



## **Selfies, Sexts, and Sneaky Hats: Young People’s Understandings of Gendered Practices of Self-Representation**

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When is sexting not sexting? How do producers and sharers of naked and seminaked selfies negotiate and engage with broader cultural codes and conventions of sexed and gendered self-representation? This article draws on interviews conducted in 2012 with three mixed-sex groups of 16- and 17-year-olds in Sydney, Australia, as part of the Young People and Sexting in Australia project (Albury, Crawford, Byron, & Mathews, 2013). It focuses not on the images that might most easily be categorized as “sexts” (i.e., images intended to be exchanged within flirtations and intimate relationships) but on other, more ambiguous images, defined by participants as *private selfies*, *public selfies*, and a subgenre of joke selfies known as *sneaky hats*. These images were not discussed in all groups, but when they were, they provoked lively debates in which participants explicitly and implicitly explored complex and at times contradictory understandings of the interplay of sexuality, gender, and representation. While not representative of all young people’s experiences of digital-picture-sharing cultures, these discussions point to a significant gap between young people’s own interpretations of their ordinary or everyday digital practices and adults’ interpretations of these practices.

As in other studies of sexting in the UK, Australia, and North America, participants in our study rejected the imprecision of the term *sexting* itself (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Hasinoff, 2014; Lounsbury, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2011; Manning, 2013; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013; Tallon, Choi, Keeley, Elliott, & Maher, 2012). The Young People and Sexting project used a plain-English definition of sexting produced by the National Children’s and Youth Law Centre (NCYLC), a legal service for young people: “naked or semi-naked pictures.” (Albury et al., 2013, p. 5). This definition provoked considerable dissent in some groups (and has now been altered on the NCYLC website).

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Our participants preferred the term *pictures* and categorized them in many ways, with references to broader popular genres and the context of production and circulation. As a result, the Young People and Sexting in Australia report aimed to produce a broad typology of images, as follows:

- private selfies (or self-portraits)
- public selfies
- contextual images—i.e., pictures where undress is “ordinary,” such as images taken at the beach or swimming pool, featuring one or more young people in swimwear
- joke images
- inoffensive sexual pictures—i.e., flirtatious seminaked or naked images produced and shared consensually between peers or intimate partners
- offensive and unethical sexual pictures:  
These include flirtatious semi-naked or naked images produced consensually, but nonconsensually shared by ex-friend or ex-partner for revenge; images produced or shared without consent . . . and images produced consensually but distributed/consumed outside of prior agreements. (Albury et al., 2013, p. 23)

The conversations that led us to propose this typology were significant in that they drew attention to both young women’s and young men’s participation in selfie culture in Australia and to the gaps in adult understandings of selfie practices.

#### **Private and Public Selfies**

As Boesel (2014) argues, although all genders can rightly be concerned by issues of online privacy and unsanctioned sharing and collection of data, many elements of what she terms the “privacy critique” (and, consequently, many approaches to cybersafety education) are expressed in terms that are highly sexed and gendered:

check your settings, tug down your hem, button your blouse. Abstinence only, please— or you’re asking for it. Keep your knees (bits?) pressed together, and cover up already. Surely you’re not trying to show your data to everyone, you [insert choice of sexual slur here]? (para. 10)

It was clear from our group discussions, however, that both young men and young women were highly conscious of privacy and that not all selfies were made to be shared. Indeed, all participants agreed that while the NCYLC definition of sexting implied that any “suggestive” photograph might count as sexting, some forms of sexual self-representation were intended primarily for self-reflection. In response to a question on whether “boys taking pictures of muscles” might count as sexting, one group responded as follows:

Female:           But everyone’s doing that these days.  
Male:             That’s not—that’s not—yeah.  
Facilitator:      Yeah?

- Female: That's not sexting.  
 Male: Yeah, yeah.  
 Female: Everyone's taking photos of themselves and . . .  
 Female: Yeah.  
 Female: Even the girls these days are taking photos of themselves in sexual ways.  
 Facilitator: Just in the mirror, or . . .?  
 Female: Yeah, just posing.

This practice was defined by the group as "just private selfies." For one male participant, a private selfie meant "you take a picture of yourself for just the satisfaction of having a photo." As indicated in the exchange quoted above, posing for private selfies could be seen as sexual, but these pictures were not created to be shared—even among close friends. It was clear from this conversation, too, that boys' muscle pictures (i.e., displays of flexed biceps and six-packs) could be reasonably read as sexual or sexy. In groups that discussed private selfies, they were framed as an ordinary, or at least unremarkable, practice, albeit somewhat risky, with several participants expressing concern that friends, parents, or teachers might find private selfies on unlocked phones. Friends might nonconsensually share these images as a joke or prank, but the main risks of parental discovery were embarrassment (for both parents and young people) and "overreaction" from adults who feared the photo had been shared.

