Fighting Instagram Censorship of the Female Nipple

@exotic.cancer and @genderless_nipples Seeking the Boundaries of the Instagram Guidelines to Critique the Sexualisation of the Female Body

Goukje Suringar
5983126
TCS: Postcolonial- and Gender Studies
Vasiliki Belia
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Summary

Instagram -one of the most popular platforms for visual works- bans photographic representations of the nude body including female nipples. This thesis focuses on Instagram and how feminist artists find ways to critique the censorship on the platform, while working with the boundaries of this platform. This research looks at the top-down and bottom-up ways of online practices on Instagram related to censorship. By doing discourse analysis and semiotics of the Instagram guidelines, two accounts and four posts it answers the following question: How do (queer) feminist accounts @genderless_nipples and @exotic.cancer seek the boundaries of the Instagram guidelines to critique the censorship of the female body and take ownership of the representation of the female body? Firstly, the posts accounts show that the Instagram censorship enacts the male gaze. Secondly, this male gaze is contested by seeking the boundaries of the guidelines and showing other ways of looking and representation of the female body. Lastly, the accounts of @exotic.cancer and @genderless_nipples try to change the existing objectifying discourse of the female body by forming an activist collective identity with other Instagram users.

Introduction

The female body has been a central subject in visual representation for centuries. It has been painted, sculpted, displayed and photographed. Instagram -one of the most popular platforms for visual works- bans photographic representations of the nude body including female nipples, as this would be disrespectful (Instagram 2018). According to Steinfeld, "the pendulum swings between female nipples being hidden [...] and times when they are celebrated" (2017, p. 116). Visuality of the female nude still is a terrain in which institutions find it difficult to find a mid-way between hiding versus celebrating. Instagram users @exotic.cancer and @genderless_nipples are seeking equality for the representation of the female body, as censorship of the nipples only applies to female bodies.

This thesis focuses on Instagram and how feminist artists find ways to critique the censorship on the platform, while working with the boundaries of this platform. The importance of this case study lies in the fact that Instagram can function as a place where women and queer people can claim their self-representation (Locatelli 2017) or contest the existing male gaze (Ritland 2018). Censorship attempts to take this power away from the female individual. Still, women find ways to reclaim their power. In this study I illustrate this shift from the 'patriarchal' way women are 'looked at' (Mulvey 1989) to the ways women negotiate 'images of women' and make self-representations.

In this thesis I look at the top-down and bottom-up ways of online practices on Instagram related to censorship. By doing discourse analysis and semiotics I will answer the following question: How do (queer) feminist accounts @genderless_nipples and @exotic.cancer seek the boundaries of the Instagram guidelines to critique the censorship of the female body and take ownership of the representation of the female body? In order to arrive to the answer I pose the following sub-questions first: How are power relations of visual culture present in the Instagram guidelines? How do the images being used by @genderless_nipples and @exotic.cancer represent the female body? How are they following or disobeying the censorship guidelines of Instagram? And, what kind of discourse is being created by the accounts @genderless_nipples and @exotic.cancer? Throughout the analysis I will be working with the concepts of

collective identity and protest actions, the gaze and spectatorship. These concepts will be situated within visual culture as a place of power relations and discourse.

How does Instagram work?

Instagram is an online image sharing platform. As contemporary culture is very visually centred, Instagram is popular platform that shapes gazes, discourse, and identity and makes meaning socially, culturally, and politically (Sturken 2011). On this platform people can create accounts, share pictures and comment on and like those. The images that people see are based on the accounts they follow[1]. The images are squared and can be viewed on one's mobile phone. An image is shared in the form of a post, this means that there can be either one or multiple images shared at once and they can be accompanied by a description, location tag and tags of other accounts. Posts can be seen by looking at an account and clicking on the preview of the post to enlarge it. When a user is following an account, the posts show on their feed[2]. When multiple images are posted together, they are put together in order from left to right. The images can be seen by moving the visible image from the right side of the screen to the left. This way, the following image will appear. Instagram has got community guidelines that state what can and what can not be posted. This research focuses on the guidelines[3] that involve the (nude) body. Following these guidelines there is a censorship process that Instagram uses. For example, a photo can be flagged and a user is notified of its removal, or the photo is removed without any notice (Olszanowski 2014). The most drastic measure is that an entire account is suspended and removed without warning and with no further access to the images. Through these guidelines and the affordances of the platform, certain power relations are established. These power relations will be discussed in the analysis.

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[1] Following an account on Instagram is similar to having a free subscription.
[2] A feed functions as a timeline. This homepage shows new posts of accounts that a user follows.
[3] The community guidelines in this research are the most recent version, published on 19 april 2018.

Theoretical framework

Visual culture

Nowadays, we are surrounded by visual media that shape our daily life. This culture of images and visuality that creates meaning in our world today we call, 'the visual culture'. According to the Grove Art Lexicon, visual culture includes media forms such as photography, film, television, and digital media; art media such as painting, drawing, prints, and installations; and other visual forms including the look of urban life itself. It also encompasses such social realms as art, news, popular culture, advertising and consumerism, politics, law, religion, and science and medicine (Sturken 2011). In this research the emphasis lies on artworks and photography within digital media, and therefore the social realms of art and popular culture. Within the interdisciplinary academic field of media and gender studies, the term visual culture also refers to studies that focus on the role that images and visuality play in our society. This kind of analysis is called critical visuality studies. It questions how "images, gazes, and looks make meaning socially, culturally, and politically; how images are integrated with other media; and how visuality shapes power, meaning, and identity in contemporary global culture" (Sturken 2011). Within this research the focus lies on the power relations within visuality on Instagram, the political and social meaning making of images of the female body, and the shaping of representation of the female body.

The gaze and spectatorship

Part of the role that images and visuality of women play in our society can be explained by looking at the gaze and spectatorship. Sturken and Cartwright (2001) state that looking is a social practice; like other practices, looking involves relationships of power. Visuality –the way something is represented- is tied to power and responsibility and never an innocent act (Sturken and Cartwright 2001). Within gender studies as a field that analyses power relations, the act of looking is often tied to spectatorship. The spectator is the one who is actively watching at a passive object and finds pleasure in this. In such cases the spectator is the one exerting its power by looking. Pleasure in looking has often been split between active/male and passive/female. In visual culture, the female body is often looked at through the male gaze (Mulvey 1989). In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with

their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness* (Mulvey 1989). Being used to look through the male gaze, this pleasure in looking at and objectifying the female body as sexual has taken an extensive role within visual culture. The female nude carries a dichotomy of high- versus low art. According to Nead (1990), within art historical discourse, paintings of the nude are seen as the visual culmination of Renaissance idealism and humanism. But at the same time, the nude also stands at the edge of the low culture, where it risks losing its respectability and is linked to the naked as pornographic or sexual. Moreover, the female nude is also a sign of patriarchal culture, that is, "possession, power, and subordination" (Nead 1990, 326). In the analysis, I will argue how the male gaze and sexualisation of the female body is exerted by the Instagram censorship. However, these objectifying power relations can be distorted by contesting this male gaze. In the analysis I will elaborate on how this blocking and criticizing of the male gaze is done through protest actions by the accounts of @exotic.cancer and @genderless_nipples.

