslexic	N/P
3	Beth	Straight	Generally considered middle class	No	N/P
4	Rachel	Bisexual	Middle class	No	N/P
5	Odinsleep	Heterosexual	N/P	No	N/P
6	Alexia	Heterosexual	Middle class	No	N/A
7	Josephine	Heterosexual	Middle class	No	A Christian (Pentecostal)
8	Cassandra	Mostly Heterosexual	Middle class	No	Atheist, Feminist
9	Rachael	Heterosexual, 1 or 2 on Kinsey Scale but fluctuating	Middle Class family, but more of a working class upbringing	No	Kinky + Sex-positive!
10	Lucy	Mostly Straight!	Middle class (from a working class family)	No	N/P
11	Cherry	Bisexual	Middle class	No	N/P
12	Rae	Pansexual	Upper working/lower middle class	Asperger's syndrome	N/P
13	Steel Vagina	Pansexual	Working/Middle	Kinda	N/A
14	Pumpkin	Bisexual	@.@	I can't write my thesis	N/P
15	Gilly	Straight (engaged)	Middle	No	N/P
(P: Pilot)	Notes				N/P: Not provided

## Appendix 3: Information Sheet

Participant No. \_\_\_\_\_

### Information Sheet

Research Title: Women Exploring Sexuality through Photography and Visual Representation

Researcher: Kai-Wen Tsao (Evangeline)

Supervisor: Dr Ann Kaloski Naylor

This project aims to investigate women's sexuality, and in particular how women represent and talk about their sexual desires. I am also interested in how auto-photography works as a research method.

By joining this project, you will *participate* in:

• **Photography:**

- Be a photographer! Use your own camera to take digital photos in 2 weeks.
- Take as many pictures as you want – it can be you, your body, things and images surround you – that represent these two categories: 'sexually desirable' and 'not sexually desirable' to you.
- Pick 5 photos from each category (therefore 10 photos in total) for the researcher.

• **Journaling:**

- Keep a diary of decision-making, your feelings, experience, thoughts and any other things you would like to add.

• **Interview:**

- Enjoy a face to face conversation with the researcher for about 1.5 hours.
- Share your stories and feelings about the photographs and the process.

Your participation is very much appreciated; it will contribute to an exciting and innovative research in the field of sexuality and gender studies!

Please note that:

- The interview will be audio recorded.
- Your photographs, journal and other information you provide will be used for the purpose of this research; they may be presented in conferences, journal papers and my PhD thesis under your consent, credited to you with your name or pseudonym. These research data might also be presented at the project blog with your permission. This will be confirmed in the consent form.
- It is your right to be anonymous in this research if you wish, and this shall be confirmed in the demographic questions form for this study which will be presented to you later.
- You are free to withdraw from this research anytime without giving any reason.
- For more information, please visit: <http://PhotographingDesire.wordpress.com>. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask me. Thank you for participating in this research.

Contact Information:

Researcher: Kai-Wen Tsao (Evangeline) Centre for Women's Studies University of York E-mail: kt603@york.ac.uk Mobile number: 07598 776717 Skype: EvangelineTsao	Supervisor: Dr Ann Kaloski Naylor Centre for Women's Studies University of York Email: ann.kaloski-naylor@york.ac.uk Telephone number: 01904 323674
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## Appendix 4: Consent Form

Participant No. \_\_\_\_\_

### Consent Form

I confirm that I have been informed and understand the information sheet for the above study, have had the opportunity to ask questions, and have the questions answered satisfactorily.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

I agree to the interview being audio recorded.

I consent to the collected data, including my images, being used for analysis, presentation and publication under my name or my pseudonym as agreed.

I consent to some of my images, upon confirming with the researcher, being used on the research project blog (<http://photographingdesire.wordpress.com>) with watermark of the blog link edited on it.

(If you want none of your photographs being used on the blog, simply do not tick this box. If you only agree to some of your images being published, I will confirm which photographs they are and write it down on this page.)

I agree to take part in the above study.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 5: Demographic Questions Form

Participant No. \_\_\_\_\_

### Demographic Questions Form

Please fill in the list of formal identifiers below:

Gender:	Age:
Nationality:	Occupation:
Where do you currently live:	
Race/Ethnicity:	
Sexuality:	
Social Class:	
Do you have a disability:	
Others you would like to add:	

Your e-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you wish to be anonymous in this research project? If so, please provide the name you wish to be called in this research:

- Yes, I do. Preferred pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_
- No, it is okay.

Please note that if you wish to be anonymous, your face shall be concealed or excluded in your photograph so not to be identified.

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