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2017

https://doi.org/10.25595/493

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Faust, Gretchen: *Hair, Blood and the Nipple : Instagram Censorship and the Female Body*, in: Köhn, Steffen; Fox, Samantha; Terry, Mike; Frömming, Urte Undine (Hrsg.): Digital Environments. Ethnographic Perspectives across Global Online and Offline Spaces (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2017), 159-170. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25595/493.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here: https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434970-012

GenderOpen – Repositorium für die Geschlechterforschung: www.genderopen.de

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Hair, Blood and the Nipple

Instagram Censorship and the Female Body

Gretchen Faust

Introduction

Every*body* has the possibility of becoming a content creator within the realm of social media, allowing for limitless cultural creation. Social media is an open forum permitting anyone to be heard. Content creation provides networked individuals opportunities to reach wider audiences, creating an online community and capacity to broaden discussion. Shared media contributes to expanding knowledge and generates infinite ways of being.

However, these ideals are not echoed by the application of content control in social media venues. *Facebook*, *Instagram* and *Twitter* are well-known social media outlets that focus on networking, sharing images, and brief words of thought. Despite the magnitude of variety in the realm of the internet, social media exercises different degrees of censorship to control the portrayal of male and female identified bodies. This paper is going to explore the censorship of female identified artist's bodies on the social media platform *Instagram*[1].

Methodology

This study is navigated with feminist qualitative methods that focus on the subject's experience within their self-imaging practice. The exploration is reflective in a sense, as I identify myself as a feminist artist who deals with the issue of the body. However, I do not share my work on the social media

1 | The illustrated images were hand drawn by the author to provide an idea of the sources referenced in the essay while respecting the ownership of those who are featured in regards to copyright despite the well circulated nature of the Instagram photos.

platform. Identifying myself as female may have given me more access to sharing similar experiences as my subjects.

My research was based on "following" two female artists (Petra Collins and Rupi Kaur) on their *Instagram* accounts as well as the *#FreetheNipple* movement. Additionally, I interviewed a female artist, Scar, on the topic of her experience as a female identifying artist who posts work on *Instagram,* and its issues of censorship. Scar runs an *Instagram* account[2] that is solely dedicated to posting on "menstrual experience"; posting submissions of art, photographs, comics, poems, etc. to the feed since March 2015. Unlike Petra Collins or Rupi Kaur, none of Scar's postings have been removed or banned despite similarities in content. This may be because of the difference in the amount of followers—possibly the lower volume of traffic onto their feed may protect their visibility from the *Instagram* moderation team.

What is particular to the art that has been shared on *Instagram* is that it is a "self-imaging practice," where the artist is both object and the subject at the same time. This is a challenge towards the conceived social order of image production and consumption in our general visual culture. A "self imaging practice" of a female identified artist questions the stereotypical role of image production that is controlled through a patriarchal lens. This study is important in today's image-centered society because, while the feminist movement has improved the progression towards social equality, there is still a particular ideal and image exerted over a woman's body.

Insta-*What*?

In simple terms, *Instagram* is an online, mobile, photo-sharing, video-sharing and social networking service. It enables its users to take pictures and videos and simultaneously share them on a variety of social networking platforms such as *Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr* and *Flickr. Instagram* is an interactive way to share your life with friends through a series of pictures. *Instagram* allows one to experience moments in your friends' lives through pictures as they happen, proclaiming the hope of "a world more connected through photos.[3]"

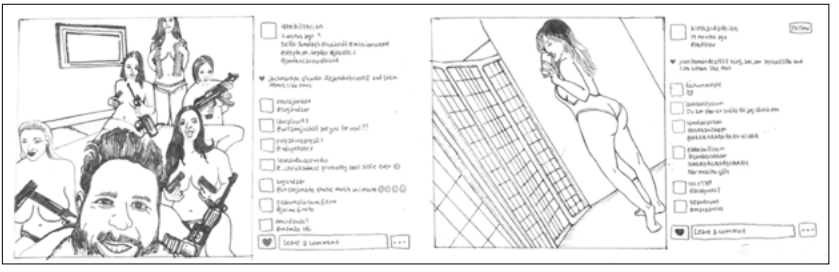
The declared goal of *Instagram*'s service presents the possibility of sharing diverse ways of being and experiences, however their terms of service present boundaries that readily contest their mission. *Instagram*'s main concern is to have users post photos and videos that are *appropriate* for a diverse audience. The detailed explanation given in their "terms of use" states, "for a variety of

2 | Scar, *Instagram* user: xxgirlflu, has over 797 followers.

