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Censored

THE FEMALE NIPPLE

How does Instagram's intolerance for the female body affect young artists?

Social media has become an integral part of most people's daily lives more than ever before. People spend a considerable amount of time on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, which, subconsciously, are beginning to impact their behavior and thinking. The moment that companies begin to have so much influence over people, it is natural to begin to question their model. Moderation on any of these platforms, such as the removal of content, can have a significant impact on millions or even billions of individuals. One such part of their model are the guidelines: what and why is chosen to be removed from their platform. Because social media platforms' guidelines are often unclear or quite open to interpretation, there have been many controversies since the beginning, and Instagram is no exception. There have been numerous instances in which posts have been removed without any explanation or for quite arbitrary reasons.

One example that became very famous was Rupi Kaur's post depicting a woman lying on a bed with blood between her legs, a clear depiction of a woman's menstrual cycle. This should not violate community guidelines. However, it was removed from the platform twice before Instagram caved in to public pressure and allowed it to remain. Research has already been conducted on this topic, but most of it focuses on the algorithm, the censorship itself and its effects, or it is very descriptive. Studies examining the impact of Instagram's content removal on artists are few and often insufficient given their potential impact on society.

Therefore, it is the goal of this study to evaluate the impact of the removal of artwork from Instagram, specifically that of female bodies. It is intended to examine how such actions affect young artists who are trying to make a living from the platform. The aim is to examine the effect such actions have on young artists, who are building their careers on this platform.

As a means of having a greater local impact, the study will be limited to Austria and its artists (Where the researchers are located).

Resch
Angelova

De Liz Sperb

Rodiga

How does Instagram's intolerance for the female body affect young artists?

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Abstract

The sharing of art on social media platforms has become an integral part of the daily lives of both artists and art enthusiasts. Among the various platforms, Instagram has emerged as a popular choice for artists aiming to fund their livelihoods. With Instagram's user base growing exponentially, the platform's guidelines have played a crucial role in maintaining a safe environment for users. While these guidelines are intended to ensure user safety, they have inadvertently resulted in the deletion of artworks, particularly when it comes to depicting nudity in their artistic creations. This study examines the impact of Instagram's removal of artworks containing nudity, delving into Instagram's guidelines, and exploring the consequences artists face when violating community rules. To gain a deeper understanding of artists' real-life experiences, a comprehensive questionnaire was developed, focusing on their artistic approach and how the guidelines, along with how the targeting of the naked female body, influence both artists and viewers alike. The goal of this study is to shed light on the complex dynamics between art, censorship, and social media platforms, emphasizing the challenges faced by artists in navigating these guidelines and the implications for artistic expression and societal perceptions.

Kurzfassung

Das Teilen von Kunst auf Social-Media-Plattformen ist zu einem festen Bestandteil des täglichen Lebens von Kunstschaffenden und Kunstliebhabern geworden. Unter den verschiedenen Plattformen hat sich Instagram zu einer beliebten Wahl für Kunstschaffende entwickelt, die ihren Werken virtuellen Raum bieten möchten. Da die Anzahl der User auf Instagram exponentiell wächst, spielen die Richtlinien der Plattform eine entscheidende Rolle bei der Aufrechterhaltung eines sicheren Umfelds. Während diese Richtlinien die Sicherheit gewährleisten sollen, haben sie unter anderem auch zur Löschung und Einschränkung von Kunst und Kunstschaffenden geführt, wobei hier ins Besondere die Darstellung von Nacktheit in Kunstwerken gezielt angepeilt wird. Dieses Research Paper untersucht die Auswirkungen der Löschung von Kunstwerken indem sie die Richtlinien näher beleuchtet und die Konsequenzen untersucht, mit denen Kunstschaffende konfrontiert werden, wenn sie gegen die Community-Regeln verstoßen. Um ein tieferes Verständnis der realen Erfahrungen von Kunstschaffenden zu erlangen, wurde ein umfassender Fragebogen entwickelt, der die Erfahrungen der Interviewpartner in Bezug auf das Posten von Kunst auf Instagram, die Wahrnehmung der Richtlinien, sowie auf Veränderungen in ihrer künstlerischen Herangehensweise beleuchten soll. Hierbei wird besonders die Darstellung des nackten, weiblichen Körpers in ihrer Kunst fokussiert. Ziel dieser Studie ist es, die komplexe Dynamik zwischen Kunst, Zensur und Social Media zu beleuchten, sowie die Herausforderungen und Auswirkungen auf den künstlerischen Ausdruck und die gesellschaftliche Wahrnehmung hervorzuheben.

Introduction

Purpose of the Research

Social media has become an integral part of most people's daily lives more than ever before. People spend a considerable amount of time on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, which, subconsciously, are beginning to impact their behavior and thinking.¹

The moment that companies begin to have so much influence over people, it is natural to begin to question their model.

Moderation on any of these platforms, such as the removal of content, can have a significant impact on millions or even billions of individuals. One such part of their model are the guidelines: what and why is chosen to be removed from their platform.

Because social media's guidelines are often unclear or quite open to interpretation, there have been many controversies since the beginning, and Instagram is no exception. There have been numerous instances in which posts have been removed without any explanation or for quite arbitrary reasons.

One example that became very famous was Rupi Kaur's post depicting a woman lying on a bed with blood between her legs, a clear depiction of a woman's menstrual cycle.² This should not violate community guidelines. However, it was removed twice before Instagram caved in to public pressure and allowed it to remain.³

Research has already been conducted on this topic, but most of it focuses on the algorithm, the censorship itself and its effects, or it is very descriptive.⁴ Studies examining the impact of Instagram's content removal on artists are few and often insufficient given their potential impact on society.⁵

Therefore, it is the goal of this study to evaluate the impact of the removal of artwork from Instagram, specifically that of female bodies. It is intended to examine how such actions affect young artists who are trying to make a living from the platform. The aim is to examine the effect such actions have on young artists, who are building their careers on Instagram.

