IJoC Selfies

Odes to Heteronormativity:
Presentations of Femininity in Russian-Speaking
Pregnant Women's Instagram Accounts

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Introduction

This article explores stereotypical stories of femininity and pregnancy that Russian-speaking women enact on the image-sharing platform Instagram.[2] Substantial parts of Instagram, could, I suggest, be conceptualized in the context of snapshots. Snapshot photography has always focused on leisure activities and happy moments (West, 2000) and is often considered to be a women's area; mothers are largely the sole managers of family snapshots (Rose, 2003, 2004). While there are no reliable statistics on what kinds of images are most abundant on Instagram, it is my assumption—informed by multiple extensive tag-word searches among publicly available images in the past six months—that nonprofessional photographers posting images of their everyday lives and people close to them (elements of snapshot photography as defined by Sarvas and Frohlich, 2011) is fairly common. Selfies, photos of pets, food, travel, vacations, and parties are featured on popular media's lists of "most annoying Instagram photos," which can be taken to be indicative of common trends. Existing research too highlights portrayals of a desirable upper-middle-class lifestyle and hegemonic ideals of beauty (Abidin, 2014) offering "instafame" to the conventionally good looking (Marwick, 2015). Furthermore, an underlying logic of the *attention economy* (Goldhaber, 1997; Marwick, 2015)—evident in the common use of tags like #follow4follow or #like4like—guides many interactions and practices on Instagram.

While not the focus of this article, there is a lot of research published on the medical and aesthetical surveillance of pregnant women's bodies and the consumerist pressures of the celebrity bump-watch culture and media's role in it (Brubaker, 2007; Dworkin & Wachs, 2004; Earle, 2003; Marshall & Woollett, 2000; Morris & McInerney, 2010; Sha & Kirkman, 2009). Here, the focus is on Russian-speaking women's stories on Instagram celebrating heterosexual traditional family, their own appearances, and romantic relationships between opposite-sex partners. In contrast to English-speaking pregnant women's Instagram accounts, these accounts share a particular style of femininity. The following is an attempt to

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[2] Instagram is a mobile image-sharing app with ~150 million users.

understand what these performances of femininity do and mean in terms of presentations of the self, pregnancy, and gender order.

Theoretical Underpinnings

I am relying on the concept of *heteronormativity* as a lens through which to understand the Russian-speaking women's Instagram presentations. It can be defined as a set of practices, assumptions, and norms that reinforce the dualism of male/female and gay/straight, which has been contested by gender research for decades (see Butler, 1990). These norms and practices render heterosexuality and gender differences natural, coherent, and privileged (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Valocchi, 2005) and constitute "feminine women and masculine men as the only viable options" (Robinson, 2012, p. 329). In terms of femininity, heteronormativity rewards compliance (Dymock, 2011) and responsiveness to male desires (Rubin, 2011/1984). Connell (1987) used these two features as the main axes of what he called "emphasized femininity—a form of femininity most valued by hegemonic masculinity" (p. 183). Schippers (2007) elaborated Connell's definition by emphasizing the relationality between the categories of "man" and "woman," thus arriving at the concept of *hegemonic femininity*. "Hegemonic femininity consists of the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity" (Schippers, 2007, p. 94), as well as other kinds of femininity. She positions hegemonic femininity as ascendant to *pariah femininity*—feminine practices that are "contaminating to the relationship between masculinity and femininity" (ibid., p. 95) because of their noncompliance with male sexual desire and authority.

Femininity and Pregnancy in Russia

The Soviet communist ideology claimed to have liberated women (Voronina, 2009). This "faux emancipation" (Johnson & Saarinen, 2013, p. 544) was reiterated in propaganda posters and schoolbooks and has been credited with the production of the symbol of the Soviet working mother. However, mothering, rather than working, was increasingly emphasized due to low fertility rates already in the 1970s and 1980s (Rivkin-Fish, 2010), and the extreme economic conditions after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 lead to women's issues being constructed "through a narrow lens focused on reproduction, motherhood, sexuality, and beauty" (Rivkin-Fish, 2010, p. 710).

Today, Russia is facing increasing population decline,[3] which creates a fertile ground for increased normativity in terms of gender, sexual, and reproductive practices. Symbolic projects like National Mother's Day, established in 1999,[4] and monetary incentives like "maternity capital"[5] have been put in place to combat the demographic disaster. Legislation has been passed to outlaw "homosexual

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[3] A fall from 143 million to 136 million was anticipated between 2010 and 2013, with an estimated net immigration of 2.7 million during the same time (Demeny, 2012).

