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## The Embodiment and Discourses of a Taboo: #brelfie

Sarah Beach

Clemson University, [beach2@clemson.edu](mailto:beach2@clemson.edu)

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## The Embodiment and Discourses of a Taboo: #brelfie

Sarah Beach

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*#brelfie is an online social media trend that seeks to normalize public breastfeeding through exposure. “Brelfies” are “breastfeeding selfies”—in which a mother uploads an image of herself breastfeeding to social media. It is controversial even within the trend itself, as women disagree on how it potentially pressures women to perform motherhood. Much of Western culture views the female breast as a sexual organ, and thus creates norms about how breasts should be functioned and displayed in public. Yet, many others would argue that breastfeeding is the only legitimate use of the female breast and is therefore permissibly exhibited in public. In fact, images of breastfeeding have been around for centuries, and so #brelfies are merely one small piece in a wider puzzle concerning motherhood and body politics. This discourse analysis takes a sample of social media posts drawn using Radian6 analytics software, and analyzes these posts for descriptive themes. These themes relate to the culturally-situated functionality of breasts, the online arena of activism, and appreciate discourse as medium for self-empowerment, and as a means for constructing taboo/s.*

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Keywords: #brelfie, normalize breastfeeding, body politics, feminism, online activism

Normalizing breastfeeding will be a lot more effective in advancing women’s issues and desexualizing breasts. Yes, they’re pretty. And yes, they have a purpose in women’s sexuality. But their main purpose is to feed another human. And I think that’s way more special—and more relevant to humanity—than being allowed to go topless in Times Square.

—Alyssa Milano, 2015

The brelfie. Breastfeeding women embracing the selfie.

—Twitter user @HazelEyedSnake, 2015

Western culture closely regulates how women’s breasts may be displayed in public spaces. Baring the female breast has long been controversial (Pundurs, 1994; Herald, 1995; Boso, 2009), and especially so when deployed as an act of social activism (Bussell, 2014; Yee et al., 2015). One trend that has only recently received media attention is the #brelfie. A March 2015 *BuzzFeed Life* article explained that #brelfie, with its associated hashtags of #breastfeedingselfie and #normalizebreastfeeding, seeks to

destigmatize breastfeeding in public spaces by combining “breastfeeding” with “selfie” (O’Connor, 2015). While the term “selfie” simply refers to any photograph taken of oneself (by oneself), usually for social media postings (Qiu et al., 2015), this particular combination results in a specific type of social media post displaying a mother and baby engaging in the act of nursing—usually photographed by the mother herself, and known as a “brelfie.”

Although I have no children of my own and have never breastfed, this topic bears special relevance for me and the mothers I associate with in contemporary Western U.S. society. In fact, this topic has much broader social implications that I will be examining in this work. As a White, middle-class, cisgendered, educated woman who engages in online health and body politics discourses, I explore the culturally-situated functionality of breasts, the online arena of social activism, and related discourse/s as a medium for both empowerment and taboo through a descriptive exploration of online #brelfie discourse. I focus specifically on talk, rather than on the images themselves, in order to engage in a purposeful discussion regarding #brelfies and their place in contemporary culture. I argue that the #brelfie is a viable and meaningful way to celebrate motherhood and to potentially change online cultural narratives.

News media often focuses on celebrity’s #brelfies, although it is unclear who invented the trend. Perhaps the most famous #brelfie poster was actress Alyssa Milano—whom a *BuzzFeed* article credits with posting a notably controversial #brelfie back in December 2014 (O’Connor, 2015). Milano used Instagram, but mothers post breastfeeding selfies across various social media platforms. Years later, mothers continue to post #brelfies, although with less attention than accompanied Milano’s first post. #brelfie’s continuity demonstrates its significance and ramifications for ongoing body politics discussions and in feminist activism.