In contrast, public selfies were suggested to be more communicative than reflective and could be understood as an expression of self that communicated to others one's location and interests at a certain point in time:

- Male: Just a way to show off yourself.  
 Male: Yeah.  
 Facilitator: Okay.  
 Male: Like whether you're at a site—a different location or something like that, it's—yeah.

In this context, the creation and sharing of public selfies deployed a range of social media practices, including those Couldry (2012) has defined as "showing and being shown" and "prescencing," or "managing presence to others across space" (p. 49). Like private selfies, public selfies might also be sexy, although it was clear that sexiness had to be deployed quite strategically in this context. Both young men and young women were described as posting selfies on Facebook that displayed their bodies (specifically female cleavage and male six-packs) in pursuit of likes. Strategies for deflecting accusations of overexposure were described by one participant as "product placement." Her demonstration, in which she mimed pushing up her breasts, was met by approving laughter and knowing commentary from the group:

- Male: And they'll just be like, "New hair." [Laughter.] And yeah, *that's* what you were trying to show [sarcasm]. 120 likes . . .  
 Facilitator: Is that considered wrong?

- Female: I think even guys with the—I know some of my guy friends on Facebook post half-naked photos, “Oh, look at my muscles.” Exactly the same thing.
- Male: Yeah . . .

Both young men and young women offered a range of contextual rationales for appearing seminaked in a selfie:

- Female: Going back to the definition “taking naked or partly naked photos,” how does a girl or boy being in their underwear have any difference to their being in their swimwear? How is that any different? . . . I know there is obviously a difference, but . . .
- Male: Yeah. It’s like the intent behind it. People think ah, if I see a photo of someone posing in their underwear, there’s an intent—“I want to look sexy.” Where, if you’re in a bikini or something, they’re like, “Oh yeah, you look hot, but you’re not, like . . .”
- Male: “Just going to the beach.”
- Male: Yeah. “Just going to the beach.” Like that sort of excuse.

This implication that the boundary between “I want to look sexy” and “Just going to the beach” requires an “excuse” was part of a humorous discussion of the ambivalence about public selfies, or selfies deliberately circulated on social media. Both young men and young women joked about conventions of self-presentation that required participants (primarily young women) to balance “ordinary” self-representation with “looking sexy,” invoking many excuses that could be used when posting selfies online.

The use of the term “excuse” did not seem to imply that such rationale were hypocritical or unreasonable—rather, that they occurred within a broader discussion of the contextual meanings of pictures of clothed and unclothed bodies. It should be noted that at the time of these interviews, the then federal government opposition leader, now Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, was frequently photographed in Lycra cycling gear or in the brief Speedo swimwear known within the Australian vernacular as *budgie smugglers*. Images of seminaked adult bodies of all genders clothed in brief athletic clothing or swimwear are extremely common in Australian popular media and can be primarily read as “sporty” or “healthy.” This is not to say that seminaked “sporty” or “outdoorsy” bodies are not *also* understood as sexy, but they are certainly not considered to be obscene or pornographic within the context of mainstream Australian popular media and culture.

### **On Cybersafety, Sexualization, and Child Pornography**

Like adults, young people represent and embody sexiness, ordinariness, functionality, and humor in careful and complex ways. Just as adults do, young people negotiate sexed, gendered, and classed codes and conventions. Yet in Australia, as in other anglophone countries, young people’s digital practices of self-representation have primarily been viewed through the discursive lenses of cybersafety and sexualization (see Hasinoff, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013). As elsewhere, the vast majority of Australian

popular media reports and educational materials addressing the production and distribution of sexts understand these (in commonsense terms) to be sexually explicit or provocative photos of young women, often self-produced (Albury et al., 2013). As Ringrose (2013) observes, the majority of scholarly and popular accounts of mediated self-representation frame young women and girls “as most ‘at risk’ of exposure to sexual ‘grooming’ from adult sexual predators, and ‘self-sexualization’, and as victims of sexually explicit imagery” (p. 114).