[4] In contrast, the modern American Mother's Day was first celebrated in 1908.

[5] Since 2007, women who have given birth to a second or third child have been able to receive maternity capital. It has been 387,640 rubles ($11,000) since 2012.

propaganda."[6] Russian popular culture and media present feminism as dangerous to Russian national values and feminists as "masculinized, sexually unsatisfied, and/or morally degraded women whose core values are rights, power over men, and money—not family and children, which a 'normal' woman is expected to prefer" (Voronina, 2009, p. 252). Rjabova and Ljamina (2007) conducted a survey in the Ivanov region in 2006, where people described Russian women as beautiful (81%) and kind (64%), caring wives (45%) and protectors of the home and the hearth (49%), whereas they saw American women as successful (48%), independent (69%), and bitchy (42%), none of which were seen as positive traits. All of this indicates a state-level desire for a heteronormative Russian nation (Lapina, 2013).

The importance of Russian women being beautiful, wifely, and motherly is perhaps best illustrated by pregnancy beauty pageants organized in big Russian cities since 2002. Beljaeva (2013) writes that visibly pregnant participants have to walk on the stage, do a dance number, and showcase an outfit in order to demonstrate that they are good mannered, photogenic, charming, active, and above all—beautiful. She quotes an interview with one of the main organizers of the 2006 Jekaterinburg pageant, Larisa Rozhkova, in *Novye Izvestija*, saying, "We created this pageant to show that pregnant women shouldn't be considered inferior. They are as beautiful and joyful as any other" (Beljaeva, 2013, p. 27, my translation). These contests are often organized with state support, and the underlying logic seems to suggest that women can be brought back to having children if promised continuing or enhanced appearances. It is in this context that the women whose Instagram feeds I observed share their images and thoughts.

Methods

My analysis was informed by the strategies of visual narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) and visual analysis (Rose, 2001). Both recommend reading images interpretively to explore how and why they are produced and read by different people.

I worked in a layered manner (Dowdall & Golden, 1989): after situating the images in their historical and social context, I moved to uncovering themes and meanings in specific sets of photos. I focused, as much as my data allowed, on the questions posed in the three sites of meaning making as suggested by Riessman (2008) and Rose (2001). These are production, image, and *audiencin*g.[7] The story of production asks how, when, by whom, and why the images are made. For this I draw on captions and hashtags. The story of the image focuses on the composition, genre, and technological aspects of the images, as the "compositional modality of the site of the image can produce persuasive accounts of a photograph's way of seeing" (Rose, 2001, p. 24). Audiencing tells us about the responses of viewers, and of how meanings and viewing positions are accepted, renegotiated, or rejected. For this, I rely on the comments.

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[6] Propaganda of nonnormative sexuality among the underage population was outlawed in the region of Ryazan in 2006 and in nine more regions by 2011 (see Lapina, 2013).

[7] A term proposed by John Fiske (1994) and used by Rose (2001), which refers to the process whereby images' meanings are renegotiated, or rejected, by particular audiences

My Russian-speaking sample consists of 110 accounts, which garnered approximately 43,000 images and captions.[8] This was created by using a scraping tool that utilizes the Instagram Application Program Interface (API) option of searching by tag-words.[9] The data was collected by regular searches for pregnancy-related tag-words during June 2014. For this article, I utilized a narrowed-down corpus of 26 Instagram accounts, which I selected because they suitably represented the themes of femininity. In the final stages of analysis I worked with the images, captions, tags, and comments from eight select accounts where the presentations of heteronormativity were potent.

This data is publicly available and tagged, but I have chosen not to reference any account URLs. In order to make myself accessible for questions throughout the research process, I set up an Instagram account where I outlined my project and followed all 110 women. Due to the technical difficulty of reproducing emoji, I have deleted them but added references to what they are in the footnotes. To further protect the Instagram users and following the idea of ethical fabrication as outlined by Markham (2011), I have altered names of cities and women when translating the cited captions from Russian, limited my reproduction of images to only those where the person's face is not recognizable, and altered the images using a sketching app called toonPAINT on IOS.