Collective identity, protest actions and discourse

Instagram is populated by communities that are complex social formations. These formations have a concrete influence on the life of their participants (Caliandro 2018). Parts of these social formations are contemporary forms of protest actions through the rise of new forms of collective identities (Gerbaudo 2014): "they are forms of collectivity in which individual users through the internet and beyond come to develop a sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves, and in which 'the small and fitful contributions of the crowd', such as choosing a certain profile picture, posting certain hashtags or retweeting certain messages appear in the guise of identity subscriptions, acts through individual internet users assert: I belong." (p. 268). Self-called members of the feminist Instagram community are the subject of this research. By the use of certain hashtags such as #FreeTheNipple and #feminist, the artists and followers make clear their relation to the collective identity of political feminists on Instagram. Protests actions, or actions that take a political stance toward the Instagram guidelines can be seen as a form of resistance. Power can work both restricting (*potestas*) and empowering (*potentia*) (Braidotti 2018). The collective identity is formed by discourse and creates discourse. Discourse is related to power as the ways we think and talk about a subject influence and reflect the ways we act in relation to that subject (Karlberg

2005). According to Rose (2001) this power is not only distributed top-down from the top of society on to its oppressed bottom layers:

> Power is everywhere, since discourse too is everywhere. And there are many discourses, some of which clearly contest the terms of others. Foucault (1979, 95) claimed that `where there is power, there is resistance... a multiplicity of points of resistance', and by this he meant that there are many discourses which jostle and compete in their effects. (p. 137)

Analysing the images that are being posted by feminist Instagram artists shows the power relations tied to the visuality of the female body and can give more insight in how discourse around the female nude is constructed. @exotic.cancer, @genderless_nipples and other Instagram users form a collective feminist and activist identity. Their accounts contest the existing Instagram guidelines that are influenced by the male gaze and existing objectifying discourse.

Methodology

Having an interdisciplinary educational background in Media studies and Gender studies, I am combining my knowledge of both fields to do a critical discourse analysis on the topic of online representation. In line with Keller (2012) -who researches gender politics and mediated identities within popular digital cultures by doing discourse analysis of blog posts- I want to show how online activism and participatory online communities can contest existing discourse around the female body.

The material that is researched includes multiple online cases. The accounts of @genderless_nipples and @exotic.cancer can give us insight of how feminist artists critique the Instagram guidelines and how they work with the boundaries of these. The accounts have different approaches as @exotic.cancer makes use of digital artwork that form stories and @genderless_nipples shows fragmented, real images. Whilst the account of @genderless_nipples has been briefly mentioned as a censored account in previous studies (Steinfeld 2017), @exotic.cancer has not. Still, both are equally as important in showing how Instagram users make representations of the (female) body.

As I analyse visual works and -interpretations of- meanings of those works, I recognize that I do not have an objective view. The eyes I look with are mine, with the background that I carry. As a white, cis-gender female feminist I might notice different things than others. However, I think this knowledge is worthy as subjective as it is, as I show how my interpretations create discourse.

Research strategy

The analysis is structured by the two accounts. Before analysing the accounts I will look at the Instagram guidelines and ask the first sub-question: how are power relations of visual culture present in the Instagram guidelines? I will answer this by doing discourse analysis of the Instagram guidelines. After this I will analyse the accounts of @exotic.cancer and @genderless_nipples. The analysis follows the affordances of Instagram as the accounts are analysed starting from the first thing one sees when looking at an account (the biography) to the last thing (the comments on a post). For both accounts, the same research steps are being taken. The content that is provided by

the two Instagram accounts is analysed by discourse analysis and semiotics –the study of signs.

Firstly, I will be looking at the discourse that is created in the biography and profile picture. Discourse refers to groups of statements which structure the way a thing is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking. In other words, discourse is a particular knowledge about the world, which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it (Rose 2001). This knowledge can be created verbally and visually.

Secondly, I will be doing semiotics of two posts of the account that depict nipples. The semiotics will be structured by categorising the meaning of the Instagram posts by the following three Foucauldian levels re-formulated by Panofsky (1957): the primary, secondary and intrinsic level. The primary (natural, pre-iconic) level shows what is there to be seen without looking critically. It answers the question of 'what does anyone see when looking at this image?', no matter the background someone has. The secondary (conventional, iconographic) layer looks at icons. This layer makes clear what is happening in an image and what certain objects mean or suggest. The intrinsic (symbolic, iconological) level shows what the meaning of an image is. By doing semiotics this will answer the sub-questions of "how do the images being used by @exotic.cancer and @genderless_nipples represent the female body?" And "how are the accounts of @exotic.cancer and @genderless_nipples following or disobeying the censorship guidelines of Instagram?".

In order to the third step properly, I will look at the discourse that is created by the intrinsic meaning. For this I will also be analysing the image descriptions and comments. This will answer my last sub-question: what kind of discourse is being created by the accounts @exotic.cancer and @genderless_nipples

As a final step, in the conclusion I will look back at the analysis of the Instagram guidelines, the analyses of both accounts and how they relate to each other. This step provides clarity on how the accounts @genderless_nipples and @exotic.cancer seek the boundaries of the Instagram guidelines to critique the censorship of the female body and take ownership of the representation of the female body.

Analysis

Power relations of Instagram

The short version of the community guidelines states the following: "We want Instagram to continue to be an authentic and safe place for inspiration and expression. Help us foster this community. Post only your own photos and videos and always follow the law. Respect everyone on Instagram, don't spam people or post nudity." (Instagram 2018). In the 'bigger' version it is explained what is meant by 'nudity':

> We know that there are times when people might want to share nude images that are artistic or creative in nature, but for a variety of 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. It also includes some photos of female nipples, but photos of post-mastectomy scarring and women actively breastfeeding are allowed. Nudity in photos of paintings and sculptures is OK, too. (Instagram 2018)

In order to see how the Instagram accounts of @exotic.cancer and @genderless_nipples seek the boundaries of the Instagram guidelines it is needed to dive into the guidelines and the structure of the platform first. Visual culture and visuality is structured by power relations. In this paragraph I ask the question of how those power relations of visual culture are present in the Instagram platform and guidelines.

