

“I Don’t Want to Seem Trashy:” Exploring Context and Self-Presentation Through Young Gay and Bisexual Males’ Attitudes Toward Shirtless Selfies on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

Mobile devices and social media have made it possible to share photos, often selfies, nearly instantaneously with potentially large networks of contacts and followers. Selfies have become a frequent component of young people’s online self-presentations and shirtless male selfies, a common trope among some gay Instagram users, present an interesting self-presentation dilemma. Images of shirtless males, normatively appropriate, attractive and innocuous in some contexts, can also be vulnerable to misinterpretation or unintended sexualization in ways that can negatively impact others’ impressions. This paper reports on an interview study of 15-24 year-old gay and bisexual Instagram users’ attitudes toward and experiences with shirtless selfies. Results suggest that they see a clear tension between these images conveying attractiveness and possible negative connotations such as promiscuity, and have different strategies for navigating this tension. The results have implications for consideration of the contexts in which mobile social media content is produced and consumed.

Author Keywords

Self-presentation; Social Media; Selfies

ACM Classification Keywords

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INTRODUCTION

Smart mobile devices with cameras have made it easier than ever before to take and share pictures anywhere and anytime [12], and to distribute these to friends and social media followers. Shared photos have become an integral part of self-presentation for adolescents and young adults, especially “selfies” [11], which include everything from quotidian moments to special occasions [14]; [34]; [4]. Mobile cameras also make it easier to share revealing images

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of one’s own body, from naked [8]; [44] to topless [47]. This raises the spectre of the “shirtless selfie,” a common theme in images shared by some gay men who are widely followed on Instagram [24] and others. These images, particularly for men in the United States and other cultures where female -- but not male -- toplessness is legally or normatively restricted, present an interesting self-presentation dilemma.

This dilemma is particularly acute for young social media users seeking to broaden their following [50], such as by using hashtags or receiving a “shoutout,” in which one’s photo and username are shared by somebody with a larger following to draw attention and gain followers, while still being perceived positively by their extant friends and family. These are important choices, especially for LGBTQ+ young people who are developing their social identity [20];[9], grappling with how to project masculinity/femininity (eg., [37]) and may be coming out as LGBTQ+ [40], all at a time when they are more likely to engage in risky behavior [22] and can be particularly vulnerable to negative consequences of social media posts[48].

On the one hand, shirtless selfies have been discussed in the popular media [23] and prior research as a way to gain social media followers, and/or portray oneself as attractive or interesting [44]; [47]. On the other hand, shirtless selfies can have negative consequences. There is some evidence that posting these pictures and seeing those from others affects one’s self-perceptions and body image [31]. Selfies of any kind can also negatively impact others’ impressions of the poster [43]. Shirtless selfies, moreover, may be seen by some as inappropriate or sexually provocative, depending on the context and intent of the poster (e.g., [1]; [38]).

Moreover, this plays out on social media platforms that span multiple contexts (e.g., [16]; [7]) and require participants to anticipate multiple audiences for shared content and constructing their identity [28]. In that regard, Instagram and other mobile social media platforms are distinct from those largely used by particular communities (e.g., [5]), and from early online environments where one could freely experiment with identity with little fear of impression consequences from ‘real-world’ contacts [45]; [41].

From a practical standpoint, this puts audience-expanding, selfie-posting social media users in the situation of having to negotiate several tensions as they present themselves. How

do they decide whether to share shirtless selfies? How do they negotiate between a desire for followers and visibility versus the potential reputational or impression consequences/risks? If they do share these images, how do they decide what is appropriate to post? And third, how do they weigh the benefits and intended consequences against the potential negative and/or unintended consequences?

In the paper that follows, I explore these tensions using a self-presentation lens via an interview study of gay and bisexual young men and adolescents who share photos of themselves on Instagram, and seek to increase their social media audience. Results suggest a range of attitudes toward and responses to shirtless selfies, with implications for how we think about the contexts in which mobile social media content is produced and consumed.



Figure 1. Mockup of a fictional shoutout post.
Note: true shoutouts include a real face photo.

SHOUTOUT GENRE AND CONTEXT

This paper reports on a particular community, so I describe the context here to position the background and research questions. Study participants use Instagram, a popular mobile social media platform on which users can share photos (visible until deleted) and ephemeral ‘stories’ (visible for 24 hours) with their followers. ‘Following’ is a one-way tie (i.e., A can follow B, but B need not follow A), in contrast to the two-way ‘friend’ tie (i.e., A and B are both ‘friends’ with each other) on platforms like Facebook. All content shared by a user is governed by a single privacy setting, which can be ‘public’ (i.e., visible to all users) or restricted to followers [21]. Direct, private messages, consisting of text and/or images between two or more users, are also possible.

Study participants are gay- and bisexual-identifying (gay and bi) males who have received a ‘shoutout’ from a popular Instagram account with ~40K followers (name omitted to

protect participant privacy) that aims to connect young gay and bi males. The shoutout genre varies across social media, but in this community a shoutout consists of 3-4 self-submitted images of the shoutout recipient that contain their face, a 1-2 sentence bio they have composed and a tagged reference to the recipient’s username (see Figure 1). These materials are sent to the shoutout account via direct message, and shared by the account owners. The shoutout post is then visible to the account followers as an ordinary post and those who view the shoutout can tap on the tagged username to view the recipient’s profile and perhaps follow them.