As a means of having a greater local impact, the study will be limited to Austria and its artists.⁶

Instagram's Community Guidelines

Since Instagram is a private company, they are entitled to define their guidelines and ultimately decide what should be posted or not. If it were still a small business, this would not be such a concern. Yet, Instagram numbers among the industry giants⁷ with a userbase (over 2.35 billion) that would rival that of the most populated country in the world – China.⁸

¹ Allen 2019

² Tsjeng 2015

³ Tsjeng 2015

⁴ Suringar 2020

⁵ Riccio, Oliver, Escolano, Oliver 2022

⁶ This is due to the fact that the researchers are located in Graz, Austria.

⁷ Ruby 2023

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau 2023

A platform like this results in a great deal of power. They are now defining what people consume, what they think and, in no small part, what the future of their culture will look like.

There are two versions of the guidelines available on their website, the short version and the long version. The short reads as follows:

“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.” (Meta 2023)

From a first glance, it appears that all nudity is prohibited, as indicated by the phrase “...don't spam people or post nudity.”, which explains why the related content is being removed. However, the problem begins right here because nudity is not an easy concept to define. According to John Berger, nudity and naked are defined in his book “Ways of Seeing” as follows:

“To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude.” (Berger 1972)

It offers a more nuanced take on the social and cultural differentiation between nudity and nakedness in the way that it relates to the female body.

The concept of nakedness varies from society to society. A good example would be the representation of the “male nipple”. Although western countries, such as Germany or the United States, may consider the display of the male nipple to be trivial, completely normal, Muslim societies may see men without shirts as provocative, as unfaithful.⁹ Therefore, a problem can already be found, who draws the limit for nudity? And how does applying the same rules to a global and multicultural audience affect the overall development of cultures?

Moving forward to the long version, Instagram states that they are aware that it reflects a diverse community of cultures, ages, and beliefs. In the part “Post photos and videos that are appropriate for a diverse audience” they mention the following:

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 in the context of breastfeeding, birth giving and after-birth moments, health-related situations (for example, post-mastectomy, breast cancer awareness or gender confirmation surgery) or an act of protest are allowed. Nudity in photos of paintings and sculptures is OK, too.

Instagram states that nudity is not allowed on its platform. Despite this, the last paragraph clearly shows that nudity is acceptable in pictures of paintings and sculptures, which is false in many instances. Nudity-containing paintings and sculptures are frequently removed from Instagram.¹⁰ There is even a website called “Don't Delete Art Gallery” where deleted posts can be viewed.¹¹ The problem has become so serious that even the top executives of meta, the company that manages the social media platform, have acknowledged it.¹²

⁹ Masumi 2013

¹⁰ Don't Delete Art 2023

¹¹ Don't Delete Art 2023

¹² Mehta 2023

In addition, Meta, the company that owns Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, created another guideline that specifically addresses nudity.¹³ In this one, however, nudity refers specifically to photographs and not artworks, which again makes nudity in artworks acceptable on the platform, although Instagram does not always allow it.

Due to its mass, it is not possible to check every post manually. Therefore, Instagram uses artificial intelligence and algorithms to filter content, which are not always the most intelligent.¹⁴ This has resulted in several artworks containing nudity being unjustly deleted.

Artists may encounter many difficulties as a result of this blurriness in the lines. In many instances, when a user's content is deleted, his or her account is also punished. It may be a permanent ban, a temporary ban, or a shadow-ban.¹⁵

In the event of a permanent ban, users will no longer be able to access the platform.¹⁶ Therefore, if the individual wishes to use the platform again, they must start from scratch. A temporary ban would mean that the individual would not be able to access their account for a specified period of time. A shadow-ban, on the other hand, would result in a drastic reduction in the audience for the individual's postings, essentially resulting in fewer people seeing their content. Occasionally, these punishments may be combined, meaning that you may receive a temporary ban followed by a shadow-ban.¹⁷

To make matters worse, most Instagram bans are poorly explained or have very vague and abstract explanations.¹⁸ Thus, they cannot be resorted to. Leaving banned individuals in the dark. As a result of these punishments, an artist who lives from selling artworks on Instagram may theoretically experience a significant decline in income.

Definition of Censorship

"...censorship, the changing or the suppression or prohibition of speech or writing that is deemed subversive of the common good. It occurs in all manifestations of authority to some degree, but in modern times it has been of special importance in its relation to government and the rule of law." (Anastaplo 2023)

Censorship is the changing, suppression or prohibition of any message that is deemed as negative for the common good (independent of the media). The issue here lies in the fact that the definition of common good is mutable.¹⁹

Every society has a different set of values. Furthermore, they are not rock solid, with a tendency to change with time. Censorship is connected to power, having control over the narrative. By controlling the culture and what people consume, you have control over what they think.²⁰

"The censorship system relies on robbing a person of the self-perception that one needs in order to maintain an independent existence. It cuts off one's access to independence and happiness." (Weiwei 2017)

¹³ Meta 2023

¹⁴ Aslamova 2022

¹⁵ Aslamova 2022

¹⁶ Aslamova 2022

¹⁷ Aslamova 2022

¹⁸ Marcus 2021

¹⁹ Silk 1992

²⁰ Hanson 2009

Brief History of Art Censorship

As forementioned, Instagram has reached such a massive size that it is hard to say that what is happening on the platform is not censorship. When an organization that has a reach bigger than governments starts to actively remove content without a clear explanation, that is censorship.

The nude in the arts has always been a theme of polemic. Censorship can affect both individual artists and society as a whole. Even stagnating the cultural status quo.