Yet in our focus groups, it was clear that young men also produced naked and seminaked selfies across a range of genres. This finding is significant for Australian policy and regulation. While young people aged 16 and over are recognized by New South Wales’ law as having full capacity to consent to sexual activity, any “sexually suggestive” image of a person aged under 18 may be considered child pornography, according to both state and commonwealth law (Albury et al., 2013). Focus group participants catalogued many possible motives for producing or sharing naked or seminaked images and challenged legal and educational interpretations of all such images as sexual, in contrast to this broad definition of child pornography.

- Facilitator: How do you think adults would define the term sexting, whether that’s teachers or journalists or someone else?
- Male: They would think it’s irresponsible because people could send it around.
- Facilitator: Anything else?
- Male: They’d probably—even the slightest thing sexual—even like teenagers joke around a lot, but the moment you mention anything sexual they’ll probably be like—jump on it straight away and say “sexting.”
- Male: Yes, overreact.

### **Gendered Bodies: Selfies and Sneaky Hats**

Participants in all three focus groups called attention to the ways the term *sexting* was misapplied to young people’s digital practices, with joke selfies mentioned in passing by several participants as an example of the kind of naked or seminaked images that might be misread by adults. These selfies seemed to be the digital equivalent of traditional seminaked or naked pranks such as mooning (flashing naked buttocks) or streaking (also known in Australia as a *nudey run*). One group explicitly discussed a selfie genre known as *sneaky hat*, in which subjects pose naked with a baseball cap (or other hat) strategically covering their breasts or genitals. This discussion illuminated young people’s perceptions of the different ways that boys’ selfies and girls’ selfies were perceived by adults.

Several young women felt themselves to be unfairly targeted or scrutinized in relation to the provocativeness of their online and offline self-representations. In a lively discussion, one group of young women complained that teachers policed their hem lengths and that parents policed their Facebook profile pictures (this practice was considered particularly unfair when facial expressions such as duck-face pouts were condemned as oversexualized). In contrast to this perceived oversurveillance, boys were observed to

be free to appear naked in pictures and social networking profiles without being read as sexual by either peers or adults. One group discussed a male friend who had recently posted a sneaky hat picture on Facebook, promising that if he received enough likes, he'd do a nudey run. The group overtly framed this post as an example of the double standards applied to digital self-representations:

- Female: That's the whole thing with the gender . . .
- Female: Yes, definitely.
- Female: . . . it's like if a girl does anything in her underwear, it's immediately, "She's trying to get someone. She's trying to look provocative and sexy and stuff."
- Female: That's a gender equality issue.
- Female: Yeah. But if a guy does it it's hilarious and it's so funny.
- Male: Yeah, I'm sure if there was a girl in that photo, people [i.e., parents and teachers] would have been called up and stuff, but because it's just a guy . . .
- Male: A guy, like no one cares, they're just . . .
- Male: No one cared.

According to *Know Your Meme*, the sneaky-hat selfie came to prominence in 2011, when a group of 15-year-old boys from Dalby, a rural town in Queensland, Australia, established a dedicated sneaky-hat Facebook page (Stanley, 2013). After receiving almost 1,000 contributions from young men, the site came to the attention of the local high school and subsequently to mainstream media outlets such as the breakfast television program *Sunrise*, where it was condemned for breaching Australian child pornography laws (Thompson, 2011). According to a 2011 news article, "the craze . . . spawned spin-offs such as girls and boys-only sites, and location-specific groups such as 'Sneaky Hat Brisbane'" (Thompson, 2011). While Facebook removed the Dalby sneaky-hat site following a request from the Queensland Department of Education and Training (Davies, 2011), examples of the genre are still easy to find on social media platforms such as Tumblr.

As a (minor) moral panic over sneaky hats peaked in Australia, rural newspaper *The Toowoomba Chronicle* reported an interview with the 15-year-old who had established the initial Facebook page, who said it was established "for a laugh," observing, "My mum saw it, she knew and just thought it was funny" (Davies, 2011). This echoes focus group participants' observations and is not surprising, given that the sneaky-hat selfie mimics a popular comedic tradition. Antecedents of the sneaky-hat selfie appear in recent cinema in the all-male striptease finale of *The Full Monty* (Pasolini, 1997) and within the prolonged, almost vaudevillian sequence in *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* in which newlyweds Mike Myers and Elizabeth Hurley walk naked through a room of conveniently placed furniture, wedding gifts, and fruit platters (McLeod et al., 1999).