Informal observations suggest that followers and shoutout recipients live all over the world. I focus here on those who say in their profiles or shoutout bio that they live in the United States. Most shoutout recipients are 15-25 years old, the study age range. Most recipients also appear to be using their primary Instagram accounts (and not a secondary one). Many shoutout recipient profiles use real names, make general references to their location (e.g., city, high school or university), and informal observations of public posts and contact lists further suggest that it is common for shoutout recipients to have many non-LGBT contacts, and post what seems to be content for a general audience.

I focus on this population because: 1) many LGBTQ individuals, as a sexual minority, use technologies to meet and connect with others like them, (e.g., [19]; [39]) and may not have easy local social connections, 2) gay and bi males have long used social technologies to meet [35]; [41], and 3) shirtless selfies are an especially interesting domain in the United States, because being shirtless per se is normatively acceptable for men in many contexts (e.g., pools, beaches), but not for women. Thus, men sharing photos of themselves are faced with choices around self-presentation and contextual norms that women are not.

BACKGROUND

There has been significant recent research on sharing selfies and Goffman’s model of self-presentation [18], which reflect three tensions at the core of this study.

Rewards and Risks

The first tension is between the desire for followers and attention, the ways that shirtless selfies can help with that, and risks taken in sharing these images. There is evidence that some people use social media to see attractive people and to get attention/validation from others who find them attractive [1]; [31]. Popular pages provide tips strategically self-presenting [18] in ways that will attract followers via shirtless selfies [23], providing initial evidence that these may be used to further this goal.

At the same time, sharing shirtless selfies, or any selfies, can pose risks. Sharing selfies on Facebook, for example, has been shown experimentally to affect others’ impressions of the sharer in terms of perceived narcissism, which is higher for selfie posters, and attraction, which is lower for selfie posters. Others have suggested links between selfie-sharing and personality traits or disorders (e.g., [42]), such that selfie

sharing by anybody (whether they have these traits or not) may affect others' impressions. All of this work on selfies more broadly likely applies to shirtless selfies as well, with the additional possible negative effects of being seen as showing off one's body, perhaps in inappropriate ways [1].

Despite these risks, however, observations suggest that young people do share shirtless selfies regularly on social media. We do not have a good sense, though, of how this plays into their self-presentation goals or strategies, or how to account for this behavior in our theoretical understanding of self-presentation as it plays out on today's mobile social media platforms. Therefore I asked:

RQ1a: What are young gay/bi male shoutout recipients' attitudes toward shirtless selfies?

RQ1b: What impressions do young gay/bi male shoutout recipients think others have or might have of the shoutout recipients' shirtless selfies?

Setting Limits and Considering Context

Stemming from the possibility of different responses to RQ1a and RQ1b, the second tension is fundamentally a strategic question about how people set limits on what they share and with whom. Goffman's [18] model suggests that people are conscious of audiences and engage in behavior appropriate to different self-presentation regions.

Prior work suggests that, despite the popular narrative about young people not attending to privacy, they do think carefully about this [9]; [32]. When specifically thinking about selfies and intimate images, Albury [1] found that many participants took 'private selfies' for friends or themselves that weren't intended for sharing, as well as intimate images (e.g., of genitalia or other typically private areas) for a very limited audience. Participants in that study also felt that the perceived intent of an image poster can impact their perceptions of these images. They described a difference, for example, between an image taken at the pool and one taken in a bathroom or bedroom, for example. The role of context here is importantly similar to what Nissenbaum's privacy model [36] treats as contextual differences in norms around information sharing and use.

Moreover, young people, particularly those who are under 18 or depend on parental support, often receive messaging from parents, school administrators and others urging caution in what they share online. Many are subject to rules about sharing [33] and fears about potential legal consequences about sharing explicit content [49].

This suggests a range of influences on shirtless selfie sharing on Instagram. We know little, however, about how young people who are active on social media and trying to build a following navigate this tension. Therefore I asked:

RQ2: What strategies for self-presentation do young gay/bi male shoutout recipients report to balance their self-presentation objectives for different audiences?

Anticipating Audiences and Responses

The third tension stems from the confluence of self-presentation strategies and what Litt [27] refers to as the actual versus imagined audience. At the root of this tension is the selfie-poster's ability to anticipate both the audience for the image and their response(s) to it. Goffman's [18] notion of regions highlights the importance of this.

First is the issue of how images are perceived and the consequences of these perceptions for impression formation. As noted above, any selfies can affect impression formation [43]; [25], and this is especially true for shirtless or revealing images. Albury's [1] participants discuss their perception of certain contacts just showing off their bodies, but sometimes masking their actual intent by framing a post as being about something else (such as posing shirtless in one's room and adding the caption 'in my new room!').

Second is audience composition. Even on Instagram, where young people may be less constrained by fears of adult presence than on Facebook [10], there can be many audiences. This is particularly true in the gay/bi shoutout genre which exposes shoutout recipients to over 40,000 people, in addition to their extant friend networks. This raises tensions around audience expectations. Gay or bi followers may follow other gay or bi individuals, for example, and -- given the frequent use of exposed male bodies to express masculinity in gay spaces [13] -- may be accustomed to or even expect shirtless pictures in a way that one's heterosexual friends may not. Thus, multiple tensions and expectations must be negotiated/balanced, and some reactions may be difficult to anticipate. I asked:

RQ3: How do young gay/bi male shoutout recipients anticipate audiences for and their responses to shirtless selfies? (How) do they adapt their self-presentation?

