

# Images of Breastfeeding on Instagram: Self-Representation, Publicness, and Privacy Management

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## Abstract

As recent feminist studies have recognized, breastfeeding is an interesting area of investigation since it encompasses several social and cultural issues involving both the private and the public sphere. These range from how motherhood is lived and interpreted, the representation of the body, how children are reared, women's self-representation, breastfeeding support, and maternal work. The article illustrates a qualitative analysis of a sample of Instagram images tagged with breastfeeding-related words, with the aim of analyzing how breastfeeding is represented and the relationship between private and public discourses. For this reason, images coming from both mothers and breastfeeding promoters were analyzed. The analysis shows that breastfeeding representation on Instagram confirms, and also goes beyond, the common image of breastfeeding a newborn, showing toddlers' breastfeeding or mothers pumping breastmilk. It also shows that breastfeeding may be connected with a wider approach to parenthood, based on proximity, and that children are active subjects of the decisions taken. The research indicates that the relationship between public and private discourses is an overlapping of shades. On one hand, research results showed several strategies enacted by parents for protecting their children's privacy; on the other hand, the functions of images posted veer between fixing a private moment and creating public discourses using specific hashtags aimed, for example, at normalizing public breastfeeding or offering new types of support. Instagram appears, then, as a platform where personal choices and beliefs can flow into public discourse and a place for investigating how public discourses and social and cultural issues (such as breastfeeding promotion and representation) shape the way that breastfeeding is lived.

## Keywords

Instagram, motherhood, social media, breastfeeding, infancy, privacy

## Introduction

Probably due to the combination of global and local campaigns and institutional statements<sup>1</sup> aimed at promoting breastfeeding and the habit of capturing moments of everyday life on social media, celebrities and ordinary people are now more prepared to show their pictures of breastfeeding on social media.

In the past, research into breastfeeding was focused on its medical aspects, but recently it has also received attention from sociology and media studies. These disciplines have examined topics such as the costs and benefits of breastfeeding (Galtry, 1997), the perception of the breastfeeding body (Stearns, 1999), lactivism and art intervention (Buller, 2016), the impact of social media use while breastfeeding (Tomfhorde & Reinke, 2016), the relation between breastfeeding and maternal subjectivity and its subjective perception (Schmied & Lupton, 2001), how breastfeeding

shapes and defines motherhood (Barston, 2012; Blum, 1999), and the rhetorical construction of the campaigns and discourses promoting breastfeeding (Koerber, 2013). Several of these studies adopt a feminist approach (Blum, 1999; Galtry, 1997; Koerber, 2013; Schmied & Lupton, 2001), arguing that the question of breastfeeding does not only entail medical or nutritional issues but also has psychological, social, and cultural implications related to the maternal identity and condition.

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As Koerber (2013) pinpoints, breastfeeding is an “embodied experience” that still needs to be investigated. In their analysis of breastfeeding selfies, Boon and Pentney (2015) stressed that researching these kinds of images is relevant because they question several aspects of Western culture: “Troubling the boundaries between motherhood and sexuality, breasts disrupt conventional understandings of public and private, self and other, subject and object” (Boon & Pentney, 2015, p. 1761).

Thus, breastfeeding images are an interesting area of investigation in exploring how breastfeeding is represented, how social and cultural issues about breastfeeding are expressed (such as how motherhood is lived, the relationship with and the representation of the body, the return to work after having a baby), women’s self-representation, and breastfeeding support.

The article will show the results of a qualitative analysis of breastfeeding images shared on Instagram by mothers. Although not adopting a feminist approach, this article seeks to analyze how this practice is lived by women, through interpreting images of bodies in action. Campaigns supporting breastfeeding are part of the public discourses about it and have a role in shaping women’s beliefs and habits (Barston, 2012). Such discourses are included in the analysis with a view to comparing them with women’s breastfeeding representation. The article will illustrate a number of topics: how breastfeeding is represented and perceived by mothers and breastfeeding promoters, the kinds of breastfeeding representation that go beyond the conventional ones (namely, a mother embracing a newborn), the influence of breastfeeding promotion campaigns on breastfeeding representation on Instagram, how private discourses flow into public issues using hashtags, how breastfeeding is connected with other choices concerning child rearing, how children’s privacy is protected, issues related to public breastfeeding, and the types of breastfeeding support available on Instagram.

## Instagram: Depicting Everyday Life

Instagram is today one of the most important platforms for sharing images. By December 2016, it had reached 600 million users worldwide, with 100 million joining in the previous 6 months (Instagram Inc., 2016c, 21 December). The decision to change the Instagram logo from the old Polaroid camera to an anonymous camera in rainbow colors (Instagram Inc., 2016b, 11 May) marked the shift in the platform’s positioning from the remediation of the analogue practices of photography to the “emplaced visibility” that “involves the entanglement of movement and placing across temporal, geographic, electronic, and spatial dimensions” (Hjorth & Hendry, 2015, p. 1). The variety of uses and types of images posted (Hu, Manikonda, & Kambhampati, 2014; Tifentale & Manovich, 2015) means that Instagram functions as “an archive in the process of becoming” (Tifentale & Manovich, 2015, p. 7), as a service “for aesthetic visual communication” (Manovich,

2016, p. 11, italics original) that shows snapshots of ordinary lives (Manovich, 2016) also for autobiographical purposes (Fallon, 2014).

The entanglement of Instagram images has been widely explored in several studies.

Projects such as Selfiecity (<http://selfiecity.net/>) analyzed thousands of pictures taken in specific geo-localizations, with a mixed computational and humanistic approach (Tifentale & Manovich, 2015) and with the aim of exploring the visual aesthetics of Instagram images. A similar method was adopted by Hu et al. (2014) who conducted taxonomic research into Instagram photographs and user types.

Other studies concentrated on users and how specific cultures were developed within Instagram, such as the celebrities’ and influencers’ culture (see among others Abidin, 2014), or investigated specific themes, such as pregnancy (Tiidenberg, 2015), the body and censorship (Olszanowski, 2014), birth and death (Leaver, 2015; Leaver & Highfield, 2014), and illness (Tembeck, 2016). Often these studies adopted qualitative ethnographic approaches combining Instagram analysis with interviews or questionnaires.

