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What Is Political About Gender Representation on Instagram?

In early August 2016, a controversial case involving the social networking site Instagram emerged (e.g. Elise, 2016b; Falabregue, 2016) when twenty-four-year-old Belgian female nude model Marisa Papen's popular Instagram account was banned from the online platform. Papen's unapologetically sexy photographs were deemed too provocative, despite her creative efforts to avoid breaking Instagram's Terms of Use (2016), by covering her nipples and other body parts judged to be "too explicit" (Elise, 2016b). Although this is a unique and highly context-dependent illustration,

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Marisa Papen's Instagram ban magnifies and highlights some of the complex and nuanced gender-related politics that underlie self-representation on Instagram.

The aim of this article is to provide a theoretical contribution to gender studies, as well as to feminist media studies. The politics of gender representation on Instagram are discussed in relation to Marisa Papen's Instagram account ban. As Instagram continues to grow in popularity, reaching over 500 million active monthly users (Instagram Press News, 2016), there is an increasing need to critically examine these emerging representations and their underlying gender politics. This article views social media platforms, and more specifically Instagram, as spaces in which gendered representations are shaped in specific mediated contexts. To explore the mediated contexts of Instagram, we discuss the technological affordances (Livingstone, 2008) and the platform's Terms of Use. Thereby, we are showing that each form of media is shaping representations of gender in particular and unique ways.

This study on the politics of gender representation on Instagram will focus specifically on representations of women and femininities. This focus stems not only from the specificities of the illustrative case of nude model Marisa Papen but also from the predominance of active female Instagram users (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). The article draws on the expertise of previous research on women's uses of such social networking sites (e.g. Burns, 2015; Murray, 2015; Rettalack, Ringrose, & Lawrence, 2016; Rettberg, 2014; Warfield, 2014a, 2014b). Further, it acknowledges the complementary studies on how masculinities are constructed on social networking sites (e.g. Dinsmore, 2014; Iovannone, 2016; Siibak, 2010).

Women have historically been associated with the consumption of media rather than with its production (Kanai & Dobson, 2016, p. 1). Social media platforms like Instagram, with user-friendly interfaces that are integrated into smartphones and are already widely used in everyday life, have simplified and democratised the means for visual creation, editing, and distribution. This has allowed women easier access to the tools of media production and distribution (Vivienne & Burgess, 2012, p. 373). As such, there is a certain "political" character in self-representation on Instagram.

This understanding of the political goes beyond the overt online activism of the still-contested notion of "fourth-wave feminism", which calls for active participatory engagement and uses social networking sites to call out injustices and inequalities (Munro, n.d.; Rettalack et al., 2016, pp. 86–87). It differs from the deliberate use of Instagram and social media for digital feminist activism, as a tool to facilitate connections and encounters between feminist and queer activist groups, both online and offline (Fotopoulou, 2016; Korn & Kneese, 2015), or as a means of protest or social commentary, used to spread openly political messages through online self-representation (Kuntsman, 2017, p. 14).

Our understanding of the political relates more closely to the notions of "everyday politics" (Highfield, 2016) and "everyday activism" (Vivienne & Burgess, 2012). This understanding grounds the discussion on how political themes are framed around our personal experiences and interests (Highfield, 2016, p. 3). It allows for

seemingly banal subjects, such as self-representation on Instagram, to be understood as political, even if they are not specifically constructed as such. This idea of "everyday activism" views the simple act of sharing the personal representations and stories of previously marginalised groups of people – like women or queer people – in a public (online) space as a catalyst for social change with potential to challenge popular stereotypes (Vivienne & Burgess, 2012, p. 363). Self-representation on Instagram might not be a deliberate political act, but it becomes political by shifting the decision of who gets to occupy the public's visual field into the hands of individuals (Syme, 2015). Self-representation has the potential to create greater visibility for demographics that are usually underrepresented or misrepresented in traditional mainstream media.

While feminist techno-utopias of earlier studies on gender and the Internet are now believed to be overly optimistic – such studies overestimated the potential for a free and unrestricted experimentation with identity and gender afforded by the Internet (Sveningsson Elm, 2009, p. 243-244) – there is still a sense of optimism surrounding the political potential of self-representation on apps such as Instagram. Such apps are perceived as opening up space for more democratic and diverse representations that do not fit the narrow parameters of beauty valorised by the popular mainstream media (Gill, 2007, p. 12). These popular media often display a version of normative femininity and ideal beauty that is limited to the strict standards of the young, white, able-bodied, seemingly heterosexual, well-groomed, thin and conventionally attractive woman (Gill, 2007). Conversely, self-representation on Instagram can normalise diversity and challenge restrictive views of the representation of women (Burns, 2015, p. 90), acknowledging differences of age, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and culture.

However, this view of the potential of Instagram must necessarily be counterposed by a more sceptical understanding of these social networking sites. Overly optimistic claims that the Internet is a tool of pure resistance are receiving increasing scrutiny (e.g. Döring, Reif, & Poeschl, 2016; Kanai & Dobson, 2016). Critics point out that the online practices of individuals draw heavily on their "real" offline experiences, and thus can serve to reproduce existing gender norms (Kanai & Dobson, 2016, pp. 1-3). Furthermore, it must be noted that access to digital technologies is not equally distributed, often being concentrated among the young and privileged. There is still a "digital divide" that prevents some women access to the tools of representation (Schuster, 2013, p. 11).