While selfies and sexting are still a subject of popular concern in Australian media, sneaky-hat pictures or sexy selfies featuring young men are seldom represented within these debates. Even at the peak of interest in sneaky hats, media reports tended to use pictures of young women rather than young men. There are, of course, many cultural meanings that might be attached to an image of nude body (see

Barcan, 2004). As noted previously, sneaky-hat pictures fit into a tradition of comic performance of nudity that relies on observers' awareness of the contextual boundaries between functional exposure (e.g., in a medical or sporting context), nakedness as sexiness, and the abjection (and shame or embarrassment) of inadvertent public nakedness typified by the wardrobe malfunction (see Low & Smith, 2007).

Both male and female performers can and do play with these boundaries, particularly in the context of neoburlesque performance, which contains intentionally comic or parodic elements of "tease," where nudity is promised but not fully revealed (Ferreday, 2008). This form of body humor is classed as much as it is gendered, with burlesque's "vulgar" displays of excessive femininity, and vaudeville's "leveling" display of masculine bodies (for an extended discussion of representations of class, race, gender, and nudity within vaudevillian comedy traditions, see Kipnis, 1992, and Penley, 2004).

As Farrell (2003) observes, while the ordinariness of working-class men's naked bodies in *The Full Monty* can be seen to render them vulnerable to the female gaze, the film's narrative (and humor) relies on the audience's understanding that women's naked bodies are "proper" objects of both judgmental scrutiny and erotic spectatorship (p. 126). Similarly, Ballou (2013) notes in her discussion of "funny/sexy" female comedians who incorporate burlesque or striptease into their performances, while female nudity *can* be recognized as comic in this context, such recognition is fraught when the naked comic body is also read as sexually attractive in normative terms (p. 182). While Ballou does not directly compare critical or popular responses to sexy/funny male and female nudity, the Australian response to sneaky-hat selfies suggests that a normatively attractive naked young male body is more likely to be read as appropriately funny (and self-deprecatingly egalitarian) than inappropriately provocative. This doesn't mean, however, that sneaky-hat pictures cannot also be sexy—on entering the term "sneaky hat" into a search engine, I found several collections of male sneaky-hat selfies curated or liked by gay men.

### **Gender, Self-Representation and Body Confidence**

Participants in two groups explicitly attributed the different responses to joke pictures and other forms of selfies to double standards for male and female bodies. While participants overtly rejected double standards of sexual self-expression, several of them also attributed differences in young men's and young women's practices of self-representation to individual body confidence rather than to perceptions of structural inequality. For example, this young woman reflected what might be termed an empowerment discourse when discussing public selfies:

Female: I think it also raises issues about, are you allowed to do what you want with your body? I mean, if you are that confident that you want to post a naked picture on Facebook, should you be allowed to do that? I mean, if it's yours, if you're autonomous.

With the exception of one female participant who found sexting offensive, all groups expressed consensus regarding young women's abilities to desire and participate in practices of sexual self-representation. These practices were not prescribed by any participant, suggesting they might take the form of private selfies, public selfies, or sexting exchanges with an intimate partner. Although all groups

acknowledged that these practices could be subject to coercion or abuse by peers or adults, female participants responded negatively to suggestions that young women produced sexual images only in response to pressure (Albury et al., 2013).

As in Bale's (2011) study of British young people's responses to sexual media culture, the young women in this group were critical of adults and peers who sought to shame or censor sexual self-representation, and as noted above, they rejected adult surveillance of their sexuality through policing their skirt length and profile pictures. At the same time, it was clear from their joking about sexy but self-effacing product-placement selfies that they recognized themselves as being enmeshed in broader cultural standards of femininity. Additionally, as in Bale's study, one group discussion implied that sexual self-confidence for women was contingent on having a "good" body and that unwanted exposure of "good" selfies would be less shaming or shameful than exposure of "bad" pictures.

While it was agreed that both boys and girls would be deeply embarrassed if a private selfie was shared without consent, one group argued that it would be easier for boys to convert the meaning of the image from private selfie to public joke or prank through their own expressions of self-confidence:

- Female: Guys go do nudey runs and all stupid type of things.  
 Female: Yeah, they do all stupid things.  
 Female: Where a girl's more—there's more problems with girls' self-confidence than there is boys' self-confidence.  
 Female: For a guy, he'd probably just laugh and go ha ha ha ha . . .  
 Female: A guy would make a joke out of it. I know guys that will, like, "Like my status, and if I get 100 status likes, I'll do a sneaky hat photo."

Although other discussions of young men's private selfies clearly implied a desire for self-presentation as a sexy body, this discussion made it clear that the possibility of nudity being read as funny rather than sexy offered boys a possibility of escaping public shaming that was not available to girls. Participants seemed to acknowledge that this was an effect of sexed and gendered double standards, but they simultaneously expressed it as an effect of young men's *individual* experience of body confidence.