First of all, Instagram as a platform can choose what can be visible. Users of the platform can in fact upload every picture they want, but there is always a chance that their picture does not show up in people's feed, gets deleted, or that their account will get taken down. This monitoring gaze functions very seemingly like the male gaze. The male gaze (Mulvey 1989) puts the woman as a passive visual subject against the active male spectator. The one who carries this gaze is the active spectator, the one who choses what can be visible. Within the Instagram guidelines this gaze is re-operated, as the female nipple, and with that the female body seems to be sexualised. This can be seen in the Instagram guidelines as they state that their censorship of nudity entails "some photos of female nipples, but photos of post-mastectomy scarring and women actively breastfeeding are allowed" (Instagram 2018). Even tough there are occasions in which

the nipple can be visible, in general Instagram does not make space for the female body to be nonsexual.

The reason for Instagram to not allow female nipples to be visible is never explicitly mentioned in the guidelines. However, there are some sentences that seem to suggest what the underlying thoughts are. For example, the guidelines start with the following: "Respect everyone on Instagram, don't spam people or post nudity." (Instagram 2018). This implies that posting nudity shows disrespect to certain people. While I understand that children should not come in contact with nudity, I question if nipples should be a part of this, depending on the situation what an image shows and how people are represented and portrayed. Instagram makes use of an age filter –for example for accounts of alcoholic brands- and works with a warning filter for violent images. Not making use of filters in the case of showing female nipples shows that this is an explicit choice.

The choice to censor nudity would lead the user to think that nudity would indeed not be present on the platform. Nevertheless, the outcome is very different. When a user blurs a nipple, or –digitally- puts something over the nipple to cover it, an image can change from banned to allowed in a second. This shows that the nude as aesthetic pleasure (Nead 1990) is still allowed. This distinction keeps in tact the patriarchal culture of "possession, power, and subordination" (Nead 1990, 326). Even though the guidelines might not be made to do so, Instagram follows in line with this culture, as the nipple –and with that the female body- is being sexualised through the male gaze.

Furthermore, Instagram does not function as a safe space for transgender and queer people. Even though the guidelines state that Instagram should function as an "authentic and safe space for inspiration and expression" (Instagram 2018), the censorship of female nipples does not make it a safe space for trans- and queer people as Instagram only acknowledges the binary of male/female. This means that expression is in fact limited.

Another way that expression is limited is through the censorship of artistic images. The Instagram guidelines state very vaguely that "some digitally created content" (Instagram 2018) that include nudity is not allowed. However, "nudity in photos of paintings and sculptures is OK" (Instagram 2018). These photos of artwork

and digitally created content can look the same, but there is still a distinction in the guidelines. The distinction between these artforms seem to suggest that they are not on the same level of artistry.

All the limitations and guidelines mentioned so far show how power relations of Instagram are distributed from top to bottom, working restricting (*potestas*). However, there are ways in which users reclaim their power (*potentia*). Instagram is a platform that functions through its users, which also puts some power in the hands of their users. In the following chapters I will show how the accounts of @exotic.cancer and @genderless_nipples function within these power relations as they work with the guidelines of Instagram and make representations of the female body.
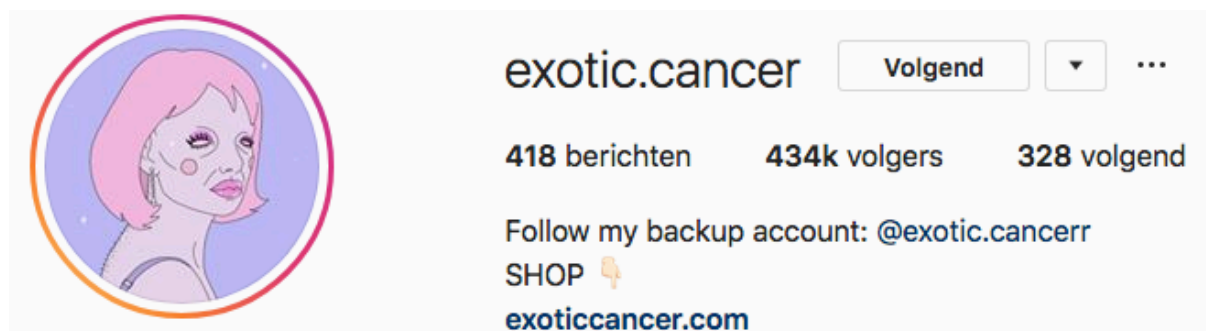
@exotic.cancer

Figure 1: profile @exotic.cancer (@exotic.cancer 2019)

The first account that I will be elaborating on is @exotic.cancer. This Instagram account posts digitally created content. Figure 1 shows the name, biography and profile picture of the account. This is the first part that an Instagram user sees when going to an account page. Together, the name, biography and profile picture of this account already fit into certain discourse as I will discuss next.

Firstly, the use of 'exotic' fits within (post-)colonial, objectifying discourse. According to Mason (1991), the term came hand in hand with the Enlightenment: "In 18th century France, the use of the term 'exotic' was confined to that of an epithet qualifying unfamiliar flora or rare objects from foreign places" (p. 167). Later on, the term 'exoticism' was used in the 19th century not to refer to objects, but to the "sense of nostalgia which they produced in the mind of the beholder" (Mason 1991, 167). This sense of nostalgia can be tied to the male gaze as exoticism creates discourse that stresses sexual desire, "the exotic as erotic" (Mason 1991, 168). The profile picture

reflects this discourse as the woman on the picture has both human and non-human features. The features that have been highlighted –such as her cheekbones, lips and lashes- are often seen as feminine. Moreover, 'exotic' is also used as an abbreviation for strippers as they are called 'exotic dancers'. This use of words emphasizes 'the exotic as erotic'. With the use of 'exotic', the owner of this Instagram account reclaims the word and makes it their own. By doing this, the account can (re)direct the gaze. How this is done I will show in the analysis of figure 3.

The phrasing of "Follow my backup account" is written as if it is an order. This shows that the artist feels the need for a backup account. This is not a surprising decision, as Instagram can take down accounts if they violate the user guidelines. On the backup account itself, it becomes clear by the image descriptions that the account of @exotic.cancer has been deleted and restored multiple times by Instagram (@exotic.cancerr 2019).