Self-representation on Instagram does not exist in a cultural void. It is intertextual, embedded in popular culture, and thus re-appropriates, often unconsciously, the texts and conventions of the film and television industries, of women's magazines, and of the fashion and beauty industries to enable one to construct one's own image through a process of "bricolage" (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015, p. 334). This often creates a struggle between the dominant discourses that popular culture seems to carry and the varied subjective meanings that people create by re-appropriating these texts (De Ridder, 2014, pp. 87-8).

By the same token, intertextuality also functions in the reverse direction, incorporating the "edginess" and potentially resistant character of self-representation on social networking sites into the production of mainstream media representations (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015, p. 119). Popular mainstream media often assimilate the self-representations that have a resistant nature, simplifying them and depoliticising them (Duguay, 2016, p. 3).

Therefore, Instagram can continue to reinforce and reproduce existing hegemonic notions of gender. Incredibly narrow conceptions of attractiveness, sexiness, and idealised femininity can re-emerge on social networking sites and can often become integrated into a seemingly postfeminist discourse of "sexiness as empowerment" (Burns, 2015, p. 199). McRobbie (2009) understands this postfeminist discourse as taking elements of feminism, such as the emphasis on empowerment and choice, and incorporating them into media and popular culture, presenting a simplified version of feminism which focuses on the body and the pursuit of beauty as a personal choice, thereby losing the political edge of feminism. This simplified version of feminism makes it possible for women to inadvertently perform the same formulaic gender stereotypes while claiming empowerment (Murray, 2015, p. 495).

Studying Instagram and its gender representation politics should be a tentative endevour: on the one hand, it can be seen as a tool for reinforcing women's agency and extending the practices of gendered representation beyond their current norms; on the other hand, it can also be a tool for reinforcing and reproducing existing social norms. Empowerment and disempowerment can co-exist, as the illustration of Marisa Papen's Instagram helps to exemplify. The symbolic empowerment gained by the visibility of a greater diversity of representations on Instagram may not always be accompanied by the social empowerment that ensures greater equality and fairer treatment (Senft & Baym, 2015, pp. 1957–8).

Understanding Instagram as a Technology of Gender

Teresa de Lauretis's work *Technologies of Gender* (1987) is especially relevant for the study of gender representation on Instagram. Reading Instagram through the lens of the technologies of gender – those media forms, narratives, and discourses through which gender is constructed – allows for refocusing on questions of gender representation (De Lauretis, 1987, p. ix).

It draws on the idea that gender is constructed rather than a "natural" given. The construction of gender is enacted through a series of performances, repeated stylizations of the body, operating within a specific regulatory cultural frame (Butler, 1990/2007). Following the same line of thought, De Lauretis (1987) understands gender as both the product and the process of representation and self-representation (p. 9). In this sense, gender is seen as the outcome of various social technologies, amongst them cinema and now also social networking sites like Instagram, and of the discourses surrounding them (De Lauretis, 1987, p. 2). These representations

not only depict gender but also actively create it, producing gender differences and norms that did not exist previously (De Lauretis, 1987, p. 7).

Understanding gender as representation does not mean, however, that it does not have real and concrete implications, both subjective and social, for the lives of individuals. Through a process of interpellation, these social representations become absorbed and accepted by individuals as their own, real representations (De Lauretis, 1987, p. 12).

According to De Lauretis (1987), the construction of gender is an ongoing effort (p. 3). Instagram inserts itself in a long line of visual technologies, from painting to cinema, that throughout history have served to actively produce and disseminate conceptions of gender. De Lauretis (1987) briefly explores how cinema in particular can be understood as a technology of gender, enquiring how its visual techniques and conventions of spectatorship contribute to the construction of gender (p. 13). These kinds of interrogations can easily be translated into the context of Instagram by questioning how gender is constructed through this particular technology and how it is absorbed by the individuals who use it.

The representations on Instagram produce and reproduce specific gender conceptions that are linked to broader sociocultural discourses (De Lauretis, 1987, pp. 18–9). Self-representations on Instagram can thus be seen as gendered performances (Butler, 1990/2007) that not only exhibit the pre-existing gender expressions of the photographed individual – through their clothing, styling and mannerisms – but also create gender expressions in the process of taking the photographs, conveyed by the choice of what to photograph, how to pose, what facial expressions to present, etc. (Döring et al., 2016, p. 955). Furthermore, gendered associations and stereotypes are created and reproduced through the use of Instagram, such as the idea that women share photos of themselves while men post photos of what they like, such as what they are drinking (Dinsmore, 2014).

Instagram is populated by representations that can only offer limited access to "the real", showing only certain desirable aspects of ourselves. Instagram users make very careful and deliberate choices about what to share and what strategies of representation to use (Thumim, 2012, p. 8). Further, they attempt to portray themselves in a positive and idealised manner. Users sharing information that will portray them in a positive light can be understood as engaging in "promotional practice", in the words of Enli and Thumim (2012, pp. 96–7).