#ljubimyj #muzh #samajaschastlivaja [10]—Heteronormativity and Emphasized Femininity

I witnessed presentations of a particular kind of femininity from the very beginning of getting acquainted with my research subject's Instagram accounts. The profile descriptions often portrayed these women relationally through their husbands.

Masha: I love my husband so much!!! (Masha's profile description)
Viktorya: Mommy to the best baby ever, loving and beloved wife.[11] Yerevan and Moscow
(Viktorya's profile description)

Further, many of the women regularly post selfies marked as images showing them waiting for their husband. Tagged in ways that reference makeup and beauty procedures, their appearances in these images could be interpreted as in service of hegemonic masculinity. The following is a caption for a mirror-selfie (not reproduced), where a visibly pregnant, made-up woman, with a demure smile, in a tight top and short shorts, is taking a selfie with a phone in a pink case. The fingers of her other hand are in her long hair. Her other selfies are often similar in terms of the small, modest smile and a focus on her long, voluminous hair, but this one shows more of her body, particularly her bare legs.

Dina: Awaiting my husband[12]

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[8] This research is part a summer internship project (2014) at SMC MSRNE, where I also collected a comparable amount of data from Instagram accounts of English-speaking pregnant women.
[9] My sincere gratitude for help with this goes to Gregory Minton.
[10] #beloved #husband #thehappiest
[11] Emoji of a family of three, an infant's bottle, and a kiss.
[12] Three emoji of a heart with an arrow through it.

The image received the following comments: "And what beauty awaits him"[13]; "You look incredible!!! What a beauty, and your figure looks gorgeous, darling!"; "You are so good that you find time to take care of yourself!!"[14] These comments acknowledge and validate Dina's efforts at looking beautiful for her husband. They also mention the beauty of her body shape (for more work on body image and pregnancy see Nash, 2008, 2011, 2012a, 2012b)—and the work that goes into it.

Dina answers by thanking the commentators for the compliments, assuring them that "each of them is beautiful"[15] by adding tags of #mirror #shorts #hair #long #redlipstick #girl #beautiful to the image. Instagram's algorithm lists comments according to when the tags were made (the newest ones are posted below the older ones) and Dina does not hashtag all of her images. Since Dina's comment that added the tags came after all of those by the others, as well as after the one where she thanked her commentators and paid them a compliment, it is possible that she made it searchable and thus inserted her image into the wider attention economy (Marwick, 2015) only after she received the necessary reassurance. In terms of her looks, her pose, and the composition, this image does not differ from her selfies that have not been marked as "waiting for my husband." #OOTD[16] images and "about to go out" selfies, both common on Instagram, could be analogues for this image—the emphasis is on clothes and the person in the image has "cleaned up" in preparation of something. Yet in the "waiting for my husband" selfie, the framing is specifically male relational.

There are an abundance of selfies and beauty shots snapped by others on my research subjects' accounts. They are usually tagged and captioned in ways that demonstrate the poser's attractiveness and the procedures undertaken to enhance it. Comments from followers make sure that even uncaptioned selfies are situated as emblematic of beauty. Grooming is portrayed as happening for men, and men's approval is what makes it a success or not. See the following captions from Olga's selfie (not reproduced):

Olga: Take a look!!![17] My husband forgave me for the length of my hair[18]

The image to this caption is of Olga facing the mirror, smiling, and behind her, with one hand on her hip, is her husband. The previous image in her Instagram feed was of her at the hairdressers. Evidently she had had a couple of inches cut from her waist-length hair.

Next to the images of beauty, there are progress report–like baby-bump pictures (often mirror-shots from the side). Together with the captions and comments, they reinforce the ideal of the devoted Russian mother/wife (Kalacheva, 2002), but still keep the emphasis on beauty. As in the previous example, the figure of the pregnant women receives special attention. Tags like #watermelononastick or commentary conversations of eagerly awaiting being able to go to the gym provide viewing guidelines for

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[13] Emoji of a heart.

[14] Emojis of thumbs-up, clapping and a hand with an index finger pointing up.

[15] Three emoji of green hearts.

[16] Outfit of the Day, a popular hashtag on Instagram.

[17] Emoji of a girl getting her hair cut.

[18] Emoji of a male and a female face kissing with a heart between them.

reading belly pictures, not only as indicative of the growing baby, but simultaneously as evidence of successful body management on the woman's part. Like selfies, belly-bump images often turn into accolades to men.