Taking in consideration different societies, there was always a back and forth with this. It is possible to take as an example *The Last Judgment* by Michelangelo. The controversy surrounding it began shortly after its completion in 1541. It was claimed by critics that the display of nudity in the work had an overtly sexual character, thus distracting from the spiritual content presented. As opposed to portraying sacred truths, Michelangelo was accused of showing off his abilities.²¹

Even though it was intended for an intellectual audience at the time, Michelangelo's work was censored after his death in 1564. In the end, a consensus was reached. Daniele Da Volterra was hired to cover the buttocks and groin.²²

Another instance of censorship is *Olympia*. Painted by Manet in 1865, it sparked criticism and caused a ruckus, leading to critics labelling it “vulgar” and “immoral”.²³

In this case, the nudity itself was not the problem; it was the fact that Manet portrayed a prostitute.²⁴ There is a sense of wealth and sensuality in her appearance, as evidenced by the orchid in her hair, her bracelet, pearl earrings, and the oriental shawl on which she lies.²⁵

And finally, a more recent case – *Ecstatic Unity* by Dorothy Iannone. The artist was famous for depicting themes related to sexuality and the divine.²⁶ During an exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1969, the director of the museum asked her to cover up the genitalia in her works. Ultimately, her works were deemed “pornographic” and confiscated.²⁷

As an answer to that, she wrote a book entitled “Censorship and The Irrepressible Drive Toward Love and Divinity”, in which she shares her perspective over what has occurred, thus reclaiming her control over the content.²⁸

Unresolved issues in current research

There is not a great deal of current research on the topic with respect to the impact that content removal has on artists. Since this topic is still relatively new, there is insufficient literature on how the algorithm works or how it affects the cultural landscape in general.²⁹ In addition, because Instagram is a private company, it is difficult to investigate how exactly it works and how it affects people.³⁰

Furthermore, because Instagram is one of the main communication channels nowadays and there is no real alternative to it. People would like to stay on the platform due to its massive audience and nice features. Nevertheless, once Instagram has taken a decision, users have a hard time reversing it and

²¹ Artstor 2013

²² Camara 2023

²³ Wikipedia 2023

²⁴ Takac 2018

²⁵ Takac 2018

²⁶ Harris 2022

²⁷ Harris 2022

²⁸ Harris 2022

²⁹ Riccio, Oliver, Escolano, Oliver 2022

³⁰ Riccio, Oliver, Escolano, Oliver 2022

showing that they have been unjustly banned or even demonstrating the company's dubious practices. Thus, leading to frustration, anger and protests against the platform, like the “Free the nipple” movement.³¹

Research Question

Therefore, the research question of this paper is the following: *How does Instagram's intolerance for the female body affect young artists?*

The idea is to assess in a concrete way how having their art removed affects young artists, the way they produce art and their livelihood. The goal is also to further gain an insight into how the guidelines and the unjustified censorship factors in to how artists approach their artistic journey of expression

³¹ Demopoulos 2023

Methodology

The main methods used for the creation of this research paper were literature research as quantitative and a guided interview as qualitative research approach, both equally important and therefore consisting to a mixed method approach.

Literature review

The purpose of this literature review was to examine and analyze previous research on this topic. Identifying gaps, inconsistencies, and areas of controversy in the existing literature was the goal of this study, as well as highlighting areas of consensus and knowledge. Consequently, further research on the topic can be conducted, and the understanding can be deepened.

Research Question

As a result of brainstorming and discussion, the team came up with some main ideas for research. Three main topics were left, which were narrowed down after some discussion to one: *How does Instagram's intolerance for the female body affect young artists?*

Preliminary Research

A preliminary investigation has been conducted into the topic. It consisted primarily of broader research on the most relevant databases, such as Google Scholar and JSTOR. The purpose of this exercise was to obtain an understanding of what literature is available and refine the search terms needed to identify the most relevant sources.

Select Sources

Once the potential sources have been compiled and the search terms have been fine-tuned, the next step is to read the abstracts and summaries to determine which sources are most relevant and informative. In this case, emphasis is placed on selecting a range of sources that offer a variety of perspectives, thus enriching the research process.

Read and Analyze sources.

Following that, each chosen source should be carefully read, and notes should be taken regarding the key findings, arguments, and methodologies used. It is important to consider how each source is related to the research question and to other sources. Each source should also be evaluated in terms of its strengths and weaknesses.

Organize the review.

As a result of reading and analyzing the literature, further notes were taken to identify themes and patterns. A result of this was the grouping of sources according to themes, which helped facilitate the correct citation during the writing of the research paper.

Write the research.

After completing the research, selecting, and organizing the sources, the writing process begins. This research was organized in the following manner: Introduction, Methodology, Results, Discussion, Conclusion, and Bibliography. The purpose of this argumentative paper was to provide concrete arguments and context as to why the research question was chosen and why it was deemed worthy of further research. This led to the next stage of interviewing the artists and gathering the data.

Interview

For the interview, the goal was finding artists that could provide insight into the issue, sharing their personal experiences with the topic and thus providing more understanding.

Description and selection of interview partners

For the interview were selected artists with the following characteristics:

1. The age range between 20 – 35 years old.
2. Uses Instagram as the main channel for sharing artworks.
3. Currently residing in Austria or Germany.
4. Makes art that contains the female body and/or nudity.

Creation of interview questions

A script was created after describing the target group for the interviews. The questionnaire contained 7 questions that should provide insight into the artists experiences with Instagram, their approach to creating and sharing art, and their ideas on how Instagram's guidelines could be improved upon to create a platform where art can be shared freely.

Seeking to gather more information, the interview guide was developed to include the following questions:

1. Why is Instagram your platform of choice when posting art?
2. Have you ever encountered difficulties promoting your art on Instagram due to their content policy? If so, can you describe what happened and how it impacted you?
3. Have you ever had any of your posts removed by Instagram for violating their community guidelines? If so, can you describe what happened and how it impacted you?
4. Have you ever altered or modified your art specifically to comply with Instagram's guidelines? If so, can you provide an example?
5. In your opinion, how does Instagram's post removals impact the freedom of expression in art?
6. How do you think Instagram's content policy compares to other social media platforms in terms of its impact on artists?
7. In your opinion, what changes could Instagram make to their policies to better support artists' freedom of expression?

Invitation of the interview partners

Following the selection of probable interview partners, invitations were sent to each asking them to complete a short questionnaire or participate in a short interview lasting no more than 15 minutes. In this process, the selection was followed by the criteria stated above.

Compilation and analysis of the data

As soon as the interview or questionnaire has been completed, the data has to be sorted out and analyzed, leading to a conclusion. This is then evaluated in detail in the research paper.

Results

The artists were very insightful when it came to the interviews, discussing topics such as their personal experiences, approach, views on the guidelines and suggestions for improvements. These made it clear that there are many aspects that factor into art censorship, especially when it comes to portraying nudity and the female body.

Findings

Upon speaking with the artists about why they chose Instagram to share their art, it became apparent that it was due to the platform's massive size and fame. If an artist is not on Instagram, they are not visible for the majority of the target group.