Moreover, representations on Instagram, as well as their gendered meanings, are shaped through a series of filters. According to Jill Rettberg (2014) the term "filter" is usually understood as a process through which something is removed. Although the filters on Instagram often seem to be adding new things to the image, such as brighter colours or retro-effects, they nonetheless can serve as a means to remove or hide imperfections, for example, by hiding skin imperfections by over-exposing the image.

In addition to these more direct kinds of technological filters, there are other types of filters that shape and constrict the image-based representation on Insta-

gram. These cultural and institutional filters are often so naturalised and taken for granted that they go unnoticed (Rettberg, 2014). "Cultural filters", according to Rettberg (2014, pp. 22–4), are the social norms and expectations, rules and conventions that shape our photographic creations. They teach us, often unintentionally, to mimic societally approved images in our own photographic practices. Some of these cultural filters arise from our understanding of Instagram as a direct descendent of analogue photography, thus carrying some of its visual conventions. In this way, our understanding of Instagram is constructed through a process of remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999/2000) that establishes a dialogue between new media and preceding technologies.

Also, these cultural filters are reproducing socially accepted gendered conventions, such as the idea of women as essentially constructed as to-be-looked-at. According to John Berger (1972, p. 46), this sense of existing as image becomes internalised, creating in women a double understanding of themselves, both as subject and object. Women must continuously watch and be aware of such images of themselves, in order to maintain their aesthetic appeal. This idea frames the construction of online self-representation, and particularly selfie-taking, as a gendered activity, essentially associated with young women (Burns, 2015, p. 16–17).

Institutional filters refer to the way in which social networking sites shape how we represent ourselves (Thumim, 2012, p. 139). Although we appear free to share whatever we please on these sites, there are nonetheless plenty of constraints. The social networking sites themselves are carefully designed to elicit certain kinds of responses and representations (Thumim, 2012, p. 153). The interface's affordances determine what can be represented through the platform (Livingstone, 2008, p. 400). Thus, Instagram, as a technological platform, is not neutral. The "politics of platforms" are shaped by companies' ideologies and particular commercial interests (Duguay, 2016; Gillespie, 2010). These politics organize users' interactions and may shape self-representations. However, the platform itself does not wholly determine how users will make use of it, because unlike traditional media industries, social media platforms do not act as gatekeepers of content (Gillespie, 2010, pp. 352–353).

Some of these technological affordances are presented in a more explicit manner, through app store ratings and descriptions of the app's intended use (Duguay, 2016, p. 4), or through regulations and terms of use. Instagram's Terms of Use, for instance, directly regulate what can be shared on the platform and what is liable to be deleted. They impose direct constraints over the self-representations shared on Instagram, prohibiting the sharing of images with full or partial nudity, of sexually explicit or pornographic photographs, as well as of violent, discriminatory or illegal content ("Terms of Use", 2016). Yet other users can also exercise a sort of "editorial power" that constrains representations. They can approve certain kinds of representations by giving "likes" and making comments or they can show their disapproval by "reporting" the images they consider inappropriate (Enli & Thumim, 2012, p. 93).

The process of constructing gender is thus related to the notion of power (De Lauretis, 1987, p. 18), as is the case with the politics of gender representation in social media. However, the power underlying these representations is not a "top-down" power imposed by a sovereign or ruling class. Rather, it is, in Foucault's conception, something that is neither centralised nor uniform, but that runs through the whole society (Gill, 2007, p. 61). Institutionally unbounded, especially in the context of Instagram, the power that regulates the technologies of gender comes from a multitude of "ordinary" sources, which are everywhere and nowhere in particular. This helps to convey a sense that these representations of gender emerge in a voluntary and natural way (Bartky, 1998, pp. 36-8).

These technologies of gender, amongst them Instagram, serve to define the culturally accepted gender norms by conveying the gender roles that are most approved of in contemporary society. Understanding Instagram as a technology of gender helps to highlight its ideological role in culture and society, as a producer of hegemonic representations of femininity and masculinity. When narrowly defined into traditional gender stereotypes, these hegemonic representations can become not only reductive of the potential of the representation of gender but can also divide the normal and acceptable from the unacceptable, drawing symbolic boundaries and excluding what does not fit in these simplified notions (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2014, p. 44).

Regarding the technologies of gender, De Lauretis (1987) emphasises the role of the individual in the construction of these representations. She sees the social representation of gender as affecting its subjective construction, and conversely, the subjective self-representation of gender as also affecting the social construction. This opens up the possibility of agency in the creation of gender at the individual level (p. 9). On Instagram, this agency is especially noticeable in the context of self-representations, which carry the potential for different constructions of gender. They allow for a "local" level of resistance, emerging from the users' subjectivities and self-representations (De Lauretis, 1987, p. 18).

A more cautious view, however, may consider Instagram as playing into a restrictive gender system that still accords different values and hierarchies to different gender representations (De Lauretis, 1987, p. 5). Representations of femininity or masculinity carry different meanings and are thus treated differently by Instagram, as the case of Marisa Papen's ban evinces. Representations of women are treated restrictively by Instagram's Terms of Use (2016). The tendentious nudity policy allows, for example, images of men's nipples to be shared while banning all images of women's nipples for being overly sexual (Wahl, 2015). Furthermore, the aforementioned "editorial power" given to Instagram's users through "likes," "comments," and "reports" (Enli & Thumim, 2012, p. 93) is influenced by gender, as women's self-representations are more likely to be met with hostility and even vilification (Burns, 2015; Warfield, 2014a).