Current literature lacks specific work concerning the experience of #brelfies, although Boon and Pentney (2015) discuss how breastfeeding selfies represent a performance of motherhood. They conclude that “however productive the breastfeeding selfie might be as a space for self-realization and lactivist engagement, it is an inherently ambiguous space” that deserves further exploration (Boon & Pentney, p. 1768). Additionally, Locatelli (2017), drawing on Boon and Penney’s (2015) work, explores several related hashtags on the photo platform Instagram, using visual analysis and surveys. Through a similar discourse analysis of social media posts, I qualitatively define #brelfie in ways that both contextualize the trend and illuminate its place in the online sphere. However, unlike Locatelli (2017), my essay focuses specifically on the hashtagged “#brelfie” from a wider variety of social media platforms; and I position #brelfie as a micro-discourse within a broader cultural discursive arena.

## **#brelfie in Context**

Like many social media trends, #brelfie has received both enthusiastic support and shocked disapproval from the public. One of the major oppositions to #brelfie concerns the belief that breastfeeding should be kept private—hidden away from the eyes of others (Brenan, 2015). This opposition is in part due to the sexualized nature of the female body in Western culture, and the social norms about how women’s bodies should be appropriately displayed in public (Mounsef, 2005). Generally, breastfeeding is stigmatized in Western societies (Boyer, 2012; Mahon-Daley, 2002). But in the modern era of sharing photos online, these rules concerning overt expressions of gender and sexual norms in physical public spaces often transfer to the online world. Another common criticism is that #brelfies show so much support for breastfeeding that they possibly increase the stigma for bottle-feeding mothers who may be unable to breastfeed, yet still feel pressured to do so (Barston, 2015; Donnelly, 2015; Lynch, 2015; Macted, 2015).

People who post #brelfies, however, are primarily attempting to celebrate motherhood and normalize breastfeeding through this public exposure (Brenan, 2015; Kantor, 2014). #brelfies are a way of lessening the social stigma surrounding breastfeeding in public by repeatedly practicing, capturing, and publicizing this taboo (Boyer, 2011; Dillard, 2015). Consequently, promoting a supportive environment for breastfeeding has been shown to be instrumental in both mother’s and infants’ health (Acker, 2009; Carter & McCutcheon, 2013; Youens et al., 2014). At its base, #brelfie seeks to promote a common good. As norms about the female body are in flux, understanding the ideology behind breastfeeding selfies may shed light on many contemporary societal beliefs. Western culture, in particular, holds a double standard for women’s bodies: women are at once encouraged to display their breasts for sexual purposes, and then are criticized for doing so. At the same time, women are forbidden from publicly using their breasts for their innate biological function—breastfeeding.

Because of these circumstances, I here focus on Western cultural beliefs surrounding breastfeeding and the appropriate use and display of breasts. In a cultural contrast of Western and non-Western paradigms, Dettwyler (1995) noted that in West Africa, men have found the idea of breasts as a sexual organ to be disturbing. For example, in Mali culture, breasts are freely displayed in public because cultural understandings prescribe that breasts are solely for breastfeeding (and this nourishment is valued) (Dettwyler, 1995). In contrast, Western culture consistently objectifies breasts for use in advertising and for promoting sex, thus creating a double-bound “tension between the maternal and sexual breast” (Stearns, 2013, p. 363). This friction highlights the complex rules and norms surrounding how breasts are supposed to be displayed in Western contexts (and how they should not be).

In 2000 the United States ruled that women will no longer be prohibited from breastfeeding on federal property (Mounsef, 2005, p. 245). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published a “Breastfeeding Report Card” in 2014, listing that 81% of infants in the United States have been breastfed at least some, and that support for breastfeeding is on the rise (“Breastfeeding Report Card,” 2014, p. 6). These details illustrate that there is some support for breastfeeding, and indeed, for public breastfeeding, in the United States today. If #brelfie is emerging in a time period that is seemingly becoming more supportive of breastfeeding, why then, are #brelfies still being met with resistance?