METHODS

I conducted an exploratory interview study with young gay and bi male shoutout recipients who use Instagram.

Participants

Participants were 31 males who self-identified as gay (n=25) or bisexual (n=6). They ranged in age from 15 - 25 (M=17.42, SD=1.86), had been "out" for 0 - 4 years (M=2.2; SD=1.05) and all said in their profile or shoutout bio that they live in the United States. Participants had public Instagram profiles at the time of the study and had received a 'shoutout' as described above. Their follower counts ranged from 400 to 57,000 (median = 1600, SD = 2100), with no minimum or maximum threshold for study eligibility. Shoutout recipients were predominantly white, as were participants in this study. There was one Black and one Asian participant.

Participants were recruited by the researcher, who followed the shoutout account from a lab Instagram account, followed all shoutout recipients who met the study eligibility criteria (15 - 25 years old, in the U.S.) and direct-messaged them. The message briefly introduced the researcher and the study, and said they could participate and earn a \$25 gift card or

Paypal payment. Approximately 200 shoutout recipients were contacted, for a response rate of ~16%.

Procedure

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted between July and November, 2017 by the author via videoconference or telephone based on participant preference. These interviews, which also included questions not reported on in this paper, lasted 40 - 80 minutes. Interviews were recorded and detailed notes were taken for analysis by the researcher and an assistant while listening to the recordings. Where quotes are used in this paper, the recordings were consulted to ensure accuracy. One interview was conducted by text message over the course of one week; it is estimated based on transcript length that the total interaction time was analogous to the other interviews.

The same protocol was used for all interviews, and questions covered participants' use of social media, their 'coming out' experience on social media (for those who were out), the nature of their use of and social network on Instagram, their attitudes toward different types of content and their experiences in using different social media for different purposes and with different audiences. As part of the interview, the researcher examined the participant's Instagram profile and recent posts while talking to the participant, so that specific posts could be referenced.

As there is evidence that some potential LGBTQ+ youth participants will not ask for parental permission to participate in research studies [30] and given the low-risk nature of this study, a waiver of parental consent was obtained from my university's IRB. Consent (for those 18 or over) and assent (for those < 18) forms were sent to participants as a link to a web-accessible PDF file either via Instagram direct message, text message or via email, per their preference. They were asked at the start of the interview to read the form and ask any questions, and consented or assented verbally to participate. After the interview, participants received a \$25 gift card or Paypal payment, typically within 24 hours.

Observations. All potential participants had public profiles and were followed by the researcher. Unstructured, unsystematic observations of posts and public interactions by followed individuals were conducted over the entire study period. During this time, I looked at my feed daily or more for new content from potential participants (including ephemeral 'stories', live video streams and photo posts), paying attention to the content being shared, feedback (e.g., comments, likes) received and the people who appeared to be engaging with the shoutout recipients (via comments). These informal observations were not intended to collect data for analysis, but to contextualize the interviews.

Ethical Considerations

Talking with young people about sexuality and identity necessarily raises concerns about their privacy and safety. To ensure participants' privacy, no identifying information about participants was requested or stored (except as necessary to provide compensation, but these records are not

linked to the interview data). Where participants disclosed identifiers, these were removed from our records to the extent possible. With regard to participant safety, a clinical health psychologist was consulted in developing the research protocol and was available for advice in the event of a distressed participant, though this did not occur. I further considered risks to participants relative to the benefits of the study and felt that – given that I talked only to people with public profiles – participants were at no greater risk than they encounter in their everyday social media activity.

Analysis

Analysis was thematic and consisted of carefully reviewing interview notes by two researchers for mentions of experiences with or attitudes toward shirtless selfies or other revealing images. These were aggregated and read together by the researcher looking for key themes, commonalities and differences. As these were identified, relevant quotations from interviews were iteratively arranged and rearranged according to these themes. Once quotations were selected, these were verified using the interview recordings.

Limitations

As with any exploratory study of this nature, there are several limitations to bear in mind. First, the paper focuses on a specific population on one mobile social media platform, so should not be taken as a general description of young people or even young gay people's attitudes. Second, the sample size and method are both inadequate to make definitive causal or correlational claims. Where relationships between factors are observed, they should be interpreted as possible trends that merit additional research. Third, it is possible that participants were not accurately or fully describing their experiences. The consistency among interviews and consistency with my observations on Instagram, however, suggest this was not likely the case. Finally, it is important to note that the specific and unique experiences of transgender individuals, who face unique threats and safety concerns, were not explicitly addressed here, though there are certainly transgender individuals who identify as gay or bi men.

RESULTS

Attitudes Toward Shirtless Selfies

RQ1a asked about attitudes toward shirtless selfies as related to self-presentation. Many, but not all, participants voiced opinions, typically in response to questions about what they would or would not share, what they thought their followers wanted to see, and/or what they like to see on Instagram.

Some participants, whether they personally posted them or not, felt that shirtless selfies were a way to attract followers and attention, but -- though more followers and attention were described by most participants as goals -- not all of them viewed this sort of attention positively. P6 (18 years old, 911 followers), for example, noted that "I think it's kind of cheap to just throw yourself out there." P5 (16 years old, 15.5K followers) was concerned about being sexualized and thus not taken seriously by his followers, who he tries to motivate to be more politically active. And P24 (18 years old,

57K followers) said that he would “pretty much never upload shirtless pictures,” noting, however, that:

a lot of people do that and that's how they gain their followers, I don't really believe in that, I'm not comfortable with my body enough to show that to 60,000 people so I very much try to keep my pictures appropriate.