Instagram Through the Lens of Self-Representation

Despite the constraints exerted by the aforementioned cultural filters (Rettberg, 2014), technological affordances (Livingstone, 2008), and "politics of platforms" (Duguay, 2016; Gillespie, 2010), there is still a tendency to think of Instagram in terms of "pure" self-representation.

Self-representation on Instagram is often equated with a wide-spread public discourse on the selfie phenomenon, simply defined as a photograph one takes of oneself, usually with a smartphone or digital camera, and that is later shared on social media (Thumim, 2016, p. 1564). The creation of selfies is one of the digital practices expected and encouraged on Instagram as expressed through the descriptions and photographs featured in the app store. These featured images suggest the type of content that is expected to be produced on Instagram and reinforce certain discourses as acceptable (Duguay, 2016, p. 4). Yet, despite this expectation and the widespread popularity of the selfie, popular media outlets have shown noticeable disdain for it. It has been dismissed as common or trivial, and has been excluded from the realm of "proper portrait photography" (Burns, 2015, pp. 63–64). The selfie is also considered, perhaps paradoxically, as narcissistic, in a simplistic understanding of the word that disdains such self-representations as a tool for shameless self-promotion and a cry for attention (Tifentale & Manovich 2014, p. 6). This overwhelmingly negative view of the selfie phenomenon also leads to an overall attack on and vilification of the selfie-takers, a gendered category that mainly consists of young women (Burns, 2015, pp. 16–17).

However, despite the immense media attention, selfies do not constitute most of the images that are shared on Instagram. In their massive multi-city research on selfies, *Selfiecity*, Alise Tifentale and Lev Manovich (2014, pp. 2–6) concluded that single-person selfies were only 3–5% of all photographs posted on Instagram during the period of one week.

As such, self-representation on Instagram should not be merely understood in the strict sense of "a picture one takes of oneself". Self-representation can also include photographs of the users that were taken by other people (e.g. their friends), and that the users decided to publish on their own Instagram accounts. These particular photographs become a visual form of self-representation because of the choice to share them (Rettberg, 2014, p. 40), with users exercising their curatorial agency. Moreover, self-representation on Instagram can be created through images of things we love, like photographs of our family, pets, meals, or vacations. This creates an indirect self-representation of our personality (Enli & Thumim, 2012, p. 15). Either directly or indirectly, the images shared through Instagram provide a form of carefully chosen "myth-making-via-imagery" (Syme, 2015, n.p.).

When created by women, these self-representations can carry the potential to displace the culturally established male-oriented gender narratives by offering "a view from elsewhere" (De Lauretis, 1987, p. 25). Self-representation implies per-

sonal agency, emphasizing the experience of the individual self. It has a humanising power, drawing the viewer into a closer relationship with the represented (Ehlin, 2015, p. 77). It shows the self-represented person as an embodied subject, sharing their experiences from their own point of view, rather than a disembodied object (Warfield, 2014b).

As a form of "everyday activism" (Vivienne & Burgess, 2012), the simple visibility of women's self-representations goes against the deeply rooted dominant ideologies that describe women's main role as "to-be-looked-at", a source of visual pleasure (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1975). These ideologies have, for a long time, conditioned women not to expose themselves (Rettberg, 2014, pp. 17–8), not to seek control of their representations, and not to take overt pleasure in their own image. Despite self-representations being judged on looks and attractiveness, women are nonetheless trapped in a double standard; when women are considered "too" attractive and publicly show concern for their own image and self-representation, they are judged and accused of narcissism and vanity (Berger, 1972, p. 51).

Self-representation on Instagram can be an opportunity to experiment and play with gender representations, allowing users to represent themselves both in accordance with stereotypical gender ideals and through representations that transgress traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. Both conventional representations of women, such as those that show women embracing an unashamed normative sexiness that is equated with postfeminist liberation and power (Gill, 2007), and non-conformist representations of women, which do not fit the normative beauty standards, such as images showing women unshaven or with period stains (Bernard, 2013; Murray, 2015), can co-exist on Instagram.

Recent studies, however, point to the fact that this political potential tends not to be realised. The self-representations on Instagram are often conceived in more normative ways, reproducing traditional gender stereotypes, rather than actually creating non-hegemonic, stereotype-breaking gender representations (Döring et al., 2016, p. 957).

These representations are also continuously evaluated by the other Instagram users (Burns, 2015). They can receive positive reinforcements, through "likes" or other positive feedback, but they can also receive heavy critiques, signified not only by a lack of "likes" but also by negative comments, "unfollowings", by having a photo "flagged" as inappropriate, or even by being "reported" by other users (Dinsmore, 2014, p. 40). Such feedback demonstrates the kinds of representations that are most valued on Instagram, establishing what is and what is not considered acceptable (Dinsmore, 2014, pp. 40–1), but also what is liable to be banned, as in the case of Marisa Papen. Self-representations that stray too far from the desired norm are often met with mockery and derision, which act as a form of "institutionally unbounded discipline" and regulation of these practices (Burns, 2015, p. 132). These forms of discipline regulate users' behaviour, by leading them to exert tighter self-surveillance over their representations and to shape them to the socially approved ideals (Burns, 2015, p. 77).