Furthermore, "SHOP" can be read as a way of directing followers or other Instagram users to either go shopping or visit the artists shop. Promoting their own shop, the artist uses the platform to their own advance, despite the platform not always allowing their artistic expression. This is a feminist move, as the artist claims her own space on a platform that produces excluding censorship and redirects people to a website where this restricting censorship does not apply.

OH!!! GOD!!! NO!!!!

The Instagram artist @exotic.cancer posts digital artwork that shows feminine and powerful representations of female sex workers. The first Instagram post that I will be discussing is a series that is posted by @exotic.cancer. Figure 2 is the last image of the series and shows a compilation of all the previous images so they can be seen together.

The first level of meaning (Panofsky 1957) shows things that are visible without taking into account someone's background. In case of figure two, the series shows a man walking, an image of a gun, a headless dog and a nipple. The man puts his arms up and covers his face with his hands. In the last image the man breaks the image of the female nipple. The fact that this digital artwork shows a female nipple is already a form of seeking the boundaries of the Instagram guidelines. The depiction of female nipples is in general not allowed, but the phrasing of the guidelines do not make clear if this is also the case with digitally created content.
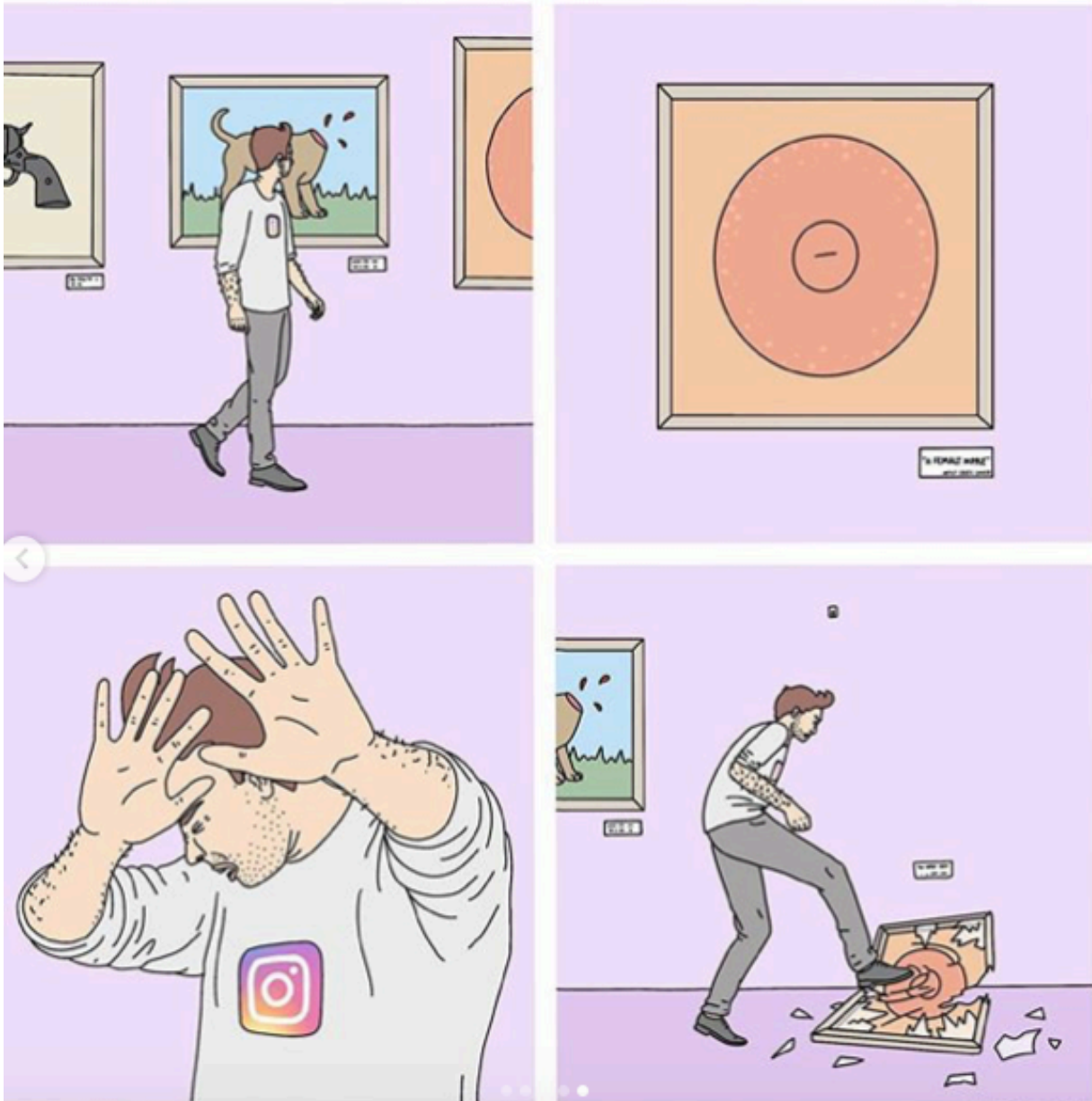
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Figure 2: OH!!! GOD!!! NO!!!! (@exotic.cancer 2019)

The secondary level (Panofsky 1957) shows that the pictures on the wall are violent images. The first image of a gun represents violence, as guns can do harm and are not allowed in a big part of the world. The second image the man encounters depicts a headless dog that is bleeding and being hurt. Even though these violent images are being seen as the man walks past them from left to right, the man (wearing an Instagram shirt), shutters away from the female nipple.

The third level makes clear that this story is about the Instagram regulations. Even though it seems like the story is situated in a museum, we recognise the man as a depiction of Instagram itself. This is because he is wearing an Instagram shirt and because he acts according to the Instagram guidelines. The artist of this account is aware of the censorship and the Instagram guidelines, and so this image seems to be a direct critique on this. Furthermore, the post also seems to depict an active male spectatorship. The man as a spectator is the one exerting its power by looking and choosing what to be visible. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness* (Mulvey 1989). In the case of figure 2, the female body is fragmented to only the nipple. This can mean both that the nipple is indeed too sexual to be visible, and that this type of nudity does not fit the *to-be-looked-at-ness.* The male gaze works as a system that keeps the sexualisation of the female body in tact: through the male gaze the female body is seen as sexual, and because this body is 'sexual' is needs to be censored.

Description and comments on OH!!! GOD!!! NO!!!!