Figure 1. Lena's selfie.

In the example provided in Figure 1, Lena has wrapped herself in a bed sheet. I interpret the backdrop of an unmade bed as a demonstration of feminine vulnerability and sexual invitation. This woman's bare shoulders and the soft window light caressing her form as well as the long hair falling to cover her face further reinforce this reading. She cradles her belly, which makes its contours more visible. I suggest this is doubly meaningful—first, it is an almost universal gesture of maternal protection, and second, it makes it visible that her weight gain has all been "in the right places" (Nash, 2012a). She captioned it as follows:

> Lena: My husband tells me that I smile in my sleep and press closer to him. Asks me, what I'm dreaming of. But he knows that it is thanks to him that there is so much happiness living inside me. He gave us the gift of a son, which makes me incredibly happy.

Lena tagged the image with #36weeks, #pregnancy #happiness #morning #goingtobeamom #9months #babybump #pregnant. These tags guide viewing through the temporality of pregnancy—she uses pregnancy-specific, week-based time telling—which invites searches from people interested in this particular content (presumably other pregnant women). The image itself and the remaining tags then guide the viewer through marital bliss and the intimacy of being allowed to greet the morning in her bed with her. The caption positions Lena's husband as the sole provider of happiness and singularly responsible for having created a male fetus. A comment has been left on the image that exclaims: "You are gorgeous!" What could, or should, other (pregnant) women make of this display of husbandly love and a demonstration of a compact bump on an otherwise slender frame so near the due date? This could be explained through hierarchies of femininity within a heteronormative system. I will offer an elaboration on this after the following example.
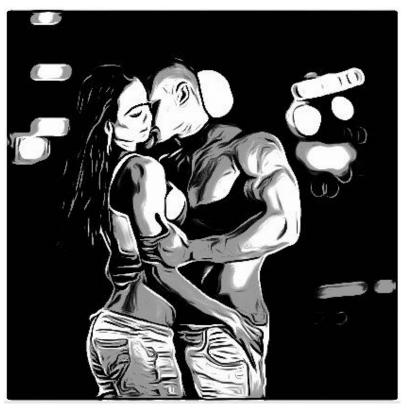

Figure 2. Maria's image of herself and her husband.

Maria: Every woman needs to be dependent on a man, and the more delicate a woman, the more elaborate these forms of dependence have to be. What a pleasure it is, when a man saves the day, takes the problems on himself. How happy it makes a woman to hear: "I have already thought about it." And how much does it actually mean when a man can simply fall asleep next to you, turning his passion into tenderness.

Maria posted this caption with this erotic image (Figure 2) taken in a professional photo shoot. Why does Maria feel the need, and the right, to make such normative generalizations? What is the significance of her using an "old" image, where she is not visibly pregnant? Ostensibly, the emphasis on the sexual appeal of her body and her husband's desire (similarly to the successful weight gain and the husband's love in Lena's case) instates her right to be a spokesperson of heteronormativity. It gives her a hegemonic status achieved through appearances and marriage. The image is tagged with #maria's, her husband's, and the photographer's names and followed by comments that say: "These words,"[19] "beautiful . . .,"[20] and "if only all girls would appreciate this."[21] The last of these comments falls in line with my reading of Maria's post as indicative of the hegemonic status of her femininity. The question of how aware and conscious she is of her status remains. If the feedback loop of her posting content and receiving feedback is part of what transforms her emphasized femininity into hegemonic femininity, should her practices only be attributed to the assumed pleasure of the ascendance of her femininity over other kinds of femininity and not some kind of ideological lean toward heteronormativity?

How do Lena, Maria, and my other research subjects use their hegemonic femininity (Schippers, 2007)? What can hegemonic femininity do? After being legitimized as femininity of a higher order through practices for which I've provided examples here, hegemonic femininity asserts its status over other kinds of femininity. The women in my sample posted advice or chastised other women to guide their performances of compliant femininity. In these, other women, referred to in abstract, diminutive group terms as "girls" or "chicks," are cautioned to discipline their eating, exercising, and of course the way they interact with their men (the following caption came with a face selfie):

Sofia: Girls, be kind! Be easy. Don't nag [in Russian, the word *sawing* was used] your husbands.