This user feedback is largely responsible for enforcing Instagram's gender representation politics and ensuring the observance of its Terms of Use. Most of Instagram's shared content that is deemed inappropriate is marked as such by other users, who "flag" photographs as improper or "report" other users. Often, it is only after this negative critique that Instagram takes action, deleting the "offending" photographs or accounts (Olszanowski, 2014, pp. 88–9). It is the user's engagement with Instagram that helps to reify its "platform politics" (Duguay, 2016; Gillespie, 2010).

The construction of gender on Instagram is thus a constant interplay between Instagram's institutional gender representation politics shaping the users' self-representations and those subjective self-representations moulding Instagram's gender politics.

Gendered Instagram Struggles: The Banning of Marisa Papen's Instagram Account

Marisa Papen is a twenty-four-year-old Belgian Instagram model, who gained national and international fame by sharing carefully aesthetically crafted photographs of her (nearly) nude body on Instagram, in an unapologetically sexy manner. Before being banned, Papen's Instagram account had amassed over six hundred thousand followers (Elise, 2016b). She was even voted the "most beautiful woman on Instagram" by the readers of the Dutch online magazine *Manners.nl* (Van Der Cooling, 2016). For Papen, Instagram played a significant role in launching her modelling career by serving as a tool for sharing her stories and for making connections with a wider audience (Van Der Cooling, 2016) and modelling agencies (Elise, 2016b).

Marisa Papen is from, and currently based in, Belgium, a liberal western European country. However, her Instagram and modelling activities transcend this local context. She was featured in magazines and websites worldwide, including in shoots for both *Playboy.com* and *Playboy.nl* (Papen, 2016). She posed for photoshoots worldwide (Elise, 2016a), and her Instagram had a large transnational group of followers.

Despite her wide popularity, Papen's photographs were deemed "too provocative" by Instagram, and her account was thus banned from the online platform in August 2016 (Falabregue, 2016). This decision made by Instagram – a private company based in the US – creates a transnational context, transcending the local Belgian context. More importantly, it brings the "platform politics" (Duguay, 2016; Gillespie, 2010) that shape Instagram use to the fore.

For Papen, this was the fourth time her account was banned from Instagram. But unlike the previous times, when her account was quickly re-instated after making an appeal to Instagram (Falabregue, 2016), this was a lasting ban, which was still in effect at the time of writing this article, over three months later.

Papen's example thus provides an illustration of the theoretical discussion previously introduced and exemplifies how gender politics work in relation to her Instagram account ban.

Papen's Instagram use is quite distinct from the informal engagement of most common social media users, as it is not confined to the expected practices of selfie-taking. Papen's Instagram use is better understood in line with Leah Schrager's (2016) conceptualisation of the uses of this social media platform by Instagram models, which entails a highly skilled labour of self-branding; a shaping of one's own image and Instagram practices, in order to gain fame, to spread one's perspective, and to monetise one's Instagram activity. Nonetheless, Papen's illustrative case helps to emphasise the complex and nuanced gender representation politics that underlie and shape all self-representation on Instagram.

The banning of Marisa Papen's Instagram account makes particularly clear that there are institutional constraints at play on Instagram. These reflect the specific "platform politics" of Instagram, which are shaped by the ideologies and commercial interests of Instagram (Duguay, 2016; Gillespie, 2010). These institutional filters (Thumim, 2012) are made explicit, for example, in Instagram's Terms of Use (2016), which prohibit the sharing of images depicting full or partial nudity, of photographs with sexually explicit or pornographic content, as well as content of a violent, discriminatory or illegal nature.

Papen had carefully avoided violating the terms imposed by Instagram by finding creative ways to evade the limitations. She used strategies of creative censorship (Olszanowski, 2014), sharing photographs in which she carefully covered her breasts and pubic area by posing in a certain way or by using props, or by playfully using emojis and other drawings to cover her nipples and other body parts deemed "too explicit" (Elise, 2016b). These strategies of creative censorship can still be seen on Marisa Papen's Facebook account (Papen, 2017), in photos such as her current profile picture – a nude portrait of Papen, in which one of her nipples is covered with her own hand and the other with a drawing of a white heart.

Despite such creative efforts, her Instagram account was still banned. Marisa Papen has never publicly shared any official reply she received from Instagram about previous bans. Yet the response of the platform seems to echo other similar cases when Instagram banned certain images due to what they deemed inappropriate, only to publicly concede later on that they "don't always get it right when it comes to nudity", acknowledging their mistakes and restoring the banned photographs and accounts (Vagianos, 2015).

Papen tried once more to appeal Instagram's decision and to have her account re-instated (Falabregue, 2016), but at the time of the writing of this article (May 2017), her account was still not re-activated and she had not shared any response from Instagram on her other online platforms, such as her website or Facebook account.