Selfies are one of the most widely investigated topics regarding Instagram. There is not just one interpretation of this phenomenon (Tifentale & Manovich, 2015) since they are “digital self-portrait(s)” (Shah & Tewari, 2016) that can be conceptualized as a “cultural artifact and social practice” that not only represents a subject but also sends a message (Senft & Baym, 2015). Since they are taken with a networked camera (Tifentale & Manovich, 2015), they are conceived for personal consumption and sharing: “By sharing their selfies, Instagram users construct their identities and simultaneously express their belonging to a certain community. Thus performing the self is at once a private act as well as a communal and public activity” (Tifentale & Manovich, 2015, p. 8). Selfies may have many functions like self-expression and communication (Fallon, 2014; Tifentale & Manovich, 2015), self-representation, self-documentation, self-improvement, and self-knowledge (Rettberg, 2014). They are also means of empowerment and agency, as in the case of hashtag activism conducted through selfies (e.g., #nomakeupselfie; Deller & Tilton, 2015; Hampton, 2015). The centrality of the body within selfies is evidenced by Frosh (2015) who conceptualizes them as “gestural image(s)” (p. 1608).

Tagging contents is an important part of sharing images on Instagram because it helps them to be found by other users, especially non-followers. Social tagging is an expression of the emergent social organization of users which constantly changes with new contributions (Highfield & Leaver, 2015). As on Twitter, hashtags may also have the function of aggregating conversations and creating thematic communities (Bruns & Burgess, 2011). They are also able to raise awareness about specific themes as in the case of hashtag activism, which is “discursive protest on social media united through a hashtagged word, phrase or sentence” (Yang, 2016).

## Social Media, Publicness, and Privacy Management

Since visual communication, including Instagram, involves self-presentation (Rettberg, 2014), it raises the question of impression management (Goffman, 1959; Litt, 2012) and, due to its public nature (Baym & boyd, 2012), it also questions the relationship between the public and the private sphere. Since Instagram images are public or semi-public (i.e., shared with a selected number of followers), it is one more space that determines the nature of “socially mediated publicness” (Baym & boyd, 2012, p. 322), a concept that “calls into question understandings of the relation between public and private and between audience and publics” (Baym & boyd, 2012, p. 322) since it unites several layers of publicness (Baym & boyd, 2012), ranging from the unrestricted publicness of viral images to the closeness of private profiles.

Empirical and theoretical investigations into publicness worked on the concepts of “imagined audience” (Marwick & boyd, 2010, p. 2) and “context collapse” (Marwick & boyd, 2010, p. 9). As Litt’s (2012) analysis pointed out, the alignment between imagined and actual audiences is based on macro-level and micro-level factors, such as environmental/structural factors like social roles, social contexts, the active audience, features of the site/service, “motivation and skill for socially acceptable behaviour” (p. 338), personal motivations for using social media, and Internet skills (Litt, 2012). Empirical research also attests that in some cases, users may or may not have an idea of the audience which they are addressing (Litt & Hargittai, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2010). Users achieve different levels of privacy by engaging different strategies and creating “forms of *collaborative disclosure*, because they rely on others’ collaboration in managing the boundaries of privacy and publicness and reducing the risks of undesirable consequences (Petronio, 2002)” (Farci, Boccia Arteri, Giglietto, & Rossi, 2016, p. 11, *italics original*).

### Instagram, Breastfeeding, and Children

The relationship between Instagram and breastfeeding images has never been smooth. It even features episodes of censorship like that involving Heather Bays, a maternity photographer. Her profile was closed by Instagram after a negative comment on one photograph in which she was breastfeeding her daughter, and it was only restored after Bays’ public protests (Jones, 2014). At that stage, Instagram policies on the body only suggested keeping clothes on and being respectful toward others (Instagram Inc., 2015). This led to the removal of breastfeeding images with consequent protests by users. In 2015, Instagram policies were changed and they explicitly allowed breastfeeding images as well as mastectomy scars. Nudity images are still not allowed (Instagram Inc., 2016a).

On the one hand, Instagram has a precise idea of how to maintain a community giving specific rules for preventing

harassment, sexual abuse, or prostitution; on the other hand, these rules are pushed beyond the limit by the users who desire to express themselves freely, such as the feminist self-imaging artistic practices described by Olszanowski (2014). As Boon and Pentney (2015) argued, breastfeeding images challenge cultural and aesthetic conventions about the female body and about what should (or should not) be shared on social media. Such images reshape “the contours of the public-private divide” (Boon & Pentney, 2015, p. 1760) because they settle between the private maternal sphere and the public place created by social media.

Moreover, Instagram policies are addressed to users who can legitimately open a profile (people over 13 years of age), and little is said about persons “who have no self-representational agency” like “babies and the recently deceased” (Leaver & Highfield, 2014, p. 1). Breastfeeding images also represent children, as one of the earliest forms of their presence online. As Leaver (2015) notes, “a social media presence begins before birth,” but “research about the way parents and others create or publish children into being online is largely absent” (p. 1). The article will briefly develop this issue as it emerges from the analysis, but it is an area suitable for further research.

## Methodology

The research aims to carry out a qualitative analysis of the social representations (Gemini, 2015) of breastfeeding images, associated with breastfeeding-related hashtags, taken by mothers/parents or by individuals or associations supporting breastfeeding.

A preliminary exploration was carried out between March and May 2016 through Gramfeed (<http://www.gramfeed.com>)<sup>2</sup> (Highfield & Leaver, 2016) to find breastfeeding-related hashtags. These tags were present in the author caption, showing the users’ explicit decision to associate them with the picture (Highfield & Leaver, 2015). Then, with a theoretical sampling, some hashtags were identified as particularly suitable for a deeper analysis, some as broader (e.g., #breastfeeding, #breastfeedingmum, #breastmilk), and some as related to specific themes (e.g., #supportbreastfeeding, #normalizebreastfeeding, #brelfie, #breastisbest, #donatebreastmilk). Then, in May 2016 through Netvizz for Instagram (<https://tools.digitalmethods.net/netvizz/instagram/>)<sup>3</sup> a list of 400 images for each hashtag were downloaded. For each image, the following data were retrieved: ID, time and location of creation, number of comments, number of likes, filter, link, caption, thumbnail (link), tags, username, and user ID. The analysis was conducted by viewing each image on Instagram, retaining the option of also analyzing comments.