This post rendered comments that encapsulate the hierarchical ascendancy of hegemonic femininity. One of the commenters, Nadezda, said, "Oh well, in my life everything was OK until I gave birth, but I guess you are right."[22] I interpret this as the commentator positioning herself below Sofia in the hierarchy of femininity. Sofia responds accordingly, by bestowing advice on the commentator and suggesting, "Nadezda, you gotta fix the situation! Everything is in your hands," thus making Nadezda solely responsible for the harmony within her relationship. This is followed by another comment,[23] which is rather negative about Nadezda's hesitant opinion. This new comment reads:

Sofia, good job that you are not listening to this silly Nadezda and her talk about problems. Given her use of the sad smiley-face I can only assume she gave birth just to get her husband on the hook. I have the biggest respect for you for what you've said, keep it up! All the happiness to you.

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[19] Emoji of thumbs-up.

[20] Three emoji of pink, layered hearts.

[21] Emoji of a smiley face.

[22] Emoji of a sad face.

[23] By the use of gendered pronouns in Sofia's response to that user, I know that he is male.

I interpret this as an attempt to situate the first commentator as a representative of the dangerous pariah femininity (Schippers, 2007) for her lack of compliance with the "no nagging" memo. Sofia does not contest this reading, and her only, and final, comment on this image thanks that last male commentator "for his positive feedback."

Conclusion

Heteronormativity can be reproduced or resisted by a variety of practices, values, norms, and traditions. There are examples of (image) sharing and social media being used by counterpublics for resisting normative ideologies (Lingel & boyd, 2013; Renninger, 2014; Tiidenberg, 2014). Even on Instagram—known for its rigid censorship—people have found ways to appropriate the platform affordances to contest bodynormativity and heteronormativity (Olszanowski, 2014). The Instagramming practices of my research subjects, however, speak of performances of hegemonic femininity at the service of heteronormative ideology. Some of the feminist research has pointed to the possibility of pregnancy being socially successful while aesthetically problematic (Dworkin & Wachs, 2004; Willmott, 2013), and as Russian culture places such a high premium on female beauty (Marsh, 2004; Rjabova & Ljamina, 2007; Zhurzhenko, 2008), pregnancy can induce anxiety. There is currently also a strong political push toward reproducing heteronormativity. What I see women doing with the stories etched out here, then, is engaging in emphasized, normative self-presentations to demonstrate their femininity as complementary to hegemonic masculinity (Schippers, 2007), and through it to reinstate their value within the system they inhabit. By employing visual (and) narrative practices that assert the status of their femininity, they can transform pregnancy into something unproblematic.

Thinking of presentations of pregnancy in wider terms, one can ask what a nonheteronormative way of doing pregnancy would be like. How could one capture one's pregnancy on Instagram in a less normative tone? Both from the empirical exploration at hand and from previous scholarship (Abidin, 2014; Marwick, 2015), it seems that the Instagram's sociotechnical affordances suit complacent performances and the reproduction of dominant ideologies. Snapshot photography's long tradition of erasing the bad and the problematic (Kotchemidova, 2005) and the #like4like attention economy of Instagram are unlikely to incentivize resistance among vernacular users. While the Russian socioeconomic, demographic, and cultural situation are place and time specific and perhaps particularly inductive of emphasized femininity and heteronormativity, there are other forces (consumerist, celebrity culture led) that also force heteronormativity on performances of pregnancy. Could it be that women who want to escape reproducing heteronormativity in their pregnancy have the dubious choice of selective silence? For example, Princeton sociologist of science and technology Janet Vertesi opted for strategic social media silence regarding her pregnancy and has written on how her decision made her seem rude, antisocial, and a criminal in a variety of blog post and news media articles.[24]

What is seen as photographable in a particular culture at a particular time illuminates the pertinent dominant ideologies. By examining alternate modes of subjectivity presented through photographable and photographed pregnancy, this article has illustrated the ideologies of gender order

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[24] I want to thank Jessa Lingel for bringing this to my attention.

and appropriate performances of femininity to which these women seem to subscribe. It has also illuminated the relations between different ideologies and specific experiences, thus demonstrating that for these Russian-speaking women there is a strong link between pregnancy and performances of emphasized, hegemonic femininity—as opposed to, for example, femininity expressed primarily through intensive mothering (Douglas & Michaels, 2004) or ideologies of gender equality.

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