Marisa Papen's gendered self-representations are actively created through a negotiation with Instagram's possibilities and limitations. On Papen's blog and in interviews, she has explained the aesthetic of her nude photography as a discourse of agency and resistance – one that is very different from the justification given by Instagram for her ban. Instagram argued that her pictures were too provocative and

too sexually explicit. Papen, however, sees herself as a "free, wild hearted expressionist" (Papen, 2016a), using her photographs as a means to express her way of viewing the world. Her choice to "go naked" is presented as a form of resistance, and, simultaneously, as the way in which she simply feels comfortable expressing herself (Elise, 2016a). She equates it with an effort to distance herself from the "corruption of society", that is, as a mode of being that is authentic, pure, and in touch with nature (Papen, 2016a). It is a nakedness that she claims has no specific bodily requirements, that supports embracing the body just as it is, and that encourages feeling good in one's own skin (Elise, 2016a).

Papen's discourse echoes the political discourses of liberation and empowerment of "fourth-wave feminism" (Rettalack et al., 2016, pp. 86–7), although she does not actively engage in overt digital feminist activism (Fotopoulou, 2016; Korn & Kneese, 2015) or make use of politicized self-representation (Kuntsman, 2017). She takes advantage of the online platforms of Instagram and her own blog to create representations that seek to disrupt the hegemonic limitations of "proper" femininity. Furthermore, Papen's use of Instagram embodies the notions of "everyday politics" (Highfield, 2016) and "everyday activism" (Vivienne & Burgess, 2012) that view the sharing of women's personal representations as political in itself, even when not deliberately constructed as such. It is a "micropolitical practice of daily life" that allows for the dissemination of different perspectives and discourses (De Lauretis, 1987, p. 25). By using Instagram, Papen claims visibility, making her voice heard and using the humanising potentialities of self-representation (Ehlin, 2015, p. 77) to present herself as a "speaking subject" in her own right. The photographic practices of Papen on Instagram seem, in this way, to be following the postfeminist idea of bodily display as being a sign of strength, independence, and empowerment (Burns, 2015, p. 197).

In addition, by using Instagram, Papen seems to be claiming agency not only over her photographic practice but also over her modelling career, adopting an ethos of self-enterprise, self-employment, and self-branding (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017). She subverts the traditional power structure of the professional modelling agency and media industry, taking matters into her own hands, doing the work of production, distribution, and networking herself, and monetising her Instagram activity (Schrager, 2016).

Despite the aforementioned institutional constraints of Instagram's Terms of Use, which ultimately led to Papen's account ban, there is still a sense of agency and freedom of self-representation present in Papen's discourses and photographs. Papen's discourses and photographic practices seem to echo the cautious optimism surrounding the political potential of Instagram's self-representation by opening up a space for a more diverse representation of gender (Burns, 2015, p. 90).

However, the same sceptical and tentative approach that is required in the study of Instagram must also be extended to the present case of Marisa Papen. The discourse surrounding her photographic practices seems to frame Instagram as a platform where everybody can become a successful model, even those who do not

fit the typical high-fashion standards (Schrager, 2016). Yet this narrative overlooks the emphasis put on the representation of Papen's own body in a highly conventional and idealised manner. Her body and photographic representations still visually comply, point by point, with the "young, white, able-bodied, middle-class, apparently heterosexual and conventionally attractive" standards that Rosalind Gill (2007, p. 12) exposed as comprising the exclusionary view of women in traditional mainstream media. Her self-representations occupy a privileged position, benefiting from the visibility generally afforded to representations of women of her race and cultural context (Brager, 2017). One must keep in mind that intersections with race, religion, sexualities, cultural context, etc. shape the readings that are generally made of such self-representations (Brager, 2017; Dean, 2016; Kuntsman, 2017), and that representations of women who, unlike Papen, do not comply as neatly to the beauty standards, either by virtue of their race or body size, for example, tend to face more online harassment, "flagging" and "reporting" by other users (Olszanowski, 2015), rather that being hailed by the media as the "most beautiful woman on Instagram" (Van Der Cooling, 2016).

In line with other recent studies on self-representation on Instagram (e.g. Döring et al., 2016), Marisa Papen's photographs can also serve to reproduce normative gender representations through her poses, styling, mannerisms, and a portrayal of sexiness that is traditionally constructed as enticing to the male gaze. Perhaps inadvertently, she continues to represent the same formulaic gender stereotypes, while claiming empowerment (Murray, 2015, p. 495).

Equating this very narrow definition of "sexiness" with empowerment leads to the internalisation of oppressive norms of femininity that perceive the female body as both powerful and in need of constant improvement (Burns, 2015, p. 199). Despite her stated views that there are no specific bodily requirements to be an Instagram nude model, Papen nonetheless adheres to and professes a specific fitness and dietary regime in order to maintain her slim figure (Elise, 2016a). Even under the banner of something done just to please oneself, the representations are still strikingly similar to the conventions that the larger society identifies as "sexy" femininity (Gill, 2007, p. 93). As De Lauretis (1987) states, through a process of interpellation, these social representations have become accepted by Papen as her own authentic representations (p. 12).

Despite Papen's claims of resistance, her self-representation can be read as one that has already been "absorbed by the mainstream" and has become tailored to normative tastes. Her images draw their influence from other societally approved images, intertextually linking them to the texts and conventions of popular culture (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015, pp. 57–8). They represent a highly perfected and idealized image of femininity, filtered both visually and through cultural conventions (Rettberg, 2014).