Since the goal of the research was to analyze images explicitly related to breastfeeding, produced by parents or breastfeeding promoters, a theoretical sampling (Silverman, 2000) of the images was made. To obtain this, the most

recent images retrieved for each hashtag were analyzed, excluding images with marketing purposes, deleted images, images belonging to private accounts,<sup>4</sup> and images in languages other than English. The final sample included 200 images with at least 20 images per hashtag. Production, image, and audiencing for each picture were analyzed (Rose, 2001; Tiidenberg, 2015), considering the identity of the authors, the context in which the images were produced (as far as possible from captions and users' profiles), kind of image (i.e., selfie or not) and its content, the way in which the mother's and child's body were represented, and comments published up to the analysis.

Following an ethnographic approach (Hine, 2000), profiles belonging to users who posted analyzed images were the object of an initial analysis which took into consideration their bios and other images posted in order to select a sample appropriate for a further study. Of them, 10, which stood out from the others for their commitment about breastfeeding, were selected with a theoretical sampling (Silverman, 2000) for an in-depth qualitative analysis. They were also contacted for an online interview, without success. To obtain more responses, an online questionnaire with open questions was set up and five more users were contacted. Three agreed to compile the online questionnaire—two of them were photographers working on projects related to destigmatizing public breastfeeding, while one was a certified lactation educator. Due to the low response to questionnaires, the results presented here are taken mainly from photographs and images/hashtags analysis, while questionnaires were used to enrich some points, such as the use of Instagram, the kind of photo posted, and the hashtags used.

To minimize harm to the subjects involved in the analysis (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Livingstone & Locatelli, 2012), the decision was made to reproduce photographs of only the two users who explicitly allowed the researcher to publish them, and not to insert quotations from captions. In fact, the photographs and accounts analyzed are public, but when they become part of a research article they are archived and reproduced irrespective of the authors' will (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Their accessibility does not automatically mean that they will be ethically used by everyone, including the researcher (boyd & Crawford, 2012), and individual expectations about privacy can be ambiguous and changing (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

## Instagram as a Way for Recounting Motherhood and Early Infancy

Users who posted the images analyzed (169 users overall) can be divided into three main types that in some cases overlap: parents (mostly mothers), professionals, and groups/associations. Parents are often mothers and make this fact explicit in their bios, sometimes in association with the fact that they are breastfeeding or by defining themselves as "breastfeeding advocates" or "lactivists." This can be a result of the sampling

method. Professionals work in two main areas: birth/lactation consultancy and photography. They are often mothers who breastfed (or who are still breastfeeding) their children and decided to make the promotion of breastfeeding and support to other mothers their job, as their Instagram bios evidenced. Finally, there are informal groups or associations with the avowed goal of promoting breastfeeding. The next paragraph will analyze photographs published by parents.

### *Tell, Save, and Share: Instagram as a Diary of the Breastfeeding Journey*

Most of the pictures analyzed are photographs taken in everyday contexts, at home, in ordinary clothes and are classifiable as snapshot photography: they are focused on "leisure activities and happy moments" (Tiidenberg, 2015, p. 1746). Photographs depict mostly children, newborn babies, as well as toddlers while breastfeeding. Pictures present few signs of post-production, and many of them have no Instagram filter (121 of 200). The frame is close to the bodies depicted which are usually depicted in half-length, with the focus on the child attached to the breast.

Some of them are selfies, called brelfies from the fusion of breastfeeding and selfie. They are taken with a very close frame by the mother while breastfeeding. They can be taken with the front camera of the phone or in front of a mirror and they depict mothers in half-length portrait mode, embracing the latched baby. Mother's body is taken in medium close-up revealing face and breast. In other cases, they are taken from above, depicting the mother's body only partially (sometimes only the breast can be seen), and the focus is on the child's face. The mother's gaze is mostly directed toward the camera, but it can also be turned toward the child(ren). In the first case, brelfies reproduce styles and modes of other kinds of selfies (see, for example, Frosh, 2015); in the second, the exchange of gazes between mother and child reinforces the idea of the bond produced by breastfeeding, also present in pictures taken by others (like photographers) and artistic images.

Captions suggested that telling and saving the moment seems to be one of the main functions of breastfeeding images. In captions, mothers express the desire to capture the joy of the moment but they also depict difficulties, such as overnight feeding and tiredness due to the constant demands of the baby, as they try to combine child's feeding requirements with other daily duties (e.g., caring for another child, housework, work, looking after themselves). The analysis of their Instagram profiles, besides hashtagged and retrieved images, revealed that mothers also post several images of their children that portray specific moments (e.g., the first bath, the first holiday together) or just depict moments of ordinary life. Mothers' profiles therefore become a diary where pregnancy, breastfeeding, and child growth can be recorded.

Lactation consultants and associations supporting breastfeeding present breastfeeding as on demand, with no fixed schedules, exclusive for the child's first 6 months, continued



for up to 2 years of age or beyond, following mother's and child's will (see also Exclusive Breastfeeding, n.d.). Mothers' attempt to combine their desires, choices, and lifestyle with the specificity of breastfeeding is a key point emerging from the analysis. Breastfeeding is described as a "journey" (also with hashtags like #breastfeedingjourney and #postpartum-journey), with ups and downs for managing it. One caption is paradigmatic because it describes breastfeeding as "time-consuming," "exhausting," "painful," and "difficult" and also as "the greatest gift" the mother has conferred on herself, a "love" and an "empowering" experience that she will miss when it will come to an end. Mothers also share badges (self-made or produced by associations) that highlight the goals reached (e.g., 6 months of exclusive breastfeeding), expressing pride and satisfaction on reaching their objective.