For centuries art has featured depictions (and discussions) of breastfeeding (Doolan, 2008; Beerden & Naerebout, 2011; Fildes, 1995; Sachdev, 2009). In earlier eras, artists frequently painted the nursing mother, and particularly in religious icons of the Madonna (or Maria Lactans) in the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance period (Doolan, 2008). Breastfeeding later became a political metaphor (e.g., nurturing “liberty”) and thus remained an important facet of colonial and Victorian artwork (Doolan, 2008, p. 29). Ventura (2015) discusses how 19th century French artworks depicting nursing mothers reflected contemporary beliefs regarding who should nurse the baby (whether a wet-nurse ought to, or if the mother herself, should). Further, how nursing mothers are treated in art often reflects prevailing cultural attitudes of the time. Finally, however, 20th century advertising objectified the breast as a marketing tool, thus changing the way breasts are displayed in art in modern times (Doolan, 2008).

### **Hashtag Activism and “Lactivism”**

Another term for breastfeeding activism is “lactivism,” which Stearns (2013) refers to as “organized protests directed toward organizations that respond negatively to a mother who is breastfeeding or to an image of a maternal breast” (p. 363). The most central aspect of the #brelfie is that it is an example of “hashtag activism”—a term that denotes the use of hashtags on social media in support of a particular social cause (Williams, 2015). The hashtag (#) symbol is used to indicate trending topics on social media platforms, and particularly on Twitter (van Dijck, 2013). Indeed, Twitter has come to be regarded as a particularly fertile ground for public communication and discussion (Poell & Rajagopalan, 2015). The practice of hashtagging is not only confined to Twitter, however, and is also featured on Instagram and Facebook.

Activists have traditionally sought alternative platforms to get their messages out, and especially so since the mainstream media can be so marginalizing (Harlow & Guo, 2014). This understanding places social media in a unique position to support and promote causes that may otherwise be ignored by the hegemony of mainstream media. Kahn and Kellner (2004) mark the beginning of internet activism in the late 1990s—and particularly

with regard to emergent political contexts. Especially in feminist activism, hashtags have become a common method for sharing gender equality ideologies with the public, and particularly by celebrities (Stache, 2015). Indeed, hashtags are key in feminist movements (Higgs, 2015; Williams, 2015; Poell & Rajagopalan, 2015; Horeck, 2014). Relatedly, “regular” people who post #brelfies are similarly showing support for the breastfeeding selfie movement.

A “selfie,” as mentioned above, is a self-portrait taken by the subject of the photo and is subsequently posted to an online social media platform (Qiu et al., 2015). Schwarz (2010) identifies the selfie as being part of a “broader trend to view new technologies of self-documentation as emancipating” (p. 164). Murray (2015) notes that the selfie is often seen by young women posters “as a radical act of political empowerment: as a means to resist the male-dominated media culture’s obsession with and oppressive hold over their lives and bodies”—this, again, aligns the idea of a selfie-post with feminist strategies of empowerment (p. 490). Specifically, many women embrace this agency to create self-portraits in order to control their own image (Schwarz, 2010). If a “brelfie” is a modified form of “selfie,” then perhaps mothers who post them have similar ideas of empowerment ideas in mind.

### **#brelfie as Discourse**

Scholars define discourse in many different ways (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000) and have often applied it to social media trends. Alvesson and Karreman (2000) locate discourse as the “general and prevalent systems for the formation and articulation of ideas in a particular period of time” (p. 1126). Bouvier (2015) asserts that in a modern globalized society, discursive changes take place in “broader” contexts than in previous eras (p. 152). This means that since #brelfies take place in a globalized mediated space, researchers must take a wider-angled view in order to fully understand them. At the same time, social media has become “central to the changes in public discourse,” as the internet both shapes and records the beliefs of online participants (Poell & Rajagopalan, 2015, p. 720). In line with Alvesson and Karreman’s (2000) “micro-level” discourse, I employ a narrow scope in order to thoroughly understand the phenomenon of #brelfie from the ground level of the mediated user (as opposed to a wider-lens). Thus, I explore how this specific phenomenon is talked about by social media users, as a way to examine how #brelfie fits into broader cultural discussions of motherhood and the female breast.