Conversely, the edginess and the resistant potential of Marisa Papen's self-representation on Instagram has also been absorbed and incorporated into the popular mainstream media. Her images are still constructed in a way that is especially

attractive to the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975), appealing to a traditional heterosexual male audience, as an erotic object for male visual pleasure.

This erotic appeal to a heterosexual male gaze is reflected in the comments that often accompany Papen's photographs. Although the original comments on her Instagram account were removed when her account was banned, on her other online platforms, such as her website (Papen, 2016) and Facebook account (Papen, 2017), most comments are made by male commenters. These comments are mostly positive and supportive, expressing appreciation for the aesthetics of both her photography and her body, often echoing her own discourses of freedom and naturalness. Yet, at other times, the comments have an explicitly sexual nature, expressing overt desire for Papen herself.

As such, Papen's images could be seen not only as highly gendered representations but also as sexualized. She represents herself as fitting the seemingly heterosexual ideal (Gill, 2007, p. 12). These images are produced for male sexual pleasure (Mulvey, 1975).

Indeed, Papen's images, with their appeal to a conventionalized notion of sexiness expressed in the poses and styling, can evoke concerns of sexual objectification of women (Nussbaum, 1995). Viewed in isolation, they seem to encompass some of the characteristics that Martha Nussbaum (1995, p. 257) associates with objectification. Namely, the notions of instrumentality – of treating a woman as a tool for the purposes of others, in this case as a tool for achieving visual and erotic pleasure – and the denial of subjectivity – treating women as if their subjective experiences and feelings do not need to be taken into account. As a result, Papen is often featured in media outlets typically associated with sexism and objectification, such as *Playboy* magazine or the Belgian online "lads magazine" *Clint.be*. Some of the people commenting on Papen's (2016b) blog were quick to point out these inconsistencies, stating that "if you look at her actual images, the way they're photographed, and the initial sneer at Playboy etc. for objectifying women: you really have to ask what the difference is. 99.9% of people looking at her images just see another beautiful model in semi-erotic nude poses…".

The self-representations of Marisa Papen can thus be seen in disparate ways, both as artistic and personal self-expression and as erotic or near-pornographic imagery displayed in objectifying media outlets. Such porous borders were similarly questioned and contested by Sarah Smith (2017) in light of the case of Natacha Merritt, an American photographer whose online photographs of her own sexual encounters were temporarily categorised as works of art. The case of Natacha Merritt relies on discourses similar to the ones used by Marisa Papen in defending her photography as a vehicle for self-exploration and emphasizing her agency in creating images. However, unlike Merritt's often-explicit images of sexual acts that can be closely linked to pornography, Papen's images occupy a more tentative position. They also rely on a voyeuristic and objectifying gaze, but they remain closer to an erotic aesthetic and are framed by her personal discourse of resistance and freedom of representation (Papen, 2016a).

There is also a clear gender bias underlying Marisa Papen's ban from Instagram. The platform's Terms of Use (2016) are quite vague with regard to the nudity policy, relying on somewhat ambiguous divisions between appropriate and inappropriate body representations (Olszanowski, 2014). Representations of women and men carry different meanings, and thus they receive different treatment from Instagram (Wahl, 2015). While Instagram accounts filled with topless and nude men abound, with some in quite provocative poses (e.g. male models like River Viiperi, Drew Hudson, and Terry Miller), male nudity tends not to be perceived as heavily sexualised; rather, it is viewed as neutral or functional, and is thus not seen as a cause for "reporting" and bans. Conversely, female nudity is quickly equated not only with sexuality but also with depreciative notions of vulgarity (Syme, 2015). In terms of overtly sexy representations of women, there seems to be an excess of "social puritanism" that rules over Instagram, leading to accounts being banned even when they do not directly break Instagram's rules (Schrager, 2016), thus limiting the potential for radical visibility.

As the 2013 polemic surrounding photographer Petra Collins demonstrates, this online puritanism is not confined to the cases of representations that are too explicitly "sexy". On her Instagram, Petra Collins shared a photograph of herself from the waist down, wearing a bikini, against a sparkly background. The photograph might have gone unscathed if not for the fact that her bikini line was ungroomed and, as such, there was some visible pubic hair. Consequently, she was banned from Instagram (Bernard, 2013). As Collins (2013) herself noted, her image in no way broke the Terms of Use policy, as it contained no nudity or pornography. This example emphasises the inconsistency of Instagram's policy, for while plenty of more revealing images of women in bikinis are allowed on the platform, Collins' photograph was censored for showing an image of a female body refusing to adhere to the dominant, narrow feminine ideal (Collins, 2013).

These controversies illustrate the ways in which the practices of self-representation on Instagram are embedded in broader discursive practices that serve as a means of regulating and limiting the photographic practice. These discourses are used to impose discipline by defining what is and is not appropriate to show (e.g. explicitly sexy photographs of women) (Burns, 2015).

The power underlying Instagram's "platform politics" (Duguay, 2016; Gillespie, 2010) and gender representation politics is not, then, a "top-down" power. Its power is not enforced by some sort of iron hand that selects and bans all the photographs and accounts considered inappropriate according to its Terms of Use. Rather, it is a more diffuse and unbounded form of power (Burns, 2015) that is spread across its whole user base, with the banning of some accounts being triggered by the users who "flag" and "report" the images for being inappropriate (Olszanowski, 2014, pp. 88–9). Users' scrutiny and judgements, in the form of "likes", "comments", "flags", or "reports" serve to regulate Instagram's gender representation, punishing those representations that stray too far from the desired norms (Burns, 2015).