“Everybody will look you up on Insta and if you don't have one, you just don't exist.”
(02, p2, c58)

The affordability and user-friendly nature of a platform are significant factors for artists. Instagram, being free to use for both private and business accounts, provides an accessible means to showcase and promote artwork, particularly for artists aiming to sell their pieces.

“Um because it's free. Because I, I know the media, because I've been using it before for myself, and so it was just, I know how it works. It's easy to share stuff. And it's even easier for stuff to be shared. I think you can get quite big of a reach for little to no money, which I think is very nice.”
(01, p2, c23-25)

Many young artists are already familiar with Instagram, as it gained popularity as a platform for sharing daily moments through pictures. Consequently, navigating and using the platform comes naturally to many young users who have grown up with Instagram as an integral part of their social media experience.

While Instagram offers a straightforward way to share artwork, there are also challenges involved in posting and promoting art. Artists have shared their experiences of not only having their posts removed but also facing the repercussions of being banned, which significantly impact their ability to reach and engage with their followers and a wider audience. As mentioned by interview partner 2, one such consequence is "shadow banning," wherein the platform erroneously categorizes and restricts artwork depicting nudity, despite it complying with community guidelines and not being explicit pornography.

“So like I only, uh, the posts were only visible for my followers, and they weren't visible for any other people outside my follow up base. They weren't even visible in the hashtag section, which I found very disappointing. But most of the time they got, like, the ban got lifted after a few weeks at most.”
(02, p1, c8-11)

Another intriguing finding from the interview is the tendency for art containing political critique to be arbitrarily removed. Interview partner 01 recounted an experience involving the creation of an Instagram filter featuring a stick figure holding a knife. The illustration incidentally included a subtly drawn penis, which was not a prominent aspect of the artwork. Accompanying the image was the text "How to Eat the Rich." Despite the filter's intention to convey a political message, it was subject to removal without clear justification.

"Yeah, I've actually, uh, made a filter once, um, which was taken down because it showed nudity and violence. But the nudity in question, which is, I, I even have a story highlight you can look at it later on Instagram, um, where it's just a tiny comic penis and the violence in question is cutting a stick figure with a knife, but it's like very ridiculously illustrated. But then it got taken down and I got a notification saying that I'm promoting nudity and I'm also asking people to be violent because it was called "How to Eat the Rich"."

(01, p2, c33-38)

Throughout their encounters with post removal and banning, one of the artists experienced a shift in their approach to the conceptual stage of their art. The repeated instances of being banned for nudity prompted the artist to reconsider the imagery they wished to depict, as the likelihood of removal increased when including nude bodies.

"[...] at first when I started doing a lot of Instagram with my art, I kind of rethink the artwork before doing it that I won't show a lot of nudity so it wouldn't be banned. But I never do or did post work. Censoring the nipples or something. I never did that."

(02, p1, c21-23)

The artists also offered valuable insights into how post removal affects the freedom of expression in art. When an AI filter disproportionately and erroneously targets depictions of naked bodies, it influences the artist's behavior and artistic approach. However, it is not only the artists who are affected. By selectively targeting specific posts, Instagram wields the power to control what viewers can or cannot see. The platform filters out content it desires to promote and showcase, while simultaneously suppressing, blocking, or rendering certain content invisible to the public eye.

"It's some sort of gatekeeping technique where it's actively choosing and censoring some people as opposed to other people who can just do whatever. And it's because they say it's for like nudity environment. But if you look at it, it's more than that. It feels like it's targeted to specific people because there's a lot of violent stuff, there's a lot of stuff that's not okay. [...] But then stuff like that, like, discrimination and antisemitic stuff is just like out there. They don't really care."

(01, p2-3, c58-67)

This situation often leads to confusion and frustration among artists. They observe that the censorship measures primarily target what the guidelines refer to as the "female presenting nipple."

The emphasis on gender-based classification in determining what constitutes acceptable nudity unfairly affects significant art forms that depict the bodies of transgender and non-binary individuals, as pointed out by the artist.

“Well, I don't know why they're censoring, for example, nipples or rather female nipples in the first place. Like, it doesn't really make sense. And I think that, um, that influences a lot of, uh, especially female or some non-binary or trans artists in what they do if they choose to choose nudity in their art.”

(01, p3, c85-88)

One interview partner shared their personal experience regarding Instagram's filter system, highlighting its tendency to target nudity in art that should otherwise be permissible according to the platform's guidelines. In contrast, the other partner provided insightful commentary on how this filtering system equates to censorship. They argued that art should have the freedom to depict the natural components inherent to every human being. Specifically, female body parts such as breasts and nipples are disproportionately targeted despite their fundamental role in human life, often subjected to unnecessary sexualization. According to the artist's perspective, the root of the issue lies not solely within Instagram and other platforms' filtering mechanisms but within a deeper societal structure that shapes the way human bodies are perceived.

“It is censorship. [...] It is not pornography, it is art. Why are breasts so bad? Why can't a woman feed a baby in public? What is the problem? It is the most normal thing ever and gets over sensitized by our society. It's just fucking stupid. Instagram and Facebook are not the core problem, but they express the problem.”

(02, p3, c68-73)

Both artists provided valuable insights on potential enhancements to Instagram's filter system and guidelines, aiming to create a more satisfactory experience for both users and artists. According to their perspectives, the artists believe that there are other crucial aspects on the platform that warrant greater attention and should be more heavily targeted than nude art. They suggest that Instagram should prioritize addressing these pressing issues to improve the overall user experience and foster a more supportive environment for artists.

“I think they could definitely be stricter on other things when it goes against discriminating other people, like, I think that they should be less tolerant there and maybe also just switch their focus to what kind of matters. Like, because if you compare. Discriminating comments to nipples. I think discriminating comments are much more dangerous and should be looked at. Rather than nipples.”

(01, p3, c90-94)

The perspective shared by the other interview partner shed light on the significance of targeting nudity, highlighting that filtering out explicit content plays a crucial role in ensuring the security and

well-being of users, particularly the younger audience. This emphasis on nudity filtering is viewed as a fundamental aspect of maintaining a safe and appropriate environment on the platform.