3 | *Instagram*'s "Community Guidelines," April 2015. Accessed: May 24, 2016. https://help.instagram.com/477434105621119/

reasons, we don't allow nudity on *Instagram*. This includes photos, videos, and some digitally-created content that show sexual intercourse, genitals, and close-ups of fully-nude buttocks." This censorship also extends to some photos of female-identified nipples, but photos of post-mastectomy scarring and women actively breastfeeding are allowed. Nudity in photos of paintings and sculptures is acceptable.

Image 1



(Left) Illustration of Dan Bilzerian's *Instagram*, Bilzerian is known as the "King of Instagram." (Right) Illustration of a well known "selfie" from Kim Kardashian's *Instagram* feed. Kardashian is within the top ten *Instagram* most followed users—only second to *Instagram* itself. Illustration by author.

Social media's definition of what constitutes "nudity" and what is permissible regarding the female nipple is constantly contested. There is the common idea that if you wouldn't show the photo or video you are thinking about uploading to a child, or your boss, or your parents, you probably shouldn't share it on *Instagram* (Raiss 2015). As with the rest of *Instagram*'s "Community Guidelines," the familiar tone of this cautionary statement contradicts the manner of enforcement. A photo that violates the ban on "nudity or mature content" will be taken down, the user will be served with either a perfunctory warning or a suspension of their account and content; in some cases the person's account will be terminated.

Similar to *Facebook*, *Instagram* doesn't get into the messy business of distinguishing between pornography and art. Their blanket ban on so-called "mature content" and the inconsistency of enforcement has users struggling to wade their way through ill-defined concepts relating to the morality around photo sharing. Male nipples and the thong-clad asses that populate the famed "Instagram King" Dan Bilzerian's feed[4], together with posts of Kim Kardashian

4 | Dan Bilzerian is an American professional poker player, actor and internet social media celebrity with over 16.4 million followers. Bilzerian commonly posts photos of women, guns and trips to Vegas.

West's[5] bottom are allowed to stay. While female nipples and bare buttocks that don't belong to Kim Kardashian are asked to leave the platform (Raiss 2015). Representations made by *Instagram* often state that they try to find a balance between allowing people to express themselves creatively whilst retaining policies that maintain a "comfortable experience for our global and culturally diverse community". However, this line of what is acceptable is always in flux, with constant revisions and what *Instagram* often refers to as mistakes. The platform is well aware of this inconsistency in their policies, and honestly states "we recognize that we don't always get it right" (Vagianos 2015).

What Started This Rumble? Petra Collins and the Visible, Impermissible Hair

On the outskirts of the celebrity-driven *Instagram* feeds, there have been a few social personalities that have brought attention to what is permissible and what is inacceptable on the social media feed. What makes the cut and what does not in the social feed, is a mirror of what our plugged-in culture promotes within its values.

Petra Collins is a portraiture photographer, fashion photographer and fashion designer from Toronto, Canada[6]. Her work addresses "what is hidden from our culture". Common themes in her work surround what is natural to a post-pubescent body, the menstrual cycle of young women and masturbation. She sparked an internet discussion after designing a t-shirt for *American Apparel* that featured a line drawing of a vagina bleeding.