When studying discourses created in social media, scholars have hitherto collected a substantial body of relevant posts and analyzed the content of each one (Demirhan & Demirhan, 2015; Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015; Poell & Rajagopalan, 2015). While images have been integral to these previously considered projects, the goal here is to understand how #brelfie is being

talked about, rather than my making arbitrary aesthetic judgments based on the images of #brelfies, themselves. I am more interested in the emergent discourses surrounding #brelfie, because talk surrounding #brelfies will more readily demonstrate its purpose, meanings, and implications. As such, I gathered posts labeled with #brelfie, #breastfeedingselfie, and #normalizebreastfeeding by using a social media analysis software called Radian6. Radian6 collects posts from many corners of the internet, including Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, blogs, forums, and others—set within a 90-day period. In order to best capture the height of the conversation spawned after Alyssa Milano’s own controversial #brelfie, I set the search parameters from December 1, 2014 to March 3, 2015.

### **#brelfie Posts and Radian6**

Radian6 software located 6,752 posts related to #brelfie in the 90-day time period. Most #brelfies came from Twitter, but a significant portion also came from internet forums and comments on news articles. These locales seemed to be a popular place for mothers to congregate and discuss parenting topics, including #brelfie. Many of these posts came from an online forum called “Baby Centre,” on a thread called “#BRELFIE opinions?”. Wherever the source, online #brelfie discourse is divided on the merits of #brelfies; yet, for the mothers, it is a place of connectedness and empowerment. I have organized the discourse into seven themes, which I detail in the following sections: #brelfie as celebration, empowerment, attention-seeking, offensive, breach of privacy, discouraging to other mothers, and as a “craze.”

#### ***#brelfie as a Celebration***

As noted previously, a #brelfie is a self-photographed image of a mother with her baby, captioned and labeled with #brelfie, #normalizebreastfeeding, or #breastfeedingselfie. By engaging in this dialogue, these mothers create an emergent discourse rooted in mutual support and interconnection. One mother wrote, “I take them, share them and like them. I have them on FB, Twitter and Instagram” (Foofaloofah, 2015, February 2). For the most part, these posts include a #brelfie image with an illustrative caption—perhaps sharing something about their day, or the joys of being with their child. The captions mentioned things like “afternoon cuddles” with a heart symbol (Lane, 2014, December 17), “the best view in the world” (TRWNancy, 2015, March 3), or, “I love being able to nourish her with my body. My best and most precious creation. #brelfie” (with three tulip emojis) (Hase, 2015, February 26). One mother succinctly captioned her image: “I don’t do it for attention. I do it for his nutrition” (Rose, 2014, March 2). These maternal posters openly support #brelfies through their participation in the public practice of breastfeeding, sharing it, and commenting on it. Many of these mothers noted the importance of posting #brelfies as a form of breaking the taboo surrounding public breastfeeding. Overall, #brelfie posts celebrate

breastfeeding and motherhood by capturing a significant moment in the mothers' day and sharing it with their online followers.

### ***#brelfie as Empowerment***

In addition to #brelfie posts creating a discourse of connection for mothers, some users also point to the value of the act of posting, itself. One mother wrote that the photos she posted were the only breastfeeding images she had of her child, adding, "I won't be so uneasy about breastfeeding this time!" (Sierra Nicole Henry, 2014, December 19). Another mother from the same forum as above wrote that, "... doing brelfies has boosted my confidence to feed in public [sic]" (Emj0502, 2015, March 3). For these mothers, posting #brelfies was a positive and affirming experience. On another level, however, some people were adamant about the importance of their support for the trend. Another mother wrote:

I posted one one [sic] my fb the other day... and thinking that I can weed out all the people who don't like it and they can get off my page and as others have said I think it's important to normalise it. I'm proud of breastfeeding and I don't see a problem with a 'brelfie'.... It's no different to posting a pic of a baby having a bottle and the sooner people realise that the better. (JillD25, 2015, February 27)

Similarly, another commenter wrote that "[if] I want to put up a breast feeding selfie (I dont!) I will, because it's MY TIT and MY child, I will plaster them anywhere and everywhere I want" (clinx123, 2015, March 4). Note that while she does not wish to post a #brelfie herself, she still supports #brelfies as an act of defiance.

One popularly re-Tweeted post shares this appreciation for #brelfies by calling breastfeeding mothers "superheroes" for how they raise and feed their children (Babe, 2015, March 