One interesting aspect of P24's response is his apparent strategic self-presentation to the researcher, distancing himself from this practice in saying that “a lot of people do that.” This implies that he has used a different strategy to amass his followers, and reflects an implicit view several participants alluded to: that followers gained without gratuitous shirtless selfies are seen as somehow more valid or acceptable. As will become clear, this view was not universal but also not uncommon.

Another issue that arose in analysis is that participants had very different goals in using Instagram and this seemed to drive their perceptions of shirtless selfies and impressions they wanted others to have. These seem to be influenced by factors such as Instagram objectives, age, and context.

As noted above, P5 (16 years old, 15.5K followers) has an activist objective and -- while he does want more followers and to increase his audience -- he is conscious of the type of followers he gets, and the importance of maintaining credibility with them. This is quite distinct from P16 (25 years old, 4600 followers), who said that he would like to post more explicit content, but was worried about possible negative consequences at his job. To avoid these consequences, he frames his posts as ‘fitness updates’:

There was a point where I was going to post really raunchy stuff, I know I post raunchy, but I decided that I'm just gonna post pictures where I have pants on and I'm shirtless, and maybe putting them as 'look this is my fitness update' and things like that so that my work is just like, 'Oh, that's just a fitness picture, there's no reason to be fired over that.'

When asked if there were things he tried to avoid, he noted:

I try not post anything just in my underwear. I mean if there was no such thing as like work getting upset, my ass would be out completely, but I just, stay away from that.

Other participants felt certain types of content might be inappropriate for people their age. P9 (16 years old, 1600 followers) noted that he doesn't share shirtless selfies and felt that some others who do so are “acting way too grown. They'll be like 15, 16, 17 doing that and I'm like, no, wait til you're 18 or something.” And P2 (16 years old, 8500 followers) said revealing anything “below the hips then it starts to be too much and I would never share anything like that, especially at my age.”

Moreover, some participants said their views had changed over time. P22 (17 years old, 400 followers), for example, said that as he got older he became more comfortable with his body and got more comfortable sharing shirtless or sexually provocative photos. He said that coming out made

him more comfortable and he developed a desire to show people who he is and how he wants to express himself.

RQ1b asked how participants felt others would perceive shirtless selfies. Again, responses varied, but there were clear themes. In general, participants recognized limits on what could be shared, but also knew that shirtless selfies would get attention and that, in some cases, at least some of their followers wanted to see them.

With regard to other audiences for content, P30 (20 years old, 3400 followers), for example, described a “naughty” picture he had taken (but not posted publicly) of his naked body with a pillow covering his genitalia as one where “if you showed that at church all the old ladies would have a heart attack.”

With regard to shirtless selfies specifically, as P24 hints above, participants recognized that shirtless selfies get attention from followers, particularly when the poster is attractive. P11 (19 years old, 1600 followers), for example, said he thought his followers wanted to see “scandalous pictures”, noting that “there are people that are watching out for more scandalous pictures and like sometimes and when I do that more often I do notice that my followers do go up because of it.” When asked what he meant by “scandalous,” P11 described a Halloween costume in which he was essentially wearing only tight-fitting underwear.

Others said they thought their followers wanted to see them naked (P3, 17 years old, 1747 followers) or in their underwear (P16, 25 years old, 4600 followers). Supporting this with his own evidence, P12 (19 years old, 4300 followers) said he sometimes uses shirtless selfies to see which of his followers are active: “sometimes I do post shirtless pics to see who's active and who's not. I think they're more active on pics like that.” These examples suggest that participants felt at least some of their followers would notice shirtless selfies, and many felt that followers wanted to see these and perhaps more revealing pictures.

Thus, participant attitudes and perceptions of others' attitudes varied widely, possibly reflecting their different goals, ages and contexts. It was the oldest participant who appeared least concerned about what others (apart from his employer) would think, and generally the youngest who tended to feel shirtless selfies were altogether inappropriate for them, regardless of their goal in using Instagram.

Constraints on Content and Context

RQ2 asked about how participants think about strategies for balancing their self presentation goals and objectives for various audiences. What emerged were a set of constraints on behavior, along with two apparent strategies. The perceived constraints, which I will explicate below, included their own goals and self-image, likely responses from others, and external rules and regulations. For strategies, some participants appeared to set limits based on the content of images, whereas others had a more contextual approach.

Reflecting a concern about the possibility of others' negative impressions of him, P31 (17 years old, 5937 followers) said

he tries to avoid shirtless pictures in general because he doesn't want to be perceived as "trashy." Reflecting a similar constraint around others' negative impressions, P9 (16 years old, 1600 followers) said that he would share shirtless pictures because "you can go to the beach and see a guy without a shirt." For this reason, he said he would share a picture of himself in underwear, but to avoid negative impressions he "wouldn't post something that's me in my underwear and you can see a dick print."

Some others described limits on sharing content less out of concerns about others' impressions than concerns about their own bodies. P15 (16 years old, 1200 followers), for example, said he had posted his first shirtless selfie the day before our interview, and said that he hadn't done so before primarily due to "[lack of] self-confidence and insecurities." He said he had gotten a lot of positive support after posting the picture, but also said he didn't want to give colleges he might apply to the wrong idea about him by posting shirtless pictures that might be misinterpreted.