Her rise as a social media sensation began in March 2013, when Collins' *Instagram* account was deleted for a photograph of herself that showed her own pubic hair emerging from bikini bottoms. Collins claims the account deletion was unfounded because it did not break any of *Instagram*'s terms and conditions. When asked about her intention with her work, "I guess I was trying to combat feelings of the male gaze through my images. I wanted to create images that represented *my own* sexuality, not a sexuality that was dictated by someone else–like, 'How do I make this *mine*?'" (Collins, 2013). Collins openly wrote about her experience of *Instagram* taking down her photo stating: "What I did have was an image of MY body that didn't meet society's standard of 'femininity'" (ibid.).

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5 | Kim Kardashian West is an American television and social media personality, socialite, and model. She has over 65.4 million followers on *Instagram*. Kardashian released a book called *Selfies* in May 2015 that contained over 445 photos of her chronological "selfie" photographs.

6 | Petra Collins has 300,000 followers on her *Instagram* account.

Image 2

Illustration of the image Petra Collins had posted on her *Instagram* in March 2013 and was subsequently removed and later allowed on the social platform. Illustration by author.

It is perplexing that such an image, apparently so harmless and familiar, could be banned alongside accepted imagery posted by celebrities that promote an aggressive sexuality and gender. This situation is salient in illustrating the capacity for society to be shocked and appalled by what is otherwise "natural" amidst a proliferation of sexually violent or disgustingly derogatory images that regularly populate our media as a whole. It highlights the hypocrisy at play; *Instagram*'s community standards deem someone's body in a more "natural" state to be unacceptable.

Responding to the inescapable reach of social media, Collins offers images of unflinching honesty, exploring the aspects of privacy and publicity of growing up as a woman at a moment when female bodies are ubiquitously hyper-mediated by *Photoshop* and social media. Collins writes, "I'm used to being told by society that I must regulate my body to fit the norm." The point that makes Collin's essay on censorship and social media significant is the idea that the internet is an outlet from real life and if an image or concept is banned in this apparently limitless realm, then how can other ways of being manifest in our real time experience? If particular imagery of bodies are silenced or censored in a place of boundless possibility, then is there any place to be free?

Rupi Kaur and 'Leaking Patriarchy'–What Type of Blood is Tolerated?

When Rupi Kaur[7] decided to make the taboo around menstruation the theme of her university photography project, she wasn't expecting to become the focus within *Instagram*'s continuous censorship war. The Canadian poet and artist uploaded an image from her photographic series onto *Instagram* in March 2015, depicting her fully clothed but with a spot of blood between her legs and on the sheets. *Instagram* removed it—twice—claiming that her photo violated their terms of service.

Kaur decided to convey menstruation to demystify the cultural stigmas that surround it. She developed the series of work with her sister Prabh over a weekend. After the photo series was created Kaur decided to share it online; this action formed a component of the project, tracking how different medias embraced or rejected the material (Tsjeng 2015). Before the image was taken down by the *Instagram* team, her page was swarmed by internet trolls[8], leaving comments like "come over here and let me make your vagina bleed" and "fuck your feminism". *Instagram* deleted the picture less than 24 hours after it was posted. Kaur stated that *Instagram* did not give her any reason, nor did they contact her before the removal of her image.

The response to, and subsequent censorship of, the photo series amplified Kaur's motive behind her work. Kaur discussed that "it wasn't just a project for my school course anymore, it felt like a personal attack on my humanity" (Tsjeng 2015). Kaur did not complain directly to *Instagram*, but instead posted the photo again with the hope of informing her audience of the nature of the censorship happening on *Instagram*. Kaur repeated the post of the image that same night it had been removed; again it was removed the following morning (Tsjeng 2015).