The description that @exotic.cancer has given to the post is "OH!!! GOD!!! NO!!!!". The title of the image seems to suggest that the man, who is depicting Instagram is thinking "OH!!! GOD!!! NO!!!!". He takes the picture of the nipple down and destroys it. This symbolizes Instagram taking down images that show the female nipple. Taking the image of the nipple down, in relation to this title makes clear that the female nipple is not to be seen according to Instagram. In line with the artist critiquing Instagram, the title itself can also be read as a critique on Instagram. It could mean that the artist thinks it is really bad that this is the way censorship is happening. The words are capitalized, as if someone is shouting them. This way it can be seen as an activist chant, as if the artist will not let this way of censorship happen.

The platform of Instagram can create discourse as users can comment on posts. In the analysis of the comments I look at comments that fit work within feminist discourse. This post creates discourse of collective identity, activism and power relations. Firstly, many of the comments are tags of other accounts. By doing this, the post is shared amongst other Instagram users that might or might not follow the account of @exotic.cancer. Tagging other Instagram users can create collective identity

(Gerbaudo 2014) as users see the same content as their respective friends.

Secondly, the post creates activist discourse. For example, the hashtag #stopcensoringsluts is commented. This hashtag supports sex workers to be visible on social media as they might use the platform for work or in general. The hashtag is also related to a bigger feminist discourse on female sexuality and the use of the word 'slut'. According to Borah and Nandi (2012), who wrote a piece on the feminist politics of 'SlutWalk', some feminists try to reclaim the word 'slut' as a word for women who feel confident in their own body in relation with sexuality. The hashtag #stopcensoringsluts therefor strives for women to be able to show their body in the way they feel comfortable.

Other comments show how followers of @exotic.cancer see the power relations of Instagram. The following comment shows how a user recognized how Instagram was censoring the account and how they do not let this stop them from seeing the posts: "Brilliant!!! Forgive me stalking, just that you have been missing from my feed and I want you back! Not letting them decide!!! X." Another user supports the artist be sharing their experience with the Instagram guidelines: "For rreeeaaaalll. I reported an account that showed dog fighting and @instagram said it doesn't go against guidelines". Comments as these show that –through forming collective identity and creating activist discourse– users of Instagram are aware of the guidelines, but that they do not always support the way these guidelines are structured.

A short story ★ swipe through

The second post I will be discussing contains 10 images. As the description of figure 3, "A short story ★ swipe through" suggests, it is a short story that can be 'read' be swiping through the images. As this Instagram post contains 10 different images, the first and secondary step of semiotics will be discussed in short. The images show a surgeon in a clinic. A man with short hair, flat-chest and body hair is lying on a bed with blue sheets. The surgeon cuts of the nipples of the man. Another person comes by the clinic. This person has longer brown hair, long lashes, pink lips, wears a pink top and has breasts. Together this signifies that she is a woman. The woman gets her own nipples replaced by male nipples. She takes a picture of herself, called a selfie, and posts it to Instagram. In contrast to the post of "OH!!! GOD!!! NO!!!", this one is provided with speech balloons. Together with the images, the text makes clear that the person who gives their nipples is

a man, and the one who receives them is a woman. This can also be seen through other signs. The body shape and body hair of the man and woman are very different, signifying the difference between the two. Again, as was also the case for the profile picture, the feminine parts of the woman have been exaggerated.
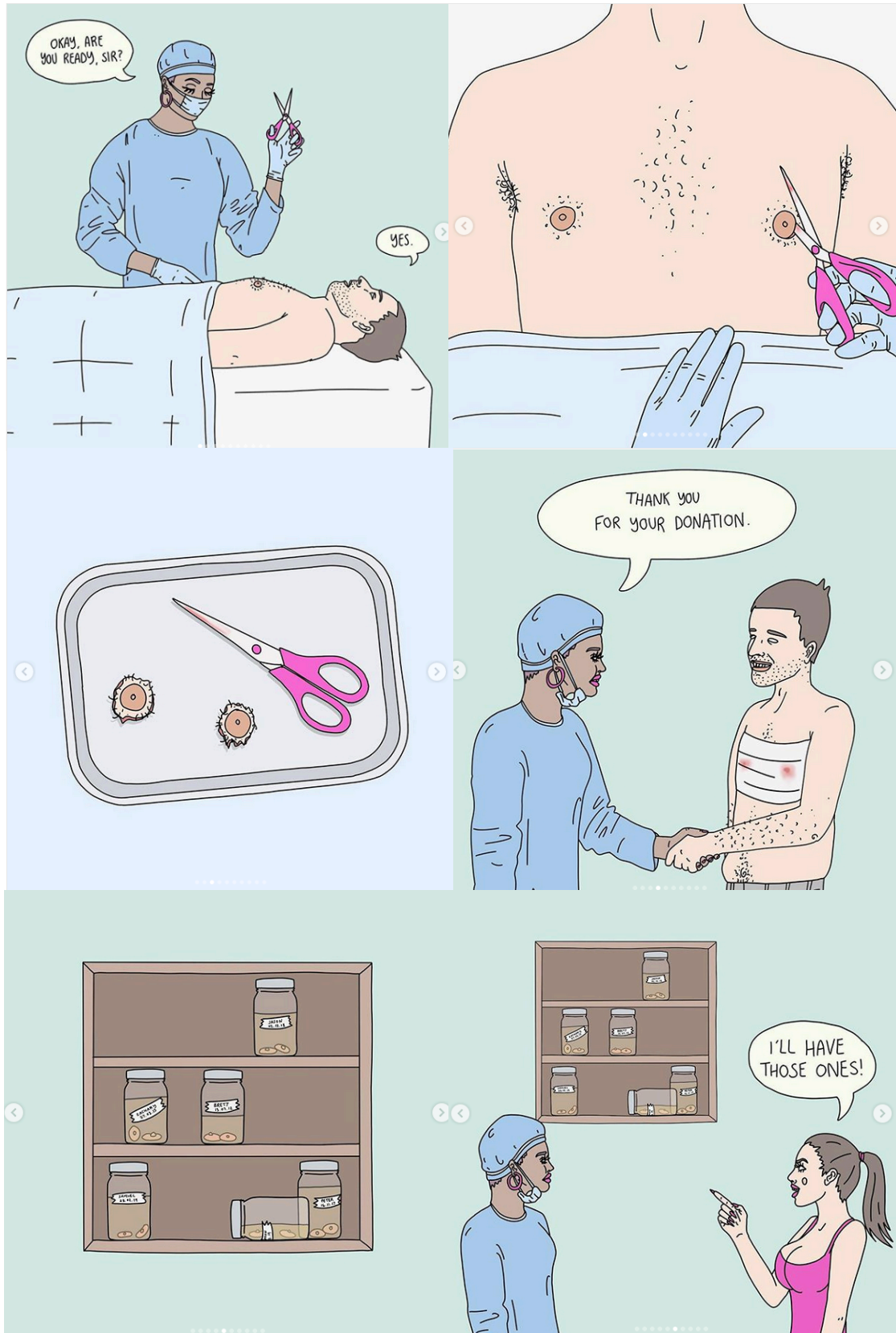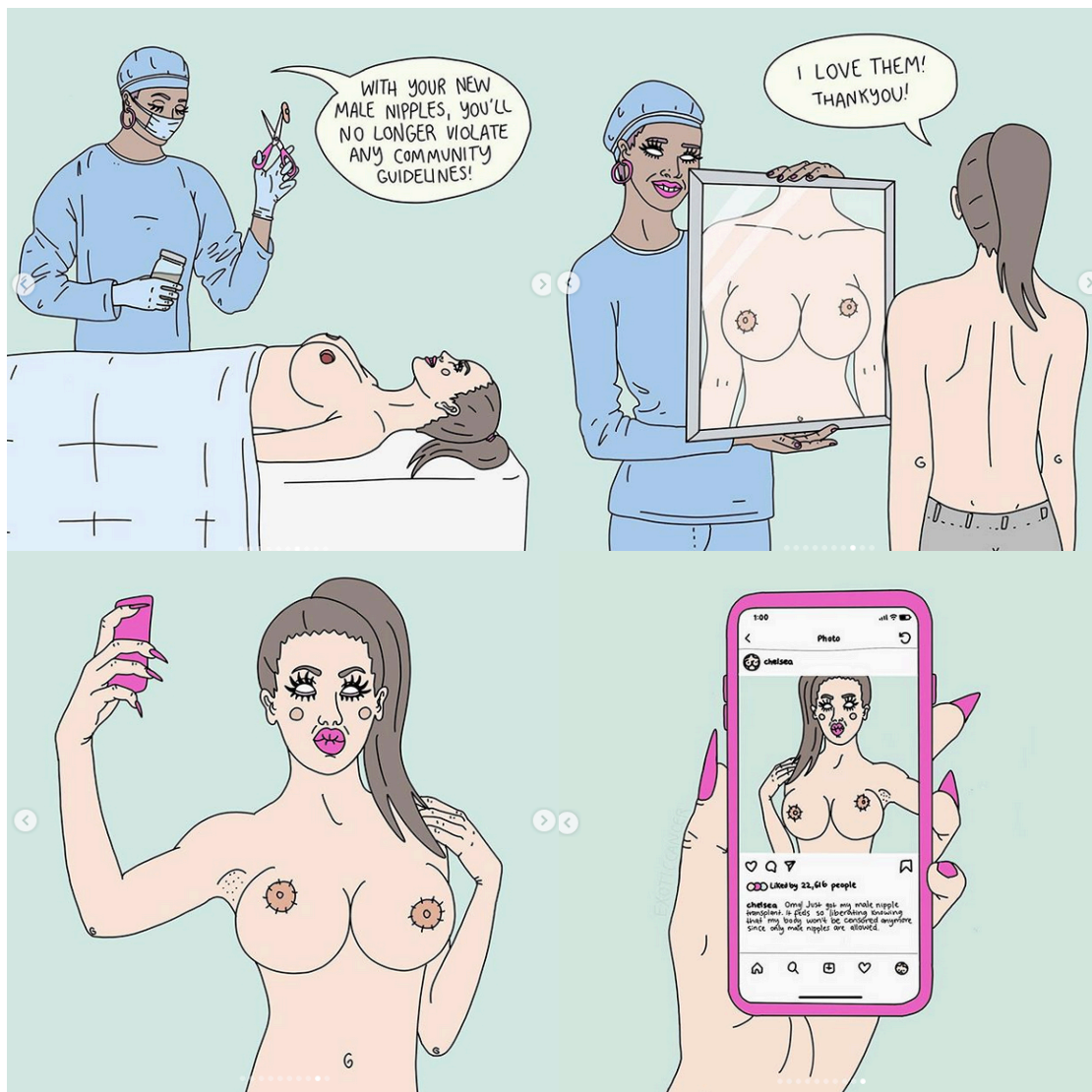
Figure 3: A short story ★ swipe through (@exotic.cancer 2019)

The third layer of meaning, the intrinsic meaning (Panofsky 1957) shows how the use of text together with the images forms critique on the Instagram guidelines. The surgeon says: "with your new male nipples you'll not longer violate any community guidelines" (@exotic.cancer 2019). The post of the selfie has the following description: "Omg! Just got my male nipple transplant. It feels so liberating knowing that my body won't be censored anymore since only male nipples are allowed." (@exotic.cancer 2019). These images show how the specific censorship of the nipple does not change how people will post pictures online. Censorship of the nipple does not change the content of an image. The tone of the description in figure 12 seems very 'sarcastic' as instead of pointing out that the censorship of the female nipple is restricting, the replacement with male nipples is called liberating. This post makes clear that though

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Instagram sees a difference between male and female nipples as a body part, there is not a visual difference between these fragmented body parts. The post emphasizes the female body as sexual, as it shows how the male gaze operates through censorship.

This fragmentation of the nipple fits the activist feminist discourse of the 'Internet Acceptable Male Nipple Template' and the #WeTheNipple protest. The Internet Acceptable Male Nipple Template is a cut-out of a male nipple that women can paste over their own. Artist and academic Micol Hebron created the acceptable nipple template in 2014 after Instagram censored an image of herself appearing topless at a breast cancer fundraiser art exhibition (Steinfeld 2017). The #WeTheNipple protest followed in this line of thought as 125 people posed nude in front of Facebook and Instagram's New York City headquarters at Astor Place to challenge social media censorship (NCAC 2019). This campaign started from the National Coalition Against Censorship and calls for a change in the policies of Facebook's social media platforms to allow photographic artistic nudity. The people participating in this protest covered their nipples with stickers of photographed male nipples, to show the odd gender inequality in existing nudity policies (NCAC 2019).

Moreover, the selfie that is posted by the woman in figure 3 fits bigger discourse about self-representation and body policing, as taking selfies is a way of making a representation of the self and choosing how to be visible. This notion is supported by Jessica Lovejoy, a self-defined body-positive activist, as she writes in the Huffington Post:

> We share our pictures to show people that we are no longer afraid of being photographed, and that people of all shapes, sizes, genders, ethnicity and backgrounds are beautiful, because they are unique and different. Selfies are this generation's way of coping with years of body policing from the media, our friends, family and strangers… saying "*Your words cannot hurt me, for I love myself. I will not hate myself because you cannot accept me*". (Lovejoy 2014)

Instagram as a platform lends itself as a space where users can create their own self-representation. This way, the binary between the active spectator and the passive subject becomes troubled. Women and queer people can choose however (non-)sexual they want to present themselves. Even though the female body is still being politicized through censorship, this short story by @exotic.cancer shows how women will seek ways to work around the censorship in order to create their own image. This already

happens through the artistic work as it is depicting nipples on a woman. However, because these are 'cut out' they are not female nipples, making it acceptable for Instagram.

Description and comments on "A short story ★ swipe through"

The description of this post: "A short story ★ swipe through" shows the discourse of Instagram use. Swiping, the movement of the image on the screen by sliding one's finger from the left to the right or vice-versa, only makes sense on a mobile device with a touchscreen. The description makes clear the images are not separated but form a story, just like reading a comic book.

This image received more attention than the first one and is the most liked post of @exotic.cancer in 2019. As it received more attention, it is likely to be seen by more people as others might have shared the post. In this case, it has resulted in a post with many negative comments. Due to the negative comments, there are also other Instagram users explaining what (they think) the artist means by this post. In some replies, other Instagram users are supporting the artist, by arguing why the censorship by Instagram is 'bad'. This shapes collective identity amongst supporters of the artist.

Other discussions in the comments show how Instagram keeps in tact the notion of the female body as sexual. For example, a user comments: "are you feminatzis fucking stupid it has nothing to do with your nipples it's the fact that you have tits and we don't do we can go out topless youse have tits so youse are can not go out topless you fucking dopes". To which is responded: "if its not the nipples, why can i post pictures of my tits only censored my nipples?". This discussion shows that the censorship of female nipples and artists such as @exotic.cancer provoke discussion around the guidelines of Instagram. The use of censorship keeps in tact the notion of the objectified female body as the female body can only be visible in a way that is regulated.

@genderless_nipples

Figure 4: profile @genderless_nipples (@genderless_nipples 2019)

The second account that I will be analysing is @genderless_nipples. The account shares pictures of nipples that other Instagram users have sent to them. The pictures are shot in such a way that it is not clear whom the nipple belongs to. This unclearness is depicted in the profile picture of the account as well. The profile picture exists from different circles with the name of the account in the outer one. The picture seems to signify a nipple, as the inner two circles can be seen as an areola and nipple. The 'nipple' is made in a very simplistic and undetailed way. Instagram could not ban this account on the basis on the profile picture, as it is not clear whether it depicts a nipple. Even though it *signifies* one it *is* not one. The account name @genderless_nipples means nipples that are not related to any gender. No gender means not only not male of female but no gender at all, as it is a performed construct. The biography goes into the Instagram guidelines as it states "Men are allowed to show their nipples, women's get banned." (@genderless_nipples 2019). This statement shows the binary of the genders of male/female as Instagram uses in their policy. @genderless_nipples creates a deviant[4] discourse around gender as this account does not make this distinction between male and female by calling for the support of all genders. The biography makes clear that part of this support would come with the change of the Instagram policy on nudity. The phrasing of the biography fits an activist discourse as it is written like an order to Instagram: "Support ALL genders!" (@genderless_nipples 2019). The owner(s) of the account makes clear this is something that has to come from bottom-up activism. With the use of "Let's change this policy" (@genderless_nipples 2019) the owner creates collective identity by the use of "us". With this account the owner calls to change the Instagram censorship policy.

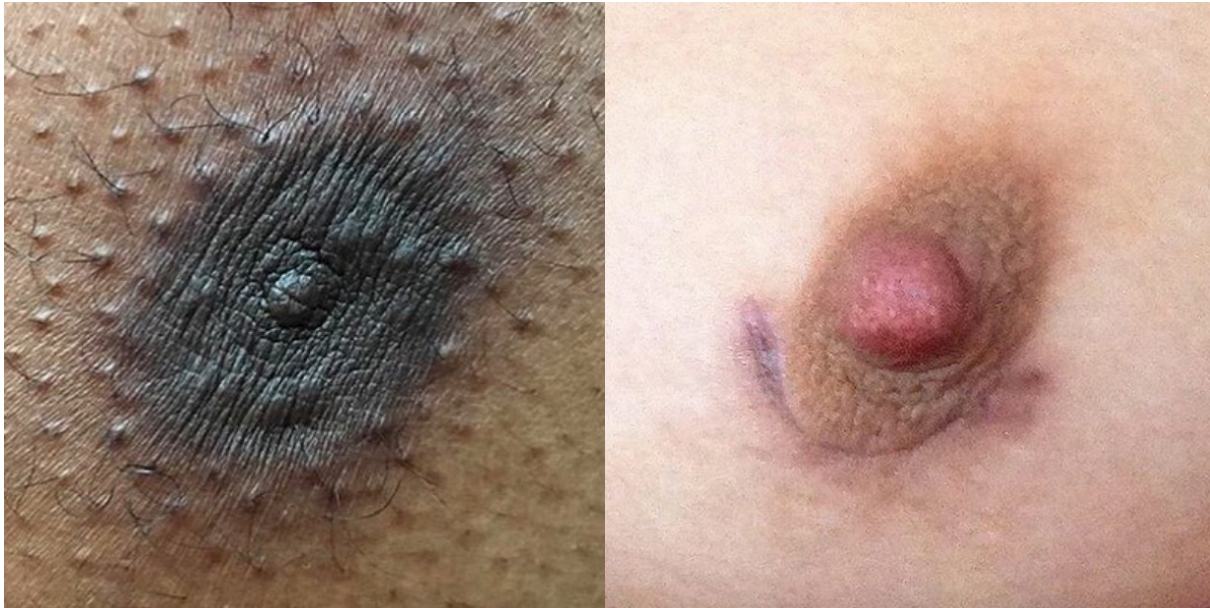[4] Different from the binary discourse on gender that is created by Instagram

Figure 5: Dark nipple (@genderless_nipples 2019)   **Figure 6: Nipple with scar (@genderless_nipples 2019)**

Nipples on display

Looking at what kind of discourse and meaning the account of @genderless_nipples produces is different from the account of @exotic.cancer. This is because doing semiotics is different for this account as the posts all show the 'same', a nipple. Still, there are some arguments to make. First of all, the account shows that every body is different. All posts show nipples, areolas and skin, but every post is different. This can be seen in figure 5 and 6. Figure 5 shows dark skin and has hairs around the nipple. In figure 6, the person has white skin and a scar. The nipple itself in figure 5 is bigger than in figure 6. Again, the fragmentation of the body fits the feminist discourse around censorship as the #WeTheNipple protest and the Internet Acceptable Male Nipple Template have taken the same approach. However there is a change in the use of the nipple. Instead of showing the binary between male/female and the difference in censorship guidelines, the account of @genderless_nipples puts the emphasis on the lack of gender. As the nipple is visible as a fragmented body part, it is not clear whether the nipple belongs to a male, female or queer body. As seen later in the comments, Instagram users can make assumptions, but this is not the goal of the account. The goal as stated in the biography is to change the Instagram policy on nudity and censorship. This account seeks the boundaries of the Instagram guidelines by posting images that

show nipples of which some are likely to belong to a female body. It is not possible to judge for Instagram which nipples are female without stereotyping and being 'prejudiced'. By posting these images and fragmenting the body, the account makes it impossible for Instagram to censor in line with their own guidelines as it is not clear which nipples belong to a female body.

Image description and comments on @genderless_nipples

Doing discourse analysis of the image descriptions and comments of the posts by @genderless_nipples shows how simple images can create meaningful feminist discourse. The description of figure 5 makes clear what feminist matters this account is involved with: "Respect for yourself and everyone around you is key ★♥★★. Finally another dark nipple! Keep em coming… #genderlessnipples #freethenipple #equality #blacklivesmatter #feminism #hairy." (@genderless_nipples 2019). The use of multiple hashtags shows that the owner of this account relates them to the post or the owner wants users that are interested in these hashtags to see this post. This use of hashtags is an individual act which shows that the owner of this account is part of a bigger collective (Gerbaudo 2014). "Finally another dark nipple!" suggests that there are less dark nipples visible on the Instagram account. The hashtag #blacklivesmatter fits the discourse of visibility of black people, as the movement fought for coverage on the murder of black people by policemen. The movement also fights for equality, just like this account is doing.

The hashtag #hairy provokes users to comment on the fact that the image shows hairs. A user takes a guess that the nipple belongs to a man, as the nipple would have "too much hair for a femme tit". This again follows in line with the objectification of the female body, as the female nude would have to portray a hairless body –in line with gender stigma and the female body as sexual. Other Instagram users express their frustration of the need for users to guess the gender of the body. Their comments can be seen as small actions of protest as they make clear that it is not the point of the account to gender the bodies on the images.

The description of figure 6 shows how the account is aware of the fact that Instagram is changing the account: " 'Someone' has started to manipulate our number of followers with every picture we post. And always exactly by 2'000 followers. Interesting strategy… #makeinstagramgreatagain #instagramban #genderlessnipples #fightsexism

#freethenipple #allgenders #feminism" (@genderless_nipples 2019). This description fits an activist discourse. The use of the words "manipulate" and "strategy" shows that there is some sort of power relation between the 'someone' and the account as manipulation gives someone an advantage and strategy is used to win a fight. The use of apostrophes shows that the description of 'someone' is rather sarcastic. It becomes clear from the hashtags that the account accuses Instagram of banning the account. The use of activist discourse puts the account itself within that discourse as well. The hashtag #fightsexism emphasizes this fight of the account to hold Instagram accountable for sexism through their censorship guidelines.

Activist discourse is present in the comments as collective identity is being formed supporting the #FreeTheNipple movement. "FREE THE NIPPLE!" is commented, and the hashtag is used by others: "Fuck! Such assholes!!! #freethenipple #instagramissexist". These 'small' contributions form a larger collective identity and makes users develop a sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves (Gerbaudo 2014). Together, the collective identity of activist feminists can contest the existing discourse on Instagram.

Lastly, activist discourse brings the power relations to the surface. A user claims that Instagram blocked them from liking posts after the user liked the post of figure 15. This comment shows that Instagram holds the power to influence the use of their users. Other comments show that Instagram users try to seek ways around censorship policies: "I will always follow you! Even if you disappear from my feed, I'll find ya". The followers of @genderless_nipples mirror the activist attitude of the account itself.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Instagram as a platform chooses what can be visible and carries a monitoring gaze. The male gaze is operated in the guidelines, as the female body is sexualized. Instagram accounts @exotic.cancer and @genderless_nipples critique the censorship and guidelines of Instagram. @exotic.cancer shows digitally created nipples, seeking the boundaries of the guidelines as it is not clear whether this is allowed. @genderless_nipples shows photographed nipples, of which some of them are likely to belong to women. However, the gender of the nipples stays unknown and therefor the posts cannot be censored. The images that are used by the accounts show how the female body gets regulated and gazed upon by Instagram. By showing the nipples in a fragmented way they reflect how Instagram guidelines fragments the female body. Both the accounts show that Instagram can be used as a platform of self-representation. @exotic.cancer does this while using the binary of male/female, showing that the censorship of nipples does not change how women will claim their space on Instagram and shape their own self-representation. @genderless_nipples emphasizes the non-binary and non-sexual of nipples, arguing that there should not be a difference between genders in the censorship of nipples. By using the platform of Instagram to express their critique on the guidelines, the accounts of @exotic.cancer and @genderless_nipples create and provoke activist, feminist and deviant discourse. Activist discourse with hashtags and sharing leads to the forming of a collective identity that is against the sexualisation of the female body. The discourse that is seen in the descriptions and comments of the posts is feminist and deviant, as it shows how Instagram operates the male gaze. The accounts and users express that nipples should not be censored, and that they will keep trying to fight the censorship.

So, how do (queer) feminist accounts @genderless_nipples and @exotic.cancer seek the boundaries of the Instagram guidelines to critique the censorship of the female body and take ownership of the representation of the female body? Firstly, the accounts show that the Instagram censorship enacts the male gaze. Secondly, this male gaze is contested by seeking the boundaries of the guidelines and showing other ways of looking and representation of the female body. Lastly, the accounts of @exotic.cancer

and @genderless_nipples try to change the existing objectifying discourse of the female body by forming an activist collective identity with other Instagram users.

As this research focussed on two accounts on the enormous platform that Instagram is, I believe that there are many other ways in which power relations are exerted and contested on Instagram. For this particular research I worked with digital and fragmented images of nipples. This might change how Instagram applies censorship. Therefor the outcome of this research might differ from images that show the entire 'real' body. Further research could look at other accounts to see how censorship applies to other representations. Moreover, further research could look into the Instagram guidelines and censorship rules are applied. Are people hired to apply individually? Is there an algorithm that censors images? How these are instructed could show more about the discourse within Instagram as a platform.

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