The World Health Organization describes breastfeeding not only as a "natural act" but also as "learned behaviour" (Exclusive Breastfeeding, n.d.). The images analyzed confirm this duality. Breastfeeding is represented both as instinctive and "natural" (in captions and hashtags used) and as something not taken for granted but learned and mastered through daily practice. One of the strongest concerns mothers express is to have a sufficient supply to feed the baby well. Associations and consultants share visual images with tips and advice on how to ensure a proper supply. Mothers add in captions what they are doing to keep their supply high, for example, breastfeeding on demand, pumping milk or eating specific foods (i.e., fenugreek tea or "lactation cookies"). The attainment of the goals set (e.g., suspending formula milk supplements or reaching the breastfeeding period envisaged) is presented with joy, as rewards for all the effort.

Breastfeeding discourses on Instagram seem, then, to depict a tension between giving "the best" to children (hashtags like #breastisbest and #liquidgold mirror the rhetoric of campaigns and promotional discourses about breastfeeding; see Koerber, 2013) and the need to combine it with the difficulties and the constraints of contemporary life, such as being alone at home and having to care after other children and the house or being obliged to return to work early, especially in countries where maternal leave is limited.

Presenting breastmilk as the best feed for children has a further implication. Actually, not all children can be fed directly at the breast. Some mothers decide not to use formula milk or to use it only as a supplement and to give pumped breastmilk from the bottle. Images also represent these moments: mothers pumping milk, milk storage bags, the quantity of pumped milk (with screenshots of the app designed to track it), children fed from a bottle containing breastmilk, and children fed at the breast with a breastfeeding supplementer (an alternative to bottles for giving expressed breastmilk to the baby while breastfeeding).

Pumping milk is related to several situations, such as difficult latch, premature babies, medical issues after partum,<sup>5</sup> and early return to work. Some users use their Instagram profile to share the daily vicissitudes of their pumping journey.

In the captions and comments, they explain the reason why they are pumping, they share emotions and experiences with their followers, they keep track of successful moments (e.g., the first latch or a day with a higher pumping level), and they ask for suggestions. In their comments, other Instagram users often share advices and express their support. Exclusive pumping mothers seem to ask for public recognition of their effort, using hashtags like #pumpingisbreastfeedingtoo. In these situations, breastfeeding has the broader meaning of feeding a child with breastmilk even when not attached to the breast. The focus of these discourses seems to be on the quality of breastmilk, described as "the best milk" or "liquid gold," avoiding substitutes like formula milk. Pumping-related discourses encompass both private choices and public discourse. On one hand, mothers want to realize their desire to breastfeed even in difficult situations and to have public recognition and support; on the other hand, their discourses display traces of breastfeeding promotion as the best choice for the child, worth all the effort and sacrifice.

It emerged also that some mothers are donating excess milk (e.g., because the demand of the child has diminished or because they are surrogate mothers). The analysis showed the presence of both official donations (as in local milk banks) and informal networks for donating breastmilk to mothers in need. This is a relatively new practice, probably encouraged by breastfeeding promotion and also by mothers' personal choices.

### *Hashtags: Connecting Discourses and People*

The analysis showed that hashtags have, first, a descriptive function, associating images that portray breastfeeding moments with breastfeeding-related hashtags like #breastfeeding and #breastmilk.

A second function is to associate breastfeeding with images that represent other moments of mothers' or children's lives. This use emerged especially in relation to the hashtags #breastfeedingmum or #breastisbest, regarding three main themes.

The first is about the changes to the maternal body and recovery after partum. Instagram pictures portray healthy food, foods for breastfeeding such as tea and cookies, mothers during workout after pregnancy, or are a collage that shows weight loss, suggesting only through the hashtag that they are breastfeeding mums. These pictures express the mothers' desire to represent themselves as breastfeeders and also to recover their original body shape after pregnancy and to be fit mums. A second theme is child growth. Images depict the child while the captions define his or her age and the point of his or her growth (e.g., solid eating). Depicting a healthy child is a way to show that the mother has overcome the worries and difficulties of the milk supply. A third thematic association refers to the ways of taking care of the children, such as baby-wearing, self-weaning, co-sleeping, and healthy eating which will be discussed later.

Finally, hashtags allow the insertion of an image into a flow of already existing pictures following a rhetorical construction of breastfeeding. The analysis shows that several images were associated with hashtags aimed at promoting a specific attitude to think about breastfeeding like *#normalizebreastfeeding*, *#supportbreastfeeding*, *#breastisbest*, and *#liquidgold*. These hashtags were also used by non-English-speaking users suggesting that the debate is cross-cultural (although it was not possible to analyze captions' content). The use of these hashtags marks a step forward in breastfeeding representation: from a private moment to a public act shared on a public platform; from a personal choice to a public topic of conversation; from a choice related to child feeding to a public discourse about woman's choices, representation, self-representation, and empowerment; from an individual act to the desire to connect with other mothers and to create a movement with public visibility.

This use recalls that made in hashtag activism which will be dealt with in section "Discussion."

### Destigmatize Public Breastfeeding

If the mother agrees to breastfeed on demand, a further aspect to consider is how to manage it and where to do it. The decision to breastfeed only at home, for example, impacts on a mother's life, while breastfeeding also in public might not be accepted everywhere. The media periodically report women being criticized for breastfeeding in public and women have controversial feelings about it (Koerber, 2013). Some of the captions analyzed reported stories of mothers shamed for feeding babies in public or referred generally to "breastfeeding haters." Probably as a result of the sampling methodology adopted, neither negative comments about the pictures nor the reasons for being bothered by public breastfeeding emerged from the analysis. Some mothers are happy to breastfeed in public and capture the moment. Some of the pictures analyzed were taken outdoors, in very different circumstances which are clearly visible (e.g., parks, mountains, one even on a kayak) or the situation is described in a caption like "The child was hungry while shopping and I stopped to breastfeed" (paraphrase of a caption).

Some pictures, however, show the use of a cover or a scarf while breastfeeding in public. Due to the low response rate to questionnaires, it is difficult to say whether this is the mother's choice, stemming from a sense of modesty, or the result of social pressure as to what can or cannot be publicly exposed.