The concept of sexed and gendered body confidence opens a provocative space for a consideration of practices of self-representation. Drawing on Butler (2002), Angela McRobbie maps what she terms a "double-entanglement" within popular cultural representations of heterosexual femininity, reflecting a "co-existence of neo-conservative values . . . with processes of liberalization in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations," which she identifies as a postfeminist response to politics of gender (2009, p. 12). In Australia, as elsewhere, media, education, and policy responses to young people's practices of sexual self-representation are framed in terms of sexualization discourses, which primarily focus on young women and girls as vulnerable subjects; however, they also express concern regarding the risks of youthful sexual curiosity or knowingness and girls' participation in online and offline sexual cultures (see Albury et al., 2013; Albury & Lumby, 2010; Egan, 2013; Hasinoff, 2014).



Within the discursive context of sexualization, seemingly straightforward (and positive) notions such as body confidence and body autonomy are doubly entangled. On one hand, the confident or empowered response for young women might be repudiation or refusal of public displays of normative sexiness. On the other, body confidence and empowerment might involve choosing to participate in body display as a public exercise of sexual agency. While young men's naked or seminaked selfies can be dismissed by both adults and young people as merely funny or stupid, young women's participation in selfie culture bears an extra burden of representation.

### Reflections and Conclusions

The Young People and Sexting in Australia project invited young people to respond to the legal, educational, and media discourses that affected practices of sexual self-representation. Throughout focus-group discussions, participants expressed frustration at the ways adults misunderstood their complex cultures of digital media production and distribution. Participants' accounts of the different ways that parents and teachers interpret male and female nudity (or seminudity) offer a challenge to cybersafety education programs and policies. As feminist scholars have noted, educational policies that seek to protect young women but that do not challenge broader cultural assumptions regarding "appropriate" gendered behaviors and modes of self-representation run the risk of reinforcing oppressive gender norms (see Albury & Crawford, 2012; Dobson, Rasmussen, & Tyson, 2012).

While our participants certainly framed selfie production and sharing as a sexed and gendered process, their explanations of the different ways that young men and women made and shared (or chose not to share) selfies opened up fertile ground for future inquiry into the specificities of gendered selfie cultures. It is significant that these discussions of selfies, sexts, and sneaky hats occurred in mixed-sex groups. While boys and girls seemed equally likely to make and share naked or seminaked selfies, it was clear that boys had more freedom to publicly display their bodies without risking adult or peer condemnation. While young men's bodies could be read as sexy, discussions of the sneaky-hat selfie and other joke images indicated that young men's self-representations were not subject to the same kinds of adult surveillance that young women's pictures (and bodies) attracted. Given that existing research and popular representations of selfie cultures focus primarily on young women's practices, future research with both mixed- and single-sex groups could more fully explore the different meanings that young people ascribe to boys' selfies, offering a valuable contribution to this field.

Young people's accounts of cultures of self-representation offer a productive space for reshaping educational, legal, and policy conversations about media, sexuality, and gender. This does not mean that all discussions of self-representation should be celebratory and that the potential for coercive or abusive production and distribution of digital images should not be taken seriously. I suggest, though, that these conversations might *also* take account of different meanings and purposes ascribed to private and public selfies, the different ways dress (and undress) are contextualized, the role of humor and pranking in picture sharing, and the ways that gendered double standards are seen as both collective structures *and* products of individual body confidence.

Because of the risk of self-incrimination under Australian child pornography laws, this project specifically excluded any discussions of participants' own experience of producing and sharing sexy pictures. However, future research might productively explore the social and political forces that come into play when discussing selfie cultures with young people. For example, Hendry observes, "the groups I work with often cringe when I mention selfies and are more than willing to discuss their own selfie production as parody, but not a serious or functional practice" (2014, para. 7). As I have argued in my exploration of the intersection between sneaky-hat selfies and other cultural forms of body humor, parodic body performances can do serious work in respect to gender and sexuality.

The ambivalence displayed in young people's discussions of "excuses" for bodily display, product-placement selfies, and gendered expressions of body confidence seem to me to reflect broader cultural ambivalence and anxieties regarding sexed and gendered practices of self-representation. Rather than seeking to shut down this discomfort by producing blanket pronouncements on the "right" way to produce, share, and interpret selfies, adults who seek to support young people would do well to delve more deeply into the broader cultural and political tensions underpinning this ambivalence.

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