In some cases, participants reflected a bit of tension between constraints on their behavior. Returning to P31, for example, he later said that he sets limits on content based on how he feels about his appearance in the picture, noting "I get shy with my stomach but if it looks decent I'll post one. I just try to stay away from that." This reflects a tension between feeling constrained by the possibility of others' negative impressions (i.e., 'trashy') and his sometimes conflicting goal of portraying himself as attractive.

Others described constraints from external rules. P3 (17 years old, 1747 followers), for example, mentioned school rules about posting photos in underwear and concerns about school administrators seeing his content. P1 (18 years old, 4900 followers), described not posting shirtless selfies or sexual content with his boyfriend because they both live at home and answer to their parents, who follow their Instagram accounts and would not likely approve of these posts.

These examples begin to illustrate how participants operate within these constraints and achieve their goals. Most of these examples serve to illustrate the first strategy I identified: setting limits on sharing, based on external rules, self-image and their own self-presentation goals. This strategy is also reflected, of course, by those in the prior results section who do not share shirtless selfies at all.

The second strategy I observed was to attempt to apply limits set in one context to other contexts. P9's explanation above illustrates this when he notes that physically no more of his body was being revealed in a sexually provocative selfie than one would see in an ordinary vacation photo from the beach. Others adopted this approach as well. When asked about shirtless pictures, for example, P28 (15 years old, 800 followers) justified photos judged by the researcher to be provocative (e.g., one in which he is lying in bed shirtless with a blanket covering his lower body, looking directly at the camera) that P28 had posted on Instagram by saying "I'm pretty sure [my mom] posted pictures of me and my nipples

out on Facebook" and "I don't mind if somebody sees my nipple." In this way he is applying a physical limit from one context (beach or pool pictures on his mom's Facebook account) to a very different context and justifying, at least to himself, this as a reasonable strategy.

Similarly, in describing his self-imposed limitation of showing his chest, P17 (17 years old, 4700 followers) said:

When I go to the beach, they're going to see me shirtless. That's normal. So that's the limit I would show on Instagram because anyone out in public would see me like that. That's as far as I would go.

In essence, these quotes suggest a perceived equivalence of content (e.g., shirtlessness or revealed nipples) across contexts (the beach vs. bed) and potentially across audiences as well. That is, P15's mom's Facebook friends are probably unlikely to view a photo of her teenage son in a sexual light, whereas P15's Instagram followers may very well do so based on what he and others described.

In a variation of this contextual strategy, others said they adapted their limits based on perceived norms in the context. P18 (17 years old, 1353 followers), describing what makes a photo "scandalous," said:

I know I'm shirtless [in some of my Instagram pictures] but I'm either at a pool or a water park. But if I'm just posting a pic in my boxers in the mirror, I don't think that's appropriate and not something people need to see.

Asked how he felt about others sharing content like this, P18 again drew on context, noting that it would be acceptable if:

someone was to lose a lot of weight or get really fit and have a transition photo or something like that just because they can get a lot of confidence from friends online through this photo and people saying like 'great job' or 'oh my gosh you look so good,' but I don't think I would ever post something like that.

Still others used a novel variant on an old context-oriented strategy that has roots in debates around pornography as artistic expression. P11 (19 years old, 1600 followers), for example, explained that he had noticed people posting naked or scantily clad photos in beautiful settings to give the photos an artistic appearance. He said he wanted to post more content "where I'm wearing less clothes, but in a great pose or great area; not just a slutty mirror selfie." What is interesting here is the contrast between the artistic rationale that a pose or location provides and his blanket characterization of mirror selfies as "slutty". Essentially, though, this is a contextual limit in that nudity is seen as permissible (even if it is to get the same sort of attention) in an artistic context, but even shirtlessness may be less acceptable in the context of a bathroom. When asked why he wanted to share more content like this, P11 said that he felt it was popular and something people would likely follow.

This section illustrates that there are several perceived constraints on whether and how participants share shirtless

selfies on Instagram, including their self-presentation goals, their concerns about others' negative and positive impressions, and external forces such as rules or expectations. To accomplish their goals and operate within these constraints, participants reported two types of strategies: 1) setting limits based on content for all photos one shares, and 2) deciding via contextual norms, perhaps adapting one's limits or presentation of images based on the context of the image and sharing.

Intent vs. Interpretation

Impressions were important to participants, whether they shared shirtless pictures or not, as the sections above suggest. Sharing shirtless pictures, however, was frequently described as having consequences both for participants' impressions of themselves as well as for others' actual or potential impressions of them. Addressing RQ3, participants described a variety of strategies for mitigating and adapting to these actual and potential consequences.

P3 (17 years old, 1747 followers), for example, described a time when he posted a picture of himself in his underwear that he removed from his profile a few minutes later. This was a complicated situation for him in several respects. As noted earlier this was a violation of his high school's policies, but what he described as affecting him more was concern about impressions people he knows might form, saying "I don't want it on my page for people I care about to see." At the same time, though, he left the picture on Instagram and it is visible to those who click to see posts in which he is tagged (via a profile link to a separate screen). His rationale was that he aspires to be an underwear model, so recognized the value of this photo in that regard, but at the same time didn't want everybody who visited his profile to see it. Making it visible only in his tagged photos (by submitting it to a different shoutout account, which reposted it and tagged him) helps accomplish the goal of being visible and perceived as attractive to strangers (who might then become followers), possibly without negatively affecting the impressions of known contacts (who might not be savvy or curious enough to click on the 'tagged' link).