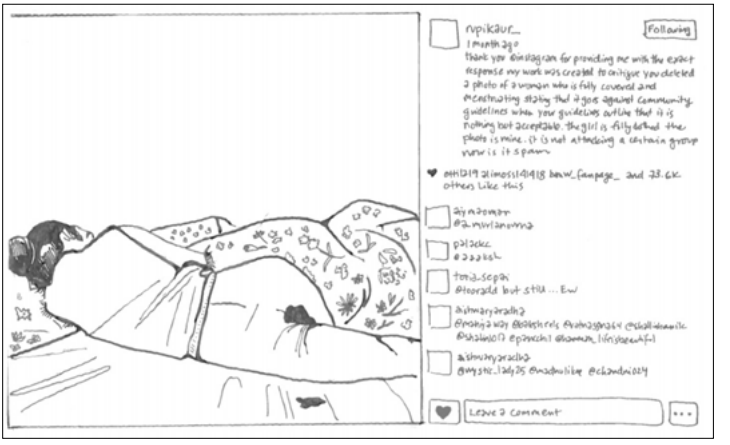
Interestingly enough, *Instagram* only claims to prohibit images that are "violent, nude, partially nude, discriminatory, unlawful, infringing, hateful, pornographic or sexually suggestive". Within this list there is no mention of menstrual blood. Nonetheless, Kaur's image of a blood spot was removed twice. Kaur moved her image to *Facebook* to discuss the censorship on *Instagram*. In her *Facebook* post, Kaur discussed that she is aware that some communities and cultures go out of their way to shun and oppress a woman for the duration of her period. In a *Facebook* post, she wrote, "*Instagram* is another one of them. Their patriarchy is leaking. Their misogyny is leaking. We will not be censored."

7 | Rupi Kaur has 387,000 Instagram followers.

8 | An internet troll is someone online who posts comments with the deliberate intent of provoking readers into an emotional response. Comments may be inflammatory, off topic, or harassing.

The post immediately went viral—it was shared 6,339 times and liked by more than 36,000 people. Kaur's photo had suddenly reappeared on her *Instagram* page within the next morning.

Image 3

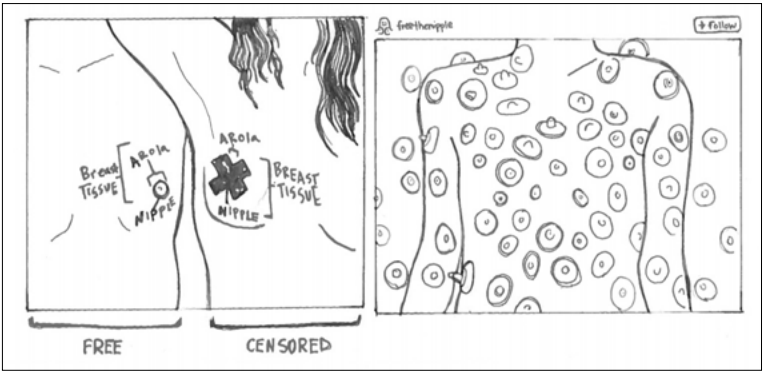


Rupi Kaur's image that was removed twice from her *Instagram* feed, first posted in March 2015. Illustration by author.

It is important to keep in mind that Kaur's image was censored on a platform where revealing imagery is persistent. The natural cycle and monthly experience of the women is not tolerable to be seen; as Kaur puts it "It is okay to sell what's between a woman's legs, more than it is okay to mention its inner workings." Kaur is still surprised the image was as controversial as it ended up being, stating, "I never thought it was such a big deal, it's just a red spot."

But Whose Nipple Makes the Cut? #FreetheNipple

Image 4



Images taken from Freethenipple's *Instagram* feed https://www.instagram.com/freethenipple/. Illustration by author.

Standards of acceptance of nudity between genders are far from equal in most cultures. This can be seen in the casual example of a bathing suit: how many women are obliged to cover their chest area, while it is cultural accepted for a male identifying person to be bare-chested. Female bodies are still subject to intense scrutiny and censorship when it comes to nipples—a form of disapproval to which, unfairly, men are not subject. Women are regularly expelled from *Instagram* for posting photos with any portion of the areola exposed, while photos *sans* nipple—degrading as they might be—remain unchallenged.