Instagram discourses about breastfeeding seem to stress the representation of breastfeeding as a public practice. On one hand, the destigmatizing of public breastfeeding is actively promoted, portraying it as a "natural practice," as part of the care of mother to her child wherever she may be; on the other hand, the use of hashtags like *#normalizebreastfeeding*, *#supportbreastfeedinginpublic*, and *#breastfeedingwithoutfear* helps to group together the images published on different accounts to create a movement and to raise awareness outside Instagram.

There are also accounts explicitly aimed at promoting and destigmatizing breastfeeding. Accounts may be managed by professionals (lactation/birth consultants or photographers), associations, or groups of women promoting and supporting breastfeeding who use Instagram together with other social networks (such as Facebook) and their website.

These accounts post a variety of contents with the explicit aim to inform about and support breastfeeding. They post or repost images taken by breastfeeding mothers and tell their stories in the captions. Second, they post professional images (often marked with a seal or a logo) specifically taken with a view to public sharing. Aesthetically, these pictures are painstakingly prepared, with the mother and child depicted in perfect light, well dressed, often in white clothes. The setting is carefully chosen, often outdoors in a natural context (e.g., a field, on the beach, near a waterfall) and also indoors (e.g., in a bathtub with petals). The frame is wide and includes both bodies and setting. Although depicting ordinary women and children, these pictures suggest an idealistic representation of breastfeeding, associating it with the idea of nature, purity, and freedom and contrasting with the day-to-day representations posted by women and described above (Figure 1).

A further category of pictures is made up of images with a superimposed text or illustrations. They explain scientific evidence, give tips, emphasize the benefits of breastfeeding, encourage mothers, share short quotations or stories, and provide a pinch of irony (Figure 2). Another, though rare, kind of image is the reproduction of artworks depicting breastfeeding from every age and culture.

Destigmatization of breastfeeding is also achieved through the sharing of images that depict breastfeeding situations that go beyond commonplaces, such as breastfeeding toddlers, tandem breastfeeding (namely, breastfeeding a newborn together with an older child), wet nursing, pumping mothers at home or at work, and mothers breastfeeding in a uniform because they serve in the army (Figure 3). The issue of combining breastfeeding with return to work of the mother elicited only marginal data in the research due probably to the sampling method, but it is relevant today and implies not only personal choices but also social, political, and cultural issues (Galtry, 1997; Koerber, 2013) like the duration of maternity leave. In the caption to one of the images posted, for example, the mother was grateful to her employer who was supportive by letting her to pump at work, thus enabling her to continue to breastfeed.

Some accounts also combine breastfeeding with racial issues—for example, showing Black wet nurses who breastfed and raised White children in the past.

Besides the online work in destigmatizing breastfeeding, the pictures analyzed were related to offline events, such as collective latches and photographic sessions, organized with the same purpose of raising media attention, connecting women, and establishing breastfeeding as an accepted practice in public (Figure 4).

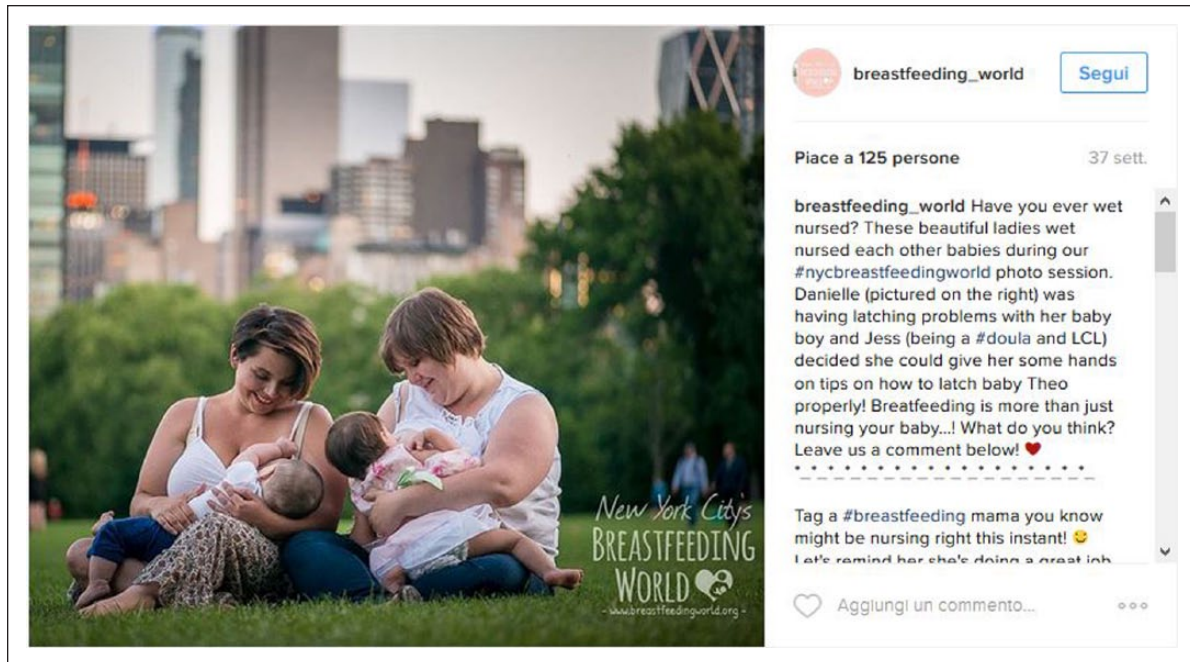


**Figure 1.** A picture from @breastfeeding\_world, screengrabbed July 2016.  
Source. [https://www.instagram.com/p/811QWVr\\_QP/](https://www.instagram.com/p/811QWVr_QP/).