Another participant, P25 (15 years old, 2247 followers), who said he generally does not share shirtless images, described the impression consequences of sharing a photo with his partially exposed chest. When I asked if he had removed any photos from his profile, he said:

I did actually take something down. It wasn't completely shirtless; it was only [showing] one nipple, but I did take it down because it was getting so much sexual attention.

By this, he meant that people were posting what he felt were inappropriate things about the photo, such as saying it was "sexy" or "hot." When asked if he regretted sharing this, he said he didn't regret it, but learned from it. He did not

anticipate and did not want that kind of attention, as he felt the photo was not sexually provocative or sexual at all. I later asked him if there was anything he felt he could do to avoid getting that kind of attention and he said, "No shirtless pictures, no sexual implications, no tongue out."

P15 (16 years old, 1200 followers), who as I noted earlier had shared his first shirtless selfie the day before our interview, also described some inappropriate responses to that picture. He took a different approach, however. Rather than delete the image itself, he tried to cultivate the impressions he wanted by deleting comments from those who he felt were misinterpreting his intent. He said: "I've gotten a lot of comments that I really didn't like, so the comments on it are the ones that I haven't deleted." One might assume that unwanted comments would be negative or disparaging, but instead the comments he talked about deleting were essentially positive, but sexual in nature and very much like the ones P25 mentioned above.

These impressions can also have consequences for others' behavior in private interactions beyond the comments on photos, such as direct messages on Instagram. P22 (17 years old, 400 followers), for example, said:

I am a very sexual person, and so I talk sexually or say something sexual, it tends to bring sexual people to your Instagram or Snapchat. And you're not asking for people to send you nudes and stuff, they just do it because they'll just assume that's how you are like outside of those types of things. Like if I post a picture on Instagram of me shirtless, or something like that, people are going to immediately think sexually about it and they'll add you on Snapchat and be like do you wanna trade¹ and that's not the reason for me posting.

He further noted that people often get the wrong idea in that his posts are intended to express his own sexuality and experiences, but not to suggest that he is looking for online sexual experiences with others.

In this section, we see that the intent of a selfie-poster, described in the prior section as important in regards to context and constraints, can be easily misinterpreted. This appeared to be especially true for shirtless selfies, which participants suggested that many followers seem to use as an excuse to try shifting an interaction or relationship toward sex. Some participants were uncomfortable with being perceived as having this intent at all, so deleted the images or offensive comments and altered future behavior. Others (like P22) described it as more of a necessary evil or annoyance. He did not alter his behavior, but his experiences gave him good awareness of its potential consequences.

DISCUSSION

Studying shirtless selfies as shared by young males, seen as ambiguously appropriate by some young people, on a

¹ Participants commonly used "trade" or "trading pics" to refer to the private exchange of revealing or nude photos.

platform that assembles people with a range of goals brings several attributes of self-presentation into useful relief [6].

From a Goffman [18] standpoint, we can think about this in terms of constraints on appearance, setting and manner. Goffman describes appearance as the way one thinks about and manipulates visible attributes of the self to cultivate a particular impression. The setting, in keeping with Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor, is analogous to the staging of a performance. Setting can be manipulated and selected by the actor (e.g., meeting at a high-end restaurant vs. a busy Starbucks), as well as drawn on as a resource. Manner refers to the ways in which the actor/self behaves or carries himself to cultivate a particular impression (e.g., facial expressions, mannerisms, accents). These attributes, when viewed by the audience, become cues that are interpreted to form an impression. Reviewing these findings in light of Goffman yields three key implications.

Ambiguity Around Possible Impressions

First, for Goffman's concept of "appearance," my results suggest that participants were aware of the possible positive and negative consequences that might follow from sharing shirtless selfies. Virtually all participants recognized that shirtless selfies were common among some gay Instagram users, but not all participants felt that these were images they themselves wanted to share or even see from others. They appeared to think about these differently depending on their age and goals. Younger participants (except P28) tended to feel that shirtless selfies were less appropriate or interesting, as did participants who were using Instagram to build a following for reasons unrelated to their physical appearance, such as encouraging political activism (P5).

There was also a strong sense among participants that many Instagram users enjoy shirtless selfies, and they can attract followers. At the same time, though, participants recognized that shirtless selfies could negatively affect others' impressions, particularly for people they knew already. They worried about being seen as 'trashy' or 'cheap.' Broadly speaking, this is consistent with prior work suggesting that revealing or risqué images seen by the 'wrong' audience (e.g., an employer) can have significant negative consequences [29]; [32]. What is interesting here, however, is that the 'wrong' audience, which is typically thought of in prior work as parents or other authority figures, is one's actual peer/friend network.

This is similar to findings that some users of Grindr, a gay hookup app, blocked friends or dorm-mates from viewing their profile to avoid the possible stigma of being seen as sexually promiscuous [6]. Unlike Grindr, however, where the goal is to meet unknown others for dating or sex such that blocking friends has few consequences, blocking is less effective on Instagram, where the goal is to stay connected to one's friends or peers. As such, participants concerned about impressions report that their peers' possible impressions serve as a 'check' on shared content.

From a Goffman standpoint, the decision to share shirtless selfies at all is fundamentally a question of 'appearance' and the perceived desirability of the impressions that might be cultivated. In the next sections, I will discuss how shirtless selfie sharers use setting and manner strategically and how this is also hampered by attributes of the platform itself.