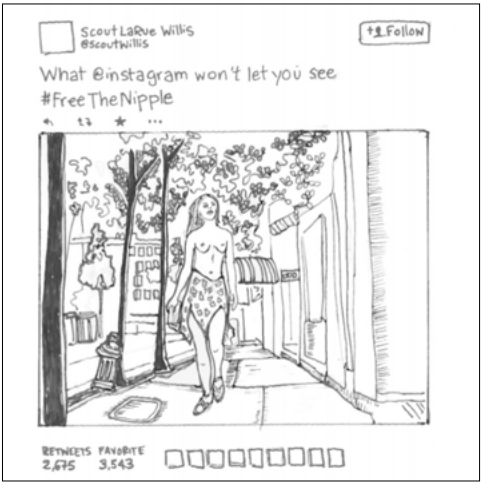
The *#FreetheNipple* movement was sparked by various *Instagram* users, however celebrity Scout Willis was able to use her public leverage to bring more light to the matter. Willis used her body to campaign against gender inequality and the double standard of censoring women more than men. During summer 2014, Willis walked around the streets of New York City topless to protest against *Instagram*'s rules on nudity. She did this to point out "that what is legal by New York state law is not allowed on *Instagram*." (Willis, 2014)

Willis has been criticized for relating the visibility of nipples with equality, however to her, "nipples seem to be at the very heart of the issue." Willis highlighted the historic point in 1930s American society when men's nipples were just as provocative and shameful as the nipples of women are now. Willis recounts the public action taken in 1935 where a flash mob of topless men descended upon Atlantic City in New York City, 42 of whom were arrested. Men fought and they were heard, so changing not only the law but also social consciousness. By 1936, male bare chests were accepted as the norm in New

York City. Unfortunately, the divide still stands and it wasn't until 1992 that women were *allowed* to be topless in public in New York City (Ridge 2013).

However, one thing to keep in mind while scrolling through *#freethenipple* is that many of the postings share some common features: a lot of the people posting are white, thin and able-bodied. Many are conventionally attractive and most of those posting are young. For a campaign that is asking for equality and visibility, it brings to question the nature of exactly *what* is allowed to be celebrated. The movement claims to work against sexual objectification and censorship—something that arguably affects all women at some point in their lives—however the lack of diversity within its *hashtag* community only perpetuates what the movement is working against.

Image 5



Scout Willis' action in New York City, posted on *Twitter* during Summer 2014 that sparked publicity on *Instagram*'s nipple ban. Illustration by author.

Concluding Thoughts

As Jessica Valenti (2015) from *The Guardian* points out, "the very nature of social media has made it easier for women to present a more diverse set of images on what the female form can look like." However, the continuous act of concealing something by removing the image from public view makes it seem that the posted matter is illicit.

Upon following the issues of hair, blood and nipple in different social situations, it becomes apparent that aspects of internet culture bear an unhealthy disconnect between bodies and personal identities. It is interesting

that an image of a nipple is more offensive than the violent imagery that is posted throughout the internet. I am still left questioning why features of basic physiology are more threatening than firearms. Kaur's photographs and her act of sharing them on social media makes the blatant point that society is uncomfortable with women menstruating but is comfortable with women being objectified.

While imagery that does not fit the mold has been flagged on social media, it is the use of social media that has made it possible to bring attention to such censorship. Digital connectivity provides women with a very public way to assert their identities, build a supportive private or public community, and in some ways liberate their bodies from injustice or oppressive societal norms (Ruiz 2015). The censorship of the hair, blood and nipple shed light on a still murky facet of the vast social media universe. Imagery is censored by a geographically dispersed group of photo moderators who work 24/7 on the moderation of *Instagram*'s social platform. The moderators are not robots; they are human beings. Their cultural differences may mean that a certain photo is either banned, accepted, flagged for moderation, or approved in different global contexts. A set of corporate guidelines can prove insufficient for a network of photo moderators with their own preferences and biases (Shapiro 2012).

This type of gendered moderation or harassment has severe implications for women's status on the internet, as it is a reflection of the inequality that exists in our physical world. I recognize that I may have bias in my methods with this paper, but I believe that the photographs speak for themselves in actualizing the content that is allowed or not allowed on *Instagram*.

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