“Just removed the stupid filter. Just remove it. Just stop censoring art. No I understand it. I understand there has to be an AI filter who filters because everybody would just upload porn on Instagram. I think nudity is ok to be seen by children, but of course not hardcore porn. That is totally fine. But just improve on that.”
(02, p3, c-76-79)

Discussion

The findings indicate that Instagram's implementation of guidelines has generated frustration and misunderstandings within the artist community. In this section of the paper, we will interpret the interview results to delve deeper into the issues surrounding filtering and its impact on artists and the broader Instagram community. Additionally, we will propose suggestions on how Instagram's guidelines and their implementation could be enhanced to create a safer space for viewers while fostering a fair and supportive environment for artists.

Why Instagram?

Through conversations with artists, it became evident that Instagram is preferred not primarily for its opportunities and artistic environment for young artists, but rather for its affordability and user-friendly interface. Both artists interviewed belong to the generation of digital natives, aged between 24 and 26, for whom Instagram has been a familiar platform since their formative years.

Instagram serves as a comfortable space for many young artists, allowing them to navigate effortlessly without requiring substantial time investment to master post generation and reaching their desired target audience, facilitated by features like hashtags.

However, despite Instagram's familiarity and cost-free nature, a growing number of young artists are actively seeking alternative platforms that offer a fairer and more just environment for posting their artwork. They often encounter issues such as content being overlooked, banned, or deleted. As one of the interviewed artists asserted, they would readily abandon Instagram in favor of a platform that provides equivalent reach and a more supportive setting.

“I would delete my Instagram as soon as a new platform arises. I hate it.”

(02, p3, c83)

This highlights the frustration felt by artists regarding Instagram's handling of post filtering based on community guidelines. Both artists express their confusion about how Instagram determines what content should be banned and what should not. They emphasize that there are more pressing issues that directly impact the safety of individuals and groups, such as discrimination, antisemitism, homophobia, transphobia, and bullying. Surprisingly, content related to these areas seems to proliferate freely on the platform and is challenging to eradicate, while nudity is heavily targeted.

These observations raise questions about how Instagram manipulates the user experience. When a platform significantly restricts content in one aspect but allows other harmful content to thrive, it raises concerns about the platform's overall objectives and those responsible for its management and provision.

The bigger picture

As recent events showed, women's rights, as well as LGBTQI-rights are being heavily targeted and society is experiencing a step back in many areas of the world.³² Especially the USA has been a place where trans rights and women's rights are now being reevaluated, as seen in the abortion ban or ban

³² Madrigal-Borloz 2022

on gender-affirming healthcare or law on preferred pronouns.³³ This in combination with American origin of Meta Platforms, Inc. which also owns Instagram, brings up questions of the intentionality of the targeting to certain posts.

The portrayal of nudity and nipples has served as a vital means of communication to represent the changes and perspectives on people's bodies, particularly within the context of transgender or non-binary individuals seeking to express their art. However, as discussed in previous sections, Instagram has been specifically targeting female bodies and removing posts featuring natural functions like period blood or breastfeeding, as well as nudity, sexual content, or violence. Paradoxically, Instagram seems to favor female influencers who present their bodies in a sexualized manner, as it attracts popularity and attention to the platform.

This brings up more questions:

Which portrayal of the female body is okay?

Should we not embrace the sight of a woman during childbirth or allow glimpses into the most natural aspects of motherhood? Is it not acceptable to depict experiences like menstruation and share vulnerable moments openly? Furthermore, how can the female body be portrayed in art without being reduced to pornography? Why is it that the mere depiction of the female body itself often becomes synonymous with pornography? These questions raise important concerns about society's perception and treatment of the female body as a subject of art.

Consequences for Artists and Society

While these questions remain unanswered, artists often find themselves with limited choices when it comes to posting their art on Instagram. They must either refrain from sharing their work on the platform altogether, take the risk of posting potentially banned art, thereby reducing their reach and potentially selling fewer pieces, or modify their art or rethink their concepts entirely.

The repercussions of shadow banning, or post removal can profoundly impact artists. Particularly for those who rely on social media marketing to sell their art, these consequences can be significant. Artists who strive to remain true to their concepts and ideas risk losing valuable advertising opportunities and, in the worst-case scenario, may even lose their entire platform, requiring them to start over from scratch.

These consequences compel artists to conform to the platform's defined guidelines, which ultimately shape the perspectives of both creators and consumers. While the intention may be to protect users from exposure to violent content, it inadvertently steers them in a predetermined direction, influencing their artistic consumption and limiting their exposure to diverse viewpoints.

Suggestions for Improvement

During conversations with the artists, their frustration with the functioning of Instagram's filtering system became evident. However, both artists recognize that Instagram's banning practices are merely symptoms of a broader, complex problem rooted in societal norms and structures.

While Instagram alone may not be able to solve these issues entirely, there is room for improvement in the selection and filtering of posts. The combination of humans and AI in content review allows for a more nuanced approach, with AI systems constantly evolving to become more refined, while

³³ Alfonseca 2023

human reviewers factor in their subjective interpretations. In the realm of art, it should be clearer to both systems that the inclusion of nudity within the medium does not inherently violate community guidelines. This aspect should be easier to implement and adhere to.

The question of nude photography as an art form arises within this discussion, yet it deserves its own dedicated attention and exploration.

Furthermore, in addition to enhancing the filtering system and formulating clearer guidelines, both artists have shared their experiences of the platform in their personal lives. They observe that Instagram provides a significant space for the presence of violence, discrimination, and bullying. Instances of antisemitic or racist posts, often disguised as jokes, are distressingly common. These observations raise questions about the priorities of the filtering system and highlight the need for greater attention to these issues as well.

Strengths and Limitations

A crucial aspect of this study was to delve into the explicit guidelines set by Instagram and examine individual experiences of artists and users in relation to censorship of art, particularly when it involves the female body, even when adhering to the guidelines.

To provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic prior to conducting and evaluating the interviews, a brief overview of the history of art censorship was reviewed and contextualized within the ongoing challenges of censoring artists online. In this context, it was important to explore existing research and implemented solutions for artists in the online realm.