Contextual Boundaries

These results point to several influences on sharing shirtless images, including self-image, concerns about others' perceptions, and rules from parents, schools/employers or platforms. Participants also described their own restrictions on what they are willing to reveal, and in what contexts.

On the one hand, some participants described overall restrictions on certain parts of the body, such as never sharing shirtless pictures or never sharing pictures in their underwear. This blanket prohibition on certain pictures is similar in principle to content policies on many social media platforms discussed by [17]. It is also interesting that some participants essentially applied norms from one context (e.g., a pool or beach) to different contexts. In some cases, this had surprising results for them in terms of audience reaction.

This suggests the value of a more contextually oriented approach, as described by Nissenbaum in her discussion of privacy [36]. For Nissenbaum, one's information sharing and use should be governed not by the technical availability of information, but by the behavioral norms of the context in which the information is shared. Applying this approach, some participants here, consistent with Albury's [1] work, suggested that they would share (or approve of other people sharing) shirtless selfies only in particular contexts or with particular motivations. This highlights several important issues, with implications for self presentation.

First, those formulating external constraints such as parents and platforms making policies may focus on strategies that make formulating regulation easy (e.g., 'no shirtless pics' or 'no underwear'), but these can lead to later complications. Gillespie and others have discussed controversies around breastfeeding or health-related images of women's breasts on Facebook [17]. What we see here is interesting in that, as P28 points out, images of boys' and young men's exposed upper bodies are common on social media and in everyday life, but as several other participants essentially point out, this does not mean that these images cannot be sexualized or seen as inappropriate. This point is also discussed, though somewhat differently, by Schoenebeck et al. [2], who found fathers hesitant to share photos of their daughters.

In this way, thinking about shirtless selfies contextually makes sense, but, as Marwick and boyd [32] point out, this is difficult when images or platforms span multiple contexts. Here, we see this when, for example, participants are concerned about content being seen by people they know versus people they are trying to attract as followers. The question then becomes one of how to communicate the intent in the image, using the tools available. From a Goffman

standpoint, this is about the strategic (or implicit) use of “setting” and “manner” to affect impressions.

One example was P11, who talked about wanting to post nude photos in beautiful settings. Here, setting is manipulated to suggest artistic value. That is, the poster isn’t just posting ‘slutty mirror selfies’ for others’ gratification, and the viewer isn’t just looking at pornography, even if both of them would rather do precisely those things to achieve their respective desires for attention and gratification.

This is consistent with Albury’s [1] finding that some participants described what they saw as attempts to mask intent by manipulating the setting or manner of the image. For example, participants described seeing others who might be looking to show off their musculature via a caption like “new haircut”, but not wearing a shirt such that the rest of their body was clearly visible. At the same time, however, some of my participants said they would respond positively to images intended to show progress on weight loss or fitness goals, so there are likely some genuine posts of this nature and not all shirtless posts are purely to show off.

In some ways, this is similar to social steganography, as discussed by Marwick and boyd [32]. In those cases, the content is intended to be understood clearly by a particular audience (e.g., peers) but not others (e.g., parents). In the case of shirtless selfies, however, there is more ambiguity in that any of the possible audiences might misinterpret the image. The novel implication from these results is that it is useful to consider the confluence of Nissenbaum’s notion of context and Goffman’s notions of “setting” and “manner.” When users cannot or do not restrict content based on privacy settings, that is, how do they manipulate or draw on attributes of the image itself or how they present it to communicate the context or intent they hope viewers will interpret it with.

Design Implication: One implication is for how we think about using AI and image recognition on mobile social media platforms and on mobile devices. While some have tried to use AI to recognize and flag images containing certain parts of the human anatomy [3], for example, these results suggest first that it may not be easy to do so for some images, such as shirtless selfies of men. They further suggest the importance of context in understanding the normative appropriateness or acceptability of an image, in that images of shirtless males may be entirely appropriate in some contexts, but perceived by some as less appropriate in others.

Future Work: Several studies could stem from this implication, specifically focused on how users think about, communicate and interpret the intended context of an image. Studies of these practices in a range of settings and populations would help the research community explore this intersection of contextual norms and self-presentation.

Contextual Asymmetry

Building on the previous point, a third implication from these results for self-presentation is an increasingly important distinction between what we can think of as the context of

production and the context of interpretation (and impression formation). In several cases, participants were surprised by how others interpreted their photos, and sometimes changed the way they presented those photos or themselves to adapt, such as by deleting the photo itself or unwanted comments.

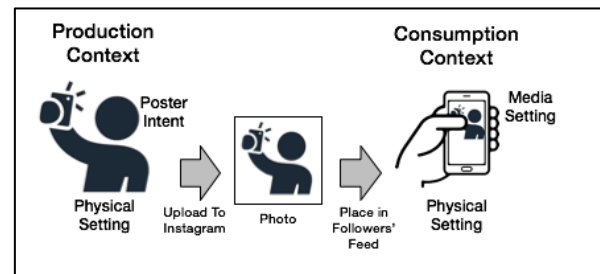


Figure 2. Contexts of production and consumption of Instagram content, as occurs in different physical settings. ‘Poster intent’ refers to goals of the image sharer and ‘media setting’ refers to other content surrounding the image.