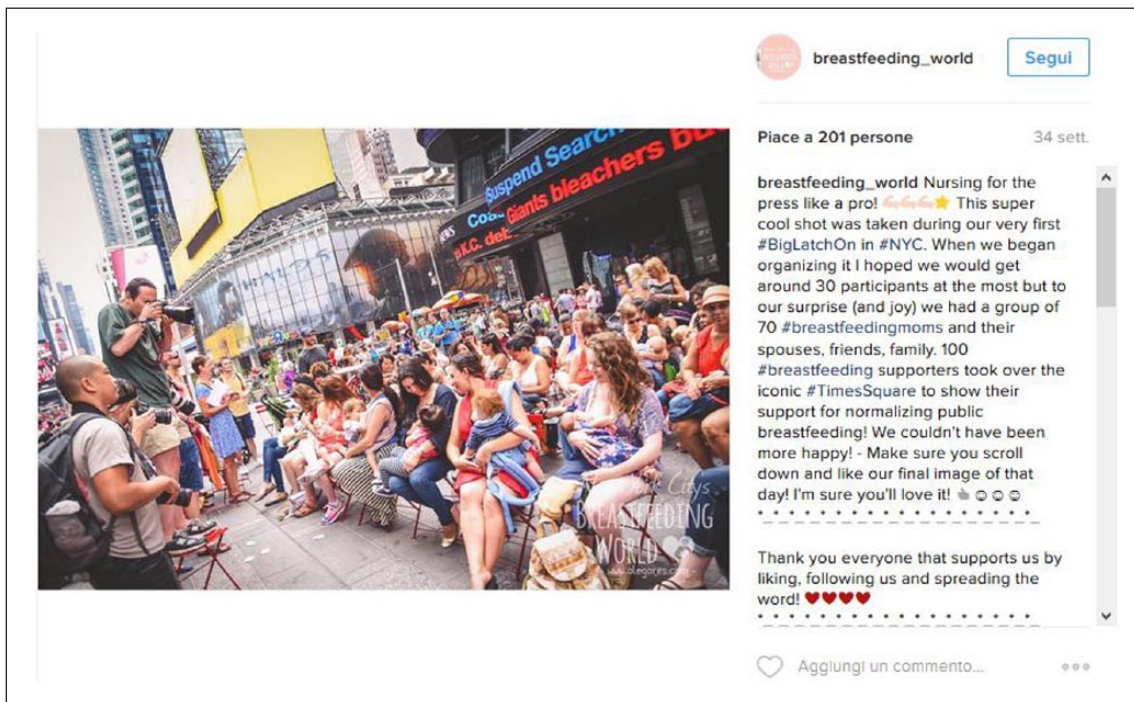
**Figure 2.** An example of captioned image shared by @thenursingmama, screengrabbed July 2016.  
Source. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BGuZr8mLRDZ/?taken-by=thenursingmama>.





**Figure 3.** Wet nursing, a picture posted by @breastfeeding\_world, screengrabbed July 2016.

Source: [https://www.instagram.com/p/9aCid0r\\_bQ/](https://www.instagram.com/p/9aCid0r_bQ/).



**Figure 4.** A collective event for promoting public breastfeeding in New York, @breastfeeding\_world, screengrabbed July 2016.

Source: [https://www.instagram.com/p/-OZ-xaL\\_X6/](https://www.instagram.com/p/-OZ-xaL_X6/).

A further point which emerged is the desire to extend the idea that breastfeeding is detached from sex. Some mothers express this concern with the hashtags #breastfeedingisnotsexual, #notsexual, and #freethenipple, so it

can be argued that breastfeeding challenges the social and cultural conventions as to what is proper to be done in public by showing a situation in which a naked breast may be exposed.



Other users claim that public breastfeeding is not “shameful” and “offensive” and that if some people are bothered by it, the problem is theirs.

## Support and Information to Empower Women

The main kinds of support found on Instagram are two.

One is the diffusion of what is described as correct information about breastfeeding, to enable women to decide whether to breastfeed or not. This is done through captions or images with superimposed texts explaining the medical evidence of the benefits of breastfeeding (often described in contrast to received wisdom) and tips on how to recognize a medical issue or how to solve everyday problems. Scientific information is presented as taken from medical research or quotes authorities in this field such as the World Health Organization and recognized associations such as La Leche League. Some accounts explicitly associate support with women’s empowerment, which is described as the right to make an informed choice about themselves and their child and to achieve their goals.

They also make information available for contacting professional associations that may help. Apart from Instagram, lactation consultants and associations use websites, social networks (such as Facebook), and offline activities, such as courses and support groups, to promote the specialized services they offer. The results showed that professionals were not only fostering their services, but they were also personally committed to breastfeeding promotion.

A second form of support is by creating opportunities for women to meet and exchange experiences. This response to the questionnaire is emblematic:

For me personally, I have found that seeing other moms who choose to breastfeed their children past the age of 1 has been very helpful. It normalizes things. I am not alone. I see an image—boom—I am not alone. I do not have to interact with this person, I just have to see that there are others out there who do the same thing. (Questionnaire 3)

The spaces for comments on the Instagram pictures can be a first level of mutual support. Picture analysis showed little use of comments (average of 2.26 comments per photo), but pictures shared by associations, treating controversial themes (such as public breastfeeding) or showing problematic situations (e.g., pumping breastmilk, problems with proper latch) in which users explicitly asked for help, were the most commented. Few examples of immediate support were found by professionals, maybe because comments are public spaces with limited privacy for a personal exchange. Some comments were limited to tagging another user. It can be argued that tagging may be

a form of phatic communication (Lobinger, 2016) or a form of awareness intended to involve a potentially interested mother in the discussion, to raise her awareness of a theme, or even to offer her a chance of support.

## The Broader Meaning of Breastfeeding: A Philosophy of Child Care

Research results showed that in some cases breastfeeding is associated not only with nourishment but also with a philosophy about taking care of children.

The images analyzed insisted on the bond created between mother and child during breastfeeding. It can be seen in the kind of representation of breastfeeding which shows the child embraced and mother and child’s gazes interlocked. Also, the captions and hashtags used include words such as “bond” and “bonding time.”

There are mothers asking for a natural childbirth, inside and outside hospital, with the immediate possibility of skin-to-skin contact with the child and minimal medical presence, unless needed. Breastfeeding is depicted as the most natural way to nourish children. Others are more concerned with health and natural feeding both for themselves (some are vegan) and for their children.