The study placed priority on selecting young, local artists who rely on the platform to sustain their livelihoods. These artists are intimately familiar with the guidelines, consequences, and advertising methods on Instagram. Interviewing them provided valuable insights into the matter. However, to enhance the research, it would be beneficial to include a larger and more diverse sample of participants, including female artists, non-binary artists, and artists from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. This would allow for a deeper exploration of the underlying structures within these communities and further enrich the insights gained from the study.

Suggestions for further research

To enhance future research on this topic, it is advisable to broaden the range of interview participants and incorporate a more diverse perspective. This can be achieved by conducting additional interviews specifically with artists who have experienced bans or removals from the platform. This expanded participant pool would provide a more comprehensive understanding of their varied experiences and perspectives.

Furthermore, to deepen the analysis of art censorship, it is recommended to situate the findings within the framework of media theory, social studies, and psychological research. By exploring the impact of censorship on individuals and the wider population restricted to Instagram's approved content, a more holistic understanding can be attained.

Integrating theories and concepts from diverse disciplines, such as media theory, social studies, and psychology, will enable researchers to gain deeper insights into the implications of censorship, both at the individual and societal levels. This multidisciplinary approach will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the broader consequences of art censorship and its effects on cultural expression.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study illuminates the ongoing issue of art censorship and reveals its historical continuity throughout human civilization. From ancient times to the present, attempts to censor artistic expression, particularly nudity and the portrayal of the female body, have persisted.

The research conducted highlights the frustration and confusion experienced by young artists on Instagram, the prominent platform for sharing artwork. While Instagram remains popular, it has faced significant criticism for its selective and inconsistent censorship practices. This has created a sense of restriction and unfair targeting among artists whose work has been suppressed.

The examination of cases involving Meta (formerly Facebook) also raises concerns about the sincerity of their efforts to address censorship issues. Despite claims of commitment to change, progress appears to be slow, casting doubt on the true motivations behind their actions.

The consequences of art censorship extend beyond individual artists and have a profound impact on our cultural landscape. Instagram's wide-reaching influence has made it an integral part of our contemporary society. As a result, the platform's restrictive practices and the frustrations faced by artists have the potential to shape and redefine broader social norms related to art.

Given these findings, it is evident that the fight against art censorship is far from over. It is crucial for artists, platforms, and society as a whole to engage in meaningful dialogue and take proactive measures to safeguard artistic freedom. Creating an environment that fosters creativity, diversity, and the expression of ideas, including artistic depictions of the human body, can contribute to a more inclusive society.

This research successfully addresses the central question regarding the impact of Instagram's intolerance for the female body on young artists. The study reveals that censorship remains a persistent issue for artists, influencing societal perceptions and restricting their creative freedom. Instagram's guidelines have significant implications, including limited audience reach, reduced exposure, and potential financial setbacks for artists. Moreover, these consequences extend beyond artists themselves and impact other users in troubling ways.

In summary, the censorship of the human body, particularly the female body, on Instagram evokes frustration and confusion among artists. This not only hampers their artistic opportunities but also raises doubts about the genuine intentions of corporate entities such as Instagram and Facebook in their mission to protect users from inappropriate content. The findings underscore the multifaceted nature of Instagram's intolerance for artistic expression and its profound impact on young artists and the wider perception of these platforms.

Appendix A: Interview Transcripts

Interview 01

Artist Information

Name: Maximilian Bauer

Age: 24

Sex: Male (he/hm)

Location: Vienna, Austria

Ears Money by their Art

BEGIN RECORD

- 1 *I: Hi! Thank you so much for your time and your interest in doing this interview.*
- 2 M: You're welcome! Of course!
- 3 *I: Are you ok with me recording this conversation? And also, would you like to be anonymised in the*
4 *paper or do you not mind us referencing you and your Instagram account?*
- 5 M: No problem at all! Recording is fine, and you can also state my personal information.
- 6 *I: Alright, thank you! So, lets begin! Your name I already know, Maxi Bauer, right?*
- 7 M: Exactly.
- 8 *I: Age?*
- 9 M: 24.
- 10 *I: Mm-hmm. Um, sex or gender, whatever you feel comfortable.*
- 11 M: Male.
- 12 *I: Okay. And do you use he him pronouns?*
- 13 M: Yes.
- 14 *I: Okay. And location is Vienna, but former Graz, right?*
- 15 M: Yes.
- 16 *I: And do you derive your like main income from art?*
- 17 M: Um, and also my parents supporting me.
- 18 *I: But you make income from art?*
- 19 M: Yes. Okay. But right now, I'm still studying a lot so I get supported by my parents too.
- 20 *I: So, you earn money by doing art and uh, also like normal support as a student?*
- 21 M: Yeah. Okay. So, I assume, as I know you post your art on Instagram, why do you choose Instagram
22 as a platform where you portray your art?

23 M: Um because it's free. Because I, I know the media, because I've been using it before for myself,
24 and so it was just, I know how it works. It's easy to share stuff. And it's even easier for stuff to be
25 shared. I think you can get quite big of a reach for little to no money, which I think is very nice.

26 *I: Okay, cool.*

27 M: And it's low effort. I mean, it's still an effort to have an Instagram presence and stuff, but just to
28 post stuff is not that much effort.

29 *I: Mm-hmm. And your main account is "maximalerei", right?*

30 M: Um, for my art yes.

31 *I: Okay. So, second question. Have you ever encountered difficulties promoting your art on Instagram*
32 *due to their guideline policy? And if so, can you describe what happened and how it impacted you?*

33 M: Yeah, I've actually, uh, made a filter once, um, which was taken down because it showed nudity
34 and violence. But the nudity in question, which is, I, I even have a story highlight you can look at it
35 later on Instagram, um, where it's just a tiny comic penis and the violence in question is cutting a
36 stick figure with a knife, but it's like very ridiculously illustrated. But then it got taken down and I got
37 a notification saying that I'm promoting nudity and I'm also asking people to be violent because it
38 was called "How to Eat the Rich".

39 *I: Ah, I remember. Yeah, I remember.*

40 M: And that was, the post was not taken down, but the filter was taken down because it was
41 promoting nudity and violence. Which I think is very ridiculous.