Applying Goffman, we can say that these strategies serve to manipulate elements of setting and manner that are under the participant’s control, to positively affect others’ impressions. Combining this with Nissenbaum [36], we can say that they used setting and manner to communicate the context, and its accompanying norms, in which they wanted their image to be consumed. A unique attribute of self-presentation on mobile social media that this highlights, but is not accounted for in Goffman’s theory, however, is that the context of production can be different from the context of consumption (see Figure 2), with significant implications both for control over setting and ability to predict others reactions.

By context of consumption, I refer both to the ‘media setting’ of a piece of content (i.e., other content shown around it), and the physical setting of the viewer. Both of these affect the interpretation of content in that they contribute to the perceived setting of the photo, just as being shown with attractive friends can positively affect others perceptions of one’s attractiveness [46] and co-situating people online who are in different physical contexts can result in different perceptions of normatively appropriate behavior [6].

As these results illustrate, Instagram and other mobile social media platforms can amplify these differences. For presentation context, we already know that the contents of one’s social media feed depends heavily on the contacts who are sharing content. The non-reciprocal nature of ties on Instagram means, moreover, that one can follow many people unlike oneself and see content mostly from those people. While this scenario is not implausible on platforms like Facebook with reciprocal ties, it is less likely because Facebook contacts need to approve friend requests which imply a tie visible to others and grant reciprocal content access. Thus, Instagram users such as the young males I spoke to, most of whom are seeking to build a following, may be followed essentially *en masse* by people interested in seeing a feed full of pictures of young males, even if this is at odds with the young males’ self-presentation goals.

This matters for self-presentation because it affects what else will appear around (i.e., before and after) photos shared on Instagram. An intended-to-be-innocuous photo of a guy on the beach, for example, may be seen by some followers amid a series of mirror selfies ('slutty' or otherwise), and interpreted differently than by those who see the same photo among other photos of their friends. Social media feeds already require users to cede control to content-selection algorithms in ways that impact self-presentation strategies [15], but this ignores the role that followers play in selecting their contacts and, thus, the inventory of available content.

It is also helpful to focus on the consumption context to highlight another implication of these results. As discussed by Blackwell et al. [6], mobile devices can be used in a range of physical settings. And as attention to the exchange of intimate images [1] suggests, some of these settings can be quite intimate. While this study did not focus on content consumption, reactions described by some participants suggests that their followers may have been consuming images in a setting significantly different from those in which the images were produced, and that was at odds with the norms of the context in which the image was shared.

Consider, for example, the difference between being at a pool and seeing an attractive person in a swimsuit, and being in bed late at night seeing a photo on one's phone of that same attractive person. This difference in contexts (and their accompanying norms) could result in quite different interpretations, amplified by the media setting of the photo and potentially by the apparent lack of any observers that might otherwise restrict one's behavior (e.g., leering glances at a public pool). In this way, even small hints at sexuality or sexualized behavior could be perceived in unintended ways and lead to exactly the sort of behaviors participants described from their followers, such as inappropriate comments or requests to 'trade' on Snapchat.

This is importantly different from extant work on context collapse [32], in that the assumption in that perspective is that the same content will be perceived differently by different audiences. What we see here, however, is that the same audience could potentially respond differently to the same content, if there is variation in the presentation and consumption contexts. That is to say that the same follower may be both at the pool and alone in bed late at night, and respond very differently to images of that same person.

This also has implications for Litt's notion of imagined audience in suggesting that one must not only think of who will see the content, but also about what other content those audiences are seeing, where they will see it, and what behavior is normatively appropriate (or possible) in those settings, when they differ from the production context. That is, one must imagine not only the audience, but the audience's consumption context. And indeed, that is essentially what participants here were doing in being concerned about sharing any shirtless photos at all.

Design Implication: supporting effective self-presentation and preventing possible misunderstandings of intent may require us to find ways to allow users not just to understand who might see their content (as current privacy models allow), but also the presentation and consumption contexts of the content. This presents many privacy challenges, but there are some possibilities. One would be akin to the FlipFeed [26] browser plug-in that allows a user to experience another's Twitter feed. Given that Instagram follower lists are publicly visible, one could imagine a similar feature that lets users see the presentation context of their content as seen by followers.

Context of consumption is a bit more difficult, but one could imagine aggregated consumption data about one's followers or groups of followers (e.g., "75% of your followers over 25 see your content while they are at home"). Even that leaves a lot of ambiguity, but still provides some information. Additional possibilities here merit thought.

Future work. This notion of context separation points to several studies of this phenomenon. First, additional empirical support is needed for the influence of presentation and physical context on impression formation. Second, as content moves across contexts, it would be useful to understand how norms are perceived or inferred, and the extent to which they constrain people's actual behavior. Third, it would be useful to further understand the relative influences on impression formation and information sharing of the photo poster's intended context, the presentation context of the image and the physical setting of consumption. All of these studies could be carried out with a more general population and across a range of contexts.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the intersection of models for self-presentation and contextual information sharing via an interview study of young gay and bi males on Instagram. Results suggest a tension between the possible impression consequences of sharing shirtless selfies, which ranged from perceptions of attractiveness to being perceived as promiscuous or receiving unwanted sexual attention. They reported several strategies for navigating this tension, many of which stemmed from contextual norms around the appropriateness and intent of shirtless images. The results have several implications for models of self-presentation, particularly as we consider the separation of the contexts in which online photos are shared and consumed. This separation is exacerbated by mobile social media platforms with non-reciprocal ties, with consequences for how we consider audience and anticipating audience reactions.

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