The Breastfeeding Controversy and Facebook:
Politicization of Image, Privacy and Protest

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ABSTRACT

Facebook's decision to invoke its obscenity clause to bar users from posting pictures of breastfeeding ignited a controversy. Members protested against the ban both offline and online. The controversy raised various issues between our lived offline experiences and the rules of engagement in social networking sites. Image economies on the Internet present new problems and challenges. Although they are crucial in the construction of profiles and identities in social networking sites and may therefore function as a referent of social values and norms, there may be disparities in the ways they are gazed at and interpreted as published content online. This paper examines the salient issues which emerged in the breastfeeding controversy with relevance to the image economy in social networking sites. In particular, it discusses the politicisation of the image, users' notions and construction of public and private spaces in social networking sites, and the use of the image as symbol of dissent and activism in such online communities.

*Keywords: Facebook, Image Economy, Online Communities, Privacy, Protest, Social Networking Sites,
                Visual Image*

INTRODUCTION

In December 2008 Facebook, the social networking facility with more than 140 million members, came under intense scrutiny over its decision to flag photos of women breastfeeding and to remove photos which it deemed objectionable. It created a backlash among some Facebook users and ignited both offline and online protests. A group of supporters gathered at the Facebook headquarters in Palo Alto, California to protest against the company's stance while online more than 11,000 members engaged in a virtual 'nurse-in' which entailed changing their profile images to that of women breastfeeding for a day. Other Facebook users convened under an online group entitled *Hey Facebook, Breastfeeding Is Not Obscene* to object to Facebook's policy of prohibiting members from uploading content which they deemed to be 'obscene, pornographic or sexually explicit' (NYT, 2009). The online group was originally formed by a San Diego member, Kelli Roman, when in June 2007 she found that Facebook had removed photos of her nursing her baby. Facebook is not an exception to the rule, as MySpace was criticised for deleting photos of women breastfeeding in 2007 and, simi-

larly, LiveJournal.com members experienced objections to breastfeeding images in 2006. LiveJournal.com, however, has since allowed nursing images despite its no-nudity policy.

According to Facebook the site's guidelines allow most breastfeeding photos, however, images of women breastfeeding comes under the context of nudity if photos show the 'nipple or areola' (cf. Calhoun, 2008). Whilst Facebook acknowledges that nudity is not obscene in certain contexts it decided to impose a consistent policy on use and this means that images where nipples are displayed are deemed a violation and can be removed by Facebook. For activists campaigning for women's right to breastfeed in physical public places, Facebook's decision to recognise the image of nipples as being associated with obscenity rather than with the act of breastfeeding constituted a defeat in the trajectory of women's rights. Today 46 states in the US have passed pro-breastfeeding legislation and it is legal to breastfeed in public in most states of America and in many countries around the world. Whilst the right to breastfeed in public spaces constitutes a victory in the long history of struggle for women's rights and emancipation, the prohibition over the image of the nipple in the online space was seen as denying the rights of women. This conflation of the online and offline environments by the activists and the expectation that they have the same rights in the online environment is a significant phenomenon in this controversy. One interesting dimension about social networking sites is that there is a common offline connection that interfaces with online relationships. Social networking sites are used to maintain existing offline relationships or there may be an offline element which binds individuals in an online space such as a shared class at school (See Ellison et al., 2007; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Lampe et al., 2007).

In the case of the breastfeeding controversy there was certainly an expectation that the norms about breastfeeding in public should not then affect its censure in the online space. The construction of personal spaces in social networking sites through images nevertheless raises various issues in both the users' construction of private and public and equally about how the notion of 'rights' transfer into a community formed initially through offline relationships. Whilst members don't usually convene over causes in social networking sites as an initial objective these sites can nevertheless provides spaces for people to articulate common causes. As Eszter Hargittai (2007) notes, while social networking sites are often designed to be widely accessible it is not uncommon for groups to form through certain commonalities such as nationality, educational qualification, age and other typical factors that segment society. In this particular controversy, the ban imposed on certain breastfeeding images provided the impetus for members to protest collectively against Facebook's decision.

The Facebook breastfeeding controversy is significant in highlighting how the difference in offline rules and social norms can produce tensions as people want both spaces to be congruent in certain respects. Much has been written about the Internet and the ways in which people bring their cultural contexts to it (See Miller & Slater, 2000; Hine, 2000). Initial discourses of the Internet crafted it as an environment dichotomous from the real and equally highlighted the notion of 'virtuality' where there is agency to create a virtual persona entirely dissimilar to an offline personality. Social networking sites, on the other hand, represent offline identity through profiles and images and in this sense do not completely dislodge offline identities from online ones. The authenticity of these profiles to the offline self can vary according to social practices and technology and image can be an intrinsic part of this representation (Marwick, 2005; Skog, 2005). Additionally, the public nature of displaying friendships can also construct the notion of popularity. With the increasing incorporation of the Internet in people's everyday lives and the use of social networking sites to maintain offline relations, offline values and norms are not completely erased but are reframed and can co-exist alongside new online norms and communication patterns.

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