42 *I: Yeah, I remember. The filter was great.*

43 M: Thanks. But other than that, nothing has been cancelled or taken down.

44 *I: Okay. So you didn't have too many like complications yet. Cool. No, that is good. So the third*
45 *question would be, have you ever had any of your posts removed by Instagram for violating the*
46 *community guidelines?*

47 M: Um, yeah, I guess that was it.

48 *I: Like the filter has been taken down?*

49 M: Yeah, the filter. Other than that, no.

50 *I: Okay. Yeah. Have you ever altered or modified your art specifically to comply with Instagram's*
51 *guidelines? For example, censoring something or leaving something out because you knew it would*
52 *like cause problems?*

53 M: Not really. No. No, because usually I draw nudity. I've been drawing naked illustrations and it
54 usually works. So, if I want to do that, I feel like I can do that.

55 *I: Okay. Good. Um, yeah. But in your opinion, how does Instagram's post removals, because I'm sure*
56 *you've heard from other people that art gets taken down, um, impact the freedom of expression in*
57 *art? What do you think about that?*

58 M: Mm, I think it impacted quite a lot. It's some sort of gatekeeping technique where it's actively
59 choosing and censoring some people as opposed to other people who can just do whatever. And it's
60 because they say it's for like nudity environment. But if you look at it, it's more than that. It feels like
61 it's targeted to specific people because there's a lot of violent stuff, there's a lot of stuff that's not

62 okay. Um, I did a project where a statistic showed, I think it was 83% of all the antisemitic, uh,
63 incidents on social media are not, are not being taken down. Um, don't quote me that correctly
64 before checking them. Yeah. I think is that number which like, there's so much shit going on. But then
65 this is the stuff they care about. And this is the stuff that people cannot see because it's being taken
66 down. But then stuff like that, like, and discrimination, uh, antisemitic stuff is just like out there. They
67 don't really care. I think I drifted a little bit from their question.

68 *I: No, but it's totally true.*

69 M: Like the female body or nudity gets targeted quite a lot and like super harsh problematics, like
70 racism, homophobia, transphobia, antisemitism...

71 *I: Yes, I get your point. Yeah. Okay. Um, how do you think that Instagram's a policy compares to other
72 social media platforms in terms of its impact on artists?*

73 M: I don't really use any other social media than Instagram. And I used to use Facebook, which has
74 the same policies. Um, so I don't really know, to be honest.

75 *I: Okay, fine. That's good. No problem. Okay. And, and we come to the last question, and I will create,
76 uh, another question I feel, because I think it would be interesting because you said you haven't had
77 any posts taken down yet. Why do you think that is? Do you think your, your comics, your artwork is
78 like reduced enough, so it's like visibly illustrated and like not nudity. What do you think?*

79 M: Yeah. I think so actually, because it's quite, if you look at my illustration style, I think you would
80 say it's quite simplified. And sometimes, for example, a penis is just like this (does hand gesture) Uh,
81 so I think it's not nudity enough.

82 *I: Okay. Um, yeah. Okay. Interesting. Yeah, I'm happy to compare this to other interviews. Okay. So,
83 we come to the last question, Maxi, in your opinion: What changes could Instagram make in their
84 policies to better support the artist's freedom of expression?*

85 M: Well, I don't know why they're censoring, for example, nipples or rather female nipples in the first
86 place. Like, it doesn't really make sense. And I think that, um, that influences a lot of, uh, especially
87 female or some non-binary or trans artists in what they do if they choose to choose nudity in their
88 art.

89 *I: Mm-hmm.*

90 M: Um, and they could definitely change that because there's no harm being done to anyone seeing
91 Nipples. Mm-hmm. Um, any kind of nipples, in my personal opinion, um, I think they could definitely
92 be stricter on other things when it goes against discriminating other people, like, I think that they
93 should be less tolerant there and maybe also just switch their focus to what kind of matters. Like,
94 because if you compare. Discriminating comments to nipples. I think discriminating comments are
95 much more dangerous and should be looked at. Rather than nipples. Yeah. Um, so I think that's a big
96 one. And also, the whole, I, I didn't really, or I don't know too much about shadow banning cuz I
97 didn't look into it so much, but I know from a lot of my friends that it's happening.

98 *I: Mm-hmm.*

99 M: And they should also just stop that as, as stupid as it sounds, but it's just not fair. Like why? Yeah.
100 Why would you do that and why do you choose to do that? I think it's not fair to give some people
101 prob, it's probably not random that they do it, but for no good reason to give some people
102 advantages and disadvantages, just because it sort of kind of feels like it.

103 *I: Mm-hmm. Yeah, totally.*

104 M: The shadow burning is ridiculous.

105 *I: Okay. Do you have anything you want to add or any questions?*

106 M: I don't think so, or at least not for now. If I can, I'll just reach out.

107 *I: Of course. Of course. If you have any doubts or if you want to add something or if something comes*
108 *to your mind, just text.*

109 M: Cool.

110 *I: Well, dear, thank you so much then.*

111 M: Yeah, of course.

112 *I: Have a nice evening and I will send you the project when it's done.*

113 M: So when do you think it will be done?

114 *I: Were finalizing the paper in May so I think end of May or sometime in June.*

115 M: Okay. Nice. Cool. Soon.

116 *I: Yes.*

117 M: All right. Well good luck with your project.

118 *I: Thank you. Have a great time and see you soon.*

119 M: I hope we do. See you.

120 *I: Bye.*

121 M: Bye.

Postscript:

The interview was conducted via zoom online Meeting. I contacted Maxi on Instagram since I knew him from way back because of friends of mine. I reached out to Maxi because he posts a lot of illustrations which often portray nudity and criticizing recent social dilemmas, often Homophobia or Transphobia. Therefor I thought Maxi will be a suitable interview partner. The interview was conducted on the 8th of May 2023 at 8p.m.

Maxi was well-versed and clear in speech and had a lot of valuable insight into the artists perspective on social media, especially Instagram, to offer. There were no misunderstandings or technical difficulties, and the interview was done once in one go, which this transcript stems from.