Another topic that emerged is the decision to self-wean the child when he or she and/or the mother are ready to not following fixed schedules imposed by others but responding to the rhythm and the desire of the people involved in the process. This also includes the decision, where possible, to pump milk when at work in order to keep the supply high and postpone weaning.

In many cases, hashtags or pictures showed baby-wearing (i.e., in a sling) and co-sleeping. Another theme that emerged is the use of cloth diapers as a way to respect and protect the environment, in opposition to the culture of disposable objects.

To sum up, research results showed that breastfeeding may involve a philosophical approach to children based on the proximity and frequent contact between parent and child, a sort of embodied parenting, that responds to the personal decisions of the people involved and is resistant to market-driven choices. Children are depicted as active subjects and parents desire to heed their rhythms, for example, breastfeeding on demand and waiting for weaning.

## Depicting Children

Besides describing forms of feeding and caring for children, Instagram images depict children too. Instagram encourages active parenting on profiles of children older than 13 years of age (Instagram Inc., 2014), but little is said about the presence of children in parent’s profiles, except that all pictures should follow Instagram policies. Although this is not the main topic of the article, this paragraph will summarize parental practices to protect children.

A first option is to make the profile private, creating a sort of personal/familiar space within a public platform, even if it does not guarantee that images will remain private forever (i.e., one follower could screenshot and diffuse them).

Parents take different approaches to public profiles. One option is not to show the child's face, even though it is difficult to say whether the omission is deliberate or simply a coincidence due to the pose. The analysis of users' profiles revealed that in some of them there were plenty of pictures in which children were recognizable. No images with post-production were found (e.g., blurring the child's face). Some parents protect their children's privacy by calling them just using the first letter of their name or a nickname (e.g., my little one), and in some cases, they themselves use a nickname.

In other situations, the research revealed a lack of forms of privacy protection since it seems that real names and surnames are published. The research also located a profile which purported to be managed by a newborn (i.e., speaking in the first person). Since a newborn cannot manage an Instagram profile, it can be assumed that the profile is managed by the parents to create an online diary of the child's growth.

The practices analyzed show that the boundaries between private and public spaces are more and more nuanced. Moreover, since children cannot act as informed agents, the level of protection extended to their privacy seems to be up to the parents. Due to the low response to questionnaires, it not possible to develop this topic in the present context, but it may well be an area for further research.

## Discussion

Breastfeeding images taken by parents usually depict mother and child in everyday moments. The framing is very close, focused on bodies depicted in half-length portrait. As many captions evinced, their function is to save and share the moment, with the autobiographical purpose (Fallon, 2014) of documenting lives and communicating with the people they know (Tifentale & Manovich, 2016). The images also have a self-representational function since the mother desires to represent herself as a breastfeeder. They are a place where mothers show the "embodied" aspects (Koerber, 2013) of breastfeeding, that is, breastfeeding as mothers perceive and experience it, with all its joys and difficulties.

Breastfeeding images included in the sample and made by professional users, such as associations or projects explicitly promoting breastfeeding, adopt features of competitive photography (Tifentale & Manovich, 2016) to represent breastfeeding in an idealized way: mother and child or children are portrayed in selected settings (e.g., a natural environment), with beautiful clothes (e.g., long white dresses), and they are fully absorbed in the breastfeeding activity.

Expanding the analysis of embodiment that breastfeeding images taken by mothers, especially brelfies, allow, it

can be argued that they emphasize proximity since they are taken with a camera phone very close to the subjects portrayed and show an "individual and intimate viewpoint" (Okabe & Ito, 2006). Moreover, brelfies broaden the definition of selfies, especially the ones in which the subject taking the picture (the mother) is hardly seen, in favor of the other implied subject (the child). In other words, brelfies are not simply selfies in which more subjects pose together or selfies in which the taker is scarcely seen; they are two (occasionally three) bodies "com-posing", "mutually emplacing the photographing body and the depicted figure" (Frosh, 2015, p. 1612). Brelfies are an "ambiguous space" (Boon & Pentney, 2015, p. 1768) since they are self-representations of the mother depicting herself as breastfeeder; they imply the posing together of two bodies, for the act of breastfeeding involves both (e.g., the act of kissing); altogether they are a part of the political space of breastfeeding representation, promoting public discourse about it.

Moreover, some brelfies are the "visual perspective of the nursing mother" (Boon & Pentney, 2015, p. 1763). This occurs when mothers post a selfie taken from above their breast, which can scarcely be seen, and the focus is on the baby latched. Unlike the selfies that declare their nature (e.g., the athletic selfies commented by Frosh, 2015), brelfies of this kind are likely to show the mother's participation in the experience of breastfeeding and to include the observer in the experience itself (Tifentale & Manovich, 2016) by allowing the viewer to share photographer's perspective, as in a subjective shot. They are the "performance of a communicative action" (Frosh, 2015, p. 1610) that represents the subjects, involves the observer by attracting his or her attention to the subjects represented (Frosh, 2015), and saves and shares a unique sight that has never been shared before. This also focuses attention on an important aspect of breastfeeding representation: it is not decided by others (i.e., artists or photographers) but by the mother herself, who can also decide to depict non-idealized or little-known aspects of breastfeeding, such as the importance of the latch or milk leaks.

The fact that the images analyzed are hashtagged images is of no less importance. They are images situated between self-representation and public discourses.

The different strategies enacted by parents representing their children (from no precautions to the decision of not to show their faces or names) reinforce the results of a "granular" approach to privacy management in photosharing highlighted by previous research (Litt & Hargittai, 2014; see also Vivienne & Burgess, 2013).

