

New study reveals why women take sexy selfies

August 27 2018, by Isabelle Dubach



Credit: University of New South Wales

A new UNSW study has revealed the science behind sexy selfies, showing that women tend to sexualise themselves in environments with greater economic inequality, rather than where they might be oppressed because of their gender.

In the study – published in prestigious journal *PNAS* – the team analysed tens of thousands of [social media posts](#) across 113 countries. Lead author Dr. Khandis Blake from UNSW Science's School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences says her team tracked posts where people had taken selfies and then noted that they were tagged sexy, hot or similar.

"We then looked at where in the world these things happened most. The number one way that psychologists usually look at women's preoccupation with their appearance is that it happens because of patriarchal pressures – that women live in societies that value their appearance more than their other qualities. The argument is usually that when you see sexualisation, you see disempowerment," Dr. Blake says.

"What we found instead is that women are more likely to invest time and effort into posting sexy selfies online in places where economic inequality is rising, and not in places where men hold more societal power and [gender inequality](#) is rife."

The findings are consistent across different geographic locations, even after taking into account and controlling for other factors that could influence patterns, like population size, human development and internet access.

The researchers say that [income inequality](#) increases competitiveness and status anxiety amongst people at all levels of the social hierarchy, making them sensitive to where they sit on the social ladder and wanting them to do better than others.

"That income inequality is a big predictor of sexy selfies suggests that sexy selfies are a marker of social climbing among women that tracks economic incentives in the local environment," Dr. Blake says.

"Rightly or wrongly, in today's environment, looking sexy can generate large returns, economically, socially, and personally."

The researchers then found the exact same pattern in real-world spending in other appearance-enhancing areas.

"What we found in more than 1000 different economic areas in the US when looking at women's spending in beauty salons and clothing stores is that income inequality is also predicting this type of spending," Dr. Blake says.

The researchers say that the findings make sense from an evolutionary point of view.

"In evolutionary terms, these kinds of behaviours are completely rational, even adaptive. The basic idea is that the way people compete for mates, and the things they do to put themselves at the top of the hierarchy are really important. This is where this research fits in – it's all about how [women](#) are competing and why they're competing.

"So, when a young woman adjusts her bikini provocatively with her phone at the ready, don't think of her as vacuous or as a victim. Think of her as a strategic player in a complex social and evolutionary game. She's out to maximize her lot in life, just like everyone," Dr. Blake concludes.

More information: Khandis R. Blake et al. Income inequality not gender inequality positively covaries with female sexualization on social media, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2018). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1717959115](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1717959115)

Provided by University of New South Wales

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