The case of Marisa Papen becomes more complicated when considering that many, perhaps even most, of the photographs she shared were not self-representations in a literal sense but, rather, photographs of herself taken by others, often in the context of professional modelling shoots. The fact that the photographers in such sessions tend to be male contributes even more to the sense of empowerment and resistance claimed by Marisa Papen (Elise, 2016a) to be viewed as a sort of disillusion. These images – created by male photographers for outlets like *Playboy*, and representing Papen in ways that can be read as traditional female objectification for male visual pleasure (Nussbaum, 1995) – can appear to fall back into the commonly established mainstream media practice of portraying women through the male gaze (Bernard, 2013), although this is not Papen's own view.

Indeed, Papen (2016b) herself has been quite critical of this, embracing the ethos of self-representation that seems to define Instagram, and challenging the views of her photographs as male-imposed objectification. Even when confronted with the problematic choice of posing for *Playboy*, she defended this choice by framing it as an artistic expression of nudity and as a representation of her own, true, natural self. She has been vocal about her dislike of the objectification of women by the media, and has even acknowledged the role *Playboy* itself plays in this objectification. Nonetheless she countered that *Playboy* had offered her "total freedom of content". As Nussbaum (1995, p. 271) states, "in the matter of objectification context is everything", and Marisa Papen views her work with photographers, in this and other sessions, as a collaborative effort, through which she gets the chance to express to a larger public her alternative and resistant views on nudity (Papen, 2016b). Her agency is framed as a means to subvert the idea of objectification and to emphasize the experience of the individual, subjective self (Ehlin, 2015, p. 77).

Although Marisa Papen's use of Instagram is not confined to the expected practices of selfie-taking, she nonetheless embraces its self-representation ethos. The fact that these specific images have been actively chosen by Marisa Papen herself to be shared on her Instagram makes them, at some level, self-representations. They fit into a broader understanding of self-representation in terms of curatorial agency and choice about what to share (Rettberg, 2014, p. 40). As Rachel Syme (2015) states, allowing someone else to take your picture and then posting it to Instagram is still a form of carefully chosen "myth-making-via-imagery". As already stated, we can choose to represent ourselves in various different ways on social media, either by using self-portraits or photographs of us taken by others, or even by sharing photographs of things we love, like our pets or family (Enli & Thumim, 2012, p. 101). In this manner, the photographs of Marisa Papen taken by others are used to convey a more comprehensive sense of self-representation on Instagram, as she is an active participant making choices about what to show or to conceal.

Overall, the study of Marisa Papen's photographic practices on Instagram serves to complexify and question our understanding of the politics of gender representation on Instagram and to put into question the role of social media in shaping self-representations. Papen's practices and discourses reveal a deeply nuanced stance on

an ever-shifting middle ground between empowerment and compliance with the objectification of the male gaze. The possibilities of freedom are always accompanied by constraints in a precarious balance between resistance and conformity.

Conclusion

Although the case of Marisa Papen is a unique and non-generalisable illustration, it nonetheless provides an interesting real-life context that facilitates questioning the gender representation politics of Instagram and contemplating how this can affect the freedom of self-representation.

The banning of Marisa Papen's Instagram account was motivated by her (near-) nude photographs, which were deemed "too provocative" by Instagram. This decision makes explicit the institutional limitations and constraints (Thumim, 2012) that condition the potential uses of Instagram. The example shows how the platform's specificities and its technological affordances – particularly Instagram's Terms of Use and the way users can use the features of "flagging" and "reporting" as a form of diffuse power (Burns, 2015) – can help to enforce these institutional policies (Olszanowski, 2014). These institutional constraints shape, frequently in less noticeable ways, all self-representation on Instagram, punishing those representations that stray too far from the desired norms. Thus, every representation is the result of a constant negotiation between Instagram's possibilities and its limitations.

The example of Marisa Papen also illuminates the tensions between Instagram's political possibilities of resistance against hegemonic gender norms and its potential to reproduce and even reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. Her personal discourse is one of resistance and freedom of representation that echoes the political claims of "fourth-wave feminism" (Rettalack et al., 2016, pp. 86–7) and of "everyday activism" (Vivienne & Burgess, 2012). It reflects the optimistic views on Instagram's political potential of self-representation to potentially produce more diverse, individualised representations. Yet Papen's actual representations very closely resemble the hegemonic gender norms, reflecting the intertextual influence of popular media. Her case exemplifies how such representations can be absorbed by the media and are re-shaped into depoliticised media products. As such, her representations can serve as a means to reproduce and reinforce hegemonic gender norms under the deceptive banner of empowerment.

The complexities and nuances of Papen's illustrative case are reflective of the practices of Instagram on a larger scale. This presents an opportunity to question how Instagram and its gender politics shape people's self-representations and how people come to understand complex questions of gender. As Instagram becomes increasingly prevalent and embedded in our quotidian existence, redoubled critical attention must be given to these self-representation practices, which are deeply intertwined with broader questions of gender representation politics, even if they are often dismissed as narcissistic and trivial.

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