Moreover, these images can be interpreted as a form of "reflexive sociability" (Frosh, 2015), because they are designed to be shared with an audience and because they are inserted in a flux of other Instagram images with the purpose of encouraging other users reflect about breastfeeding (using hashtags such as #supportbreastfeeding or #normalizebreastfeeding). Therefore, hashtags are an incentive to

form communities (Bruns & Burgess, 2011) committed to promoting a practice and to attract members connected by a common interest and not by a geographical bond. In the kind of hashtags used (especially #breastisbest), the influence of public campaigns for promoting breastfeeding can be seen. What these images share with hashtag activism is “narrative agency” or “the capacity to create stories on social media by using hashtags in a way that is collective and recognized by the public” (Yang, 2016, p. 14). The singularity of the case discussed here is that hashtags like #normalizebreastfeeding and #breastisbest, which probably originated after a crisis or a campaign, have been continuously used, becoming a part of the social representation of the phenomenon. Their narrative agency, then, unfolds over time, continuing to aggregate stories about the topic. In this way, “personal stories are linked to the broader social issue and shared with the public through the use of hashtag” (Yang, 2016, p. 15).

From this point of view, professionals, associations, and breastfeeding projects look for homophily (Manikonda, Hu, & Kambhampati, 2014) to connect with other users supporting breastfeeding rather than audience collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2010), but this result could be a limitation of the sampling method and might well prove an interesting area of further investigation.

The analysis of the contents portrayed showed that breastfeeding images range from the conventional representation of breastfeeding (namely, a mother embracing a newborn) to less canonical forms such as toddler breastfeeding, tandem breastfeeding, exclusive pumping moms, wet nursing, and mothers breastfeeding in their uniform, “implicitly push[ing] at the boundaries of maternal roles” (Boon & Pentney, 2015, p. 1760).

Research results also confirm the tendency of breastfeeding images to “challenge the taken-for-granted sexualisation of the breast” (Boon & Pentney, 2015, p. 1760), asking for a freedom to represent the female body and for its polysemy. Casual and professional images represent women in controversial or unconventional situations, for example, mother’s and child’s body just after birth or wet nursing.

In terms of breastfeeding support, Instagram was seen to have a complementary role to other forms of online support. As Herron (2013) argued, online support may be a valid source of help for breastfeeding mothers and social media could be a means of connecting women and increasing points of contact for both peer and professional individualized support which medical research has found to be effective in increasing breastfeeding rates (Bäckström, Wahn, & Ekström, 2010). The main role of Instagram images was found to be informative and cultural; in other words, they provide information about the benefits of breastfeeding and suggestions on how to solve specific problems. These images, on one hand, confirm the representation of breastfeeding as both a natural and a learned practice (Exclusive Breastfeeding, n.d.); on the other hand, they enlarge the sematic area associated with the rhetorical construction of

discourses which promote breastfeeding (Koerber, 2013) by not focusing merely on medical aspects but taking into account what happens more generally to women.

From another point of view, it can be argued that Instagram images recreate opportunities for women to receive support from other women, as happened in the past (Herron, 2013; Tomfhorde & Reinke, 2016). Although it is beyond the scope of this research, the presence of alternative forms of breastfeeding and the need for continuous support also reveal other challenges to be met, such as the early return to work, that involve not only personal choices but also political, social, and cultural issues.

## Limitations of the Study and Further Research

The decision to concentrate the research on contents in English restricted the analysis to Western culture; thus, a cross-cultural analysis is needed to broaden the findings.

Since perceptions of breastfeeding are contrasting (Schmied & Lupton, 2001), a further area of investigation might concern itself with how mothers who either cannot or do not want to breastfeed represent and experience infant feeding. A search into hashtags related broadly to motherhood should also be carried out in order to question different opinions and representations of breastfeeding and to investigate how mothering relates to breastfeeding in challenging situations (such as return to work or divorce). A further topic of research might well examine the reasons for the offense sometimes caused by public breastfeeding.

Parents use different tactics to protect their children’s privacy, but what remains unquestioned is the presence of images and discourses of underage children and the right of those children to protect their data and image. This ought to be a suitable area for future research about factors influencing privacy management and parental awareness of the opportunities and risks of showing their children online. Further research will also be useful into the relationship between context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2010) and the recent debate about echo chambers and filter bubbles (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016).

Due to the limited responses to the questionnaires, an important part of the subjective meaning of Instagram use is missing. A way to remedy this may be to publish an online questionnaire to recruit volunteers for the in-depth interview (Herron, 2013).

A further limitation was the decision to concentrate on Instagram, while an analysis of breastfeeding representation on other social media may be useful.

## Conclusion

The article examined several images related to breastfeeding, revealing the richness of the phenomenon in representing both maternity and early infancy. Instagram appears to be at



once a useful platform for personal communication (e.g., documenting breastfeeding or motherhood) and a space where users can document and share new representations of breastfeeding that go beyond the private moment of breastfeeding a newborn. The images analyzed represent the embodied side of breastfeeding, depicting it as a journey, with joys and difficulties, and as both a natural and a learned practice. Moreover, breastfeeding images express the female desire for autonomy in self-presentation so as to enfranchise body and breast from sexualization. Moreover, breelfies broaden the uses of selfies since they portray two bodies together and let the mother share her own perspective.

The research also showed that the relationship between privacy and publicness should be interpreted as a continuum within which there are different degrees of privacy and publicness management, enacted by users in response to a series of several factors. Tension between the presence of children and the desire to share breastfeeding images and aggregate them through hashtags was something which emerged from the research which should prove a fruitful area of further investigation.

Instagram was shown to be a means to promote awareness of breastfeeding with the aim of destigmatizing and normalizing this practice by publicly sharing images of breastfeeding or showing public moments of breastfeeding. This platform may also represent a first level of online support for breastfeeding, giving information and creating awareness about available support. Besides providing information and cultural knowledge, Instagram might also serve to raise broader questions about the political and social implications of breastfeeding in relation, for example, to the costs and benefits of maternal work.

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### Notes

1. Among others, see, for example, World Breastfeeding Week (n.d.) promoted by World Health Organization and the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative (n.d.) promoted by World Health Organization and UNICEF.
2. Gramfeed was a desktop tool for searching and visualizing Instagram images through hashtag search. It was closed on 1 June 2016.
3. Netvizz suspended its activities on 1 June 2016.

4. Netvizz downloaded data about images belonging to private accounts although they were not accessible by the researcher.
5. Partum denotes the act of giving birth to the baby by vaginal birth or C section.

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