Interview 02

Artist Information

Name: Paul Resch

Age: 26

Sex: Male (he/him)

Location: Graz, Austria

Ears Money by their Art: yes

BEGIN RECORD

1 *I: Hallo Paul, thank you again for participating. Are you ok with recording this interview?*

2 P: Yes of course.

3 *I: Ready?*

4 P: Yes.

5 *I: Okay. Have you ever had any of your posts removed by Instagram for violating their community*
6 *guidelines?*

7 P: No, never. No posts removed. Only, um, advertisement things. But no direct post. They only got
8 shadow banned. So like I only, uh, the posts were only visible for my followers, and they weren't
9 visible for any other people outside my follow up base. They weren't even visible in the hashtag
10 section, which I found very disappointing. But most of the time they got, like, the ban got lifted after
11 a few weeks at most. The last one got lifted after just four days. Um, yes, like I show like a lot of
12 nudity, like „Akt“ like nude, nude art, and penises and tits and vaginas, et cetera. Like they got
13 clearly, um, they got shadow banned at first, but then got lifted up a few days, till a few weeks. Um,
14 but I wanted to make ad advertisements with them and this was not possible due to violations, due
15 to nudity or pornography even.

16 *I: So they got banned for the advertisement?*

17 P: Mm-hmm.

18 *I: Okay. Have you ever altered or modified your art to comply with Instagram guidelines?*

19 P: No. Never.

20 *I: And why not?*

21 P: Just one thing, like at first when I started doing a lot of Instagram with my art, I kind of rethink the
22 artwork before doing it that I won't show a lot of nudity so it wouldn't be banned. But I never do or
23 did post work. Censoring the nipples or something. I never did that.

24 *I: So it did kind of influence how you thought about your concepts of art?*

25 P: Yes, it did.

26 *I: Okay. In your opinion, how does Instagram's post removals and shadow banning impact the*
27 *freedom of expression in art?*

28 P: It's just censorship. It's art. It should be art and should be viewed as it is and not viewed by an AI.
29 And then managed, you know, that you can't post a penis, you can't post tits because it's all natural.
30 And it's okay to do so, to post on Instagram, like posting nude art. In the guidelines it says that you
31 can, but they just censor it. They just censor it because a stupid AI looks over it and just sees a nipple
32 or something and then bans it, or shadow bans it. And the thing is like, I think with the last post
33 which got shadow banned, I think some of my subscribers reported. Because it got shadow banned
34 from the start, so I think some of the first ten viewers reported me for nudity because it were two
35 erected penises. So I guess it is unfair because it is art and everything should be ok, because why
36 not?

37 *I: Mm-hmm.*

38 P: Because it's natural. Penis is natural. Everybody, every male has a penis. Every female has a vagina.
39 Why should I shame myself for it? Why shouldn't I show it?

40 *I: Yeah, exactly. That's where the next question gets in, in your opinion. How does like Instagram's*
41 *policy affect the perception people have over nudity and what is appropriate?*

42 P: It's this American view, like every female nipple is bad. Everything nude as a woman is bad.
43 Because it's our children here and it's bad. And they could get like, oh my God, you, you, you can't
44 show that and blah, blah, blah. And everybody thinks that way nowadays, kind of, and it's just fucking
45 stupid because like, Why should you be ashamed of what you have?

46 *I: Do you believe that Instagram's content policy disproportionately targets female artists? Or*
47 *regarding to male artists?*

48 P: That I don't know. Okay. I guess they get both like the same. But there is a difference between if
49 you post a female body or a male body. Female bodies get a lot more banning than a male body in
50 my experience.

51 *I: Mm-hmm. Okay. Have you ever encountered difficulties promoting your art on Instagram? You*
52 *talked about your experience earlier.*

53 P: Yes. I already told. Every new post gets viewed, sometimes by an AI but advertisement posts get
54 looked over by real people. And most of the time they block it. Because there is nudity and children
55 could see that. And in their opinion, children can't see nudity. They fucking sucked on a tit four years
56 ago! That is so stupid.

57 *I: Why is Instagram your platform of choice when posting art?*

58 P: Because it's the only platform there is for that. If you don't have Instagram... Everybody will look
59 you up on Insta and if you don't have one, you just don't exist. If there would be another platform I
60 would post on there because everything is better than Instagram at that point. It is just shitting on
61 artists that do static posts because they want videos and they want them really short and stupid for
62 the average dumb user to get that. I hate it. I absolutely hate it.

63 *I: How do you think Instagram's content policy compares to other social media platform?*

64 P: Its that Facebook thing. Facebook and Instagram are kind of the same. Both bullshit. What else is
65 there? Reddit, Tumblr, yeah. They are all better because you can post not safe for work stuff. It is
66 better, but not the same.

67 *I: And in your opinion, how does Instagram's post removal impact the freedom of expression?*

68 P: It is censorship. Like a big American company is censoring my art because some dumb 55 year old
69 in America thought it's a good idea to not show a tit because that is bad. Because children. Its just
70 stupid. It is not pornography, it is art. Why are breasts so bad? Why can't a woman feed a baby in
71 public? What is the problem? It is the most normal thing ever and gets over sensitized by our society.
72 It's just fucking stupid. Instagram and Facebook are not the core problem, but they express the
73 problem.

74 *I: Exactly. Yeah, I love that statement. I will cite this. Okay, so last question. Um, in your opinion, what*
75 *changes could insect make to their policies to better support artist's Freedom of expression?*

76 P: Just removed the stupid filter. Just remove it. Just stop censoring art. No I understand it. I
77 understand there has to be an AI filter who filters because everybody would just upload porn on
78 Instagram. I think nudity is ok to be seen by children, but of course not hardcore porn. That is totally
79 fine. But just improve on that. What there can be and not is just stupid every time. I upload a nipple
80 and what? It is just a nipple, not the end of the world but it is treated like that. Oh my God. Yeah. It's
81 against our guidelines, blah, blah, blah. Fucking stupid.

82 *I: Okay. Is there anything else that you would like to add?*

83 P: I would delete my Instagram as soon as a new platform arises. I hate it.

Postscript:

The interview was conducted in person and recorded via phone. The interview was conducted on the 23rd of May 2023 at 4p.m.

Paul was well-versed and clear in speech and had a lot of valuable insight into the artists perspective on social media, especially Instagram, to offer. There were no misunderstandings or technical difficulties, and the interview was done once in one go, which this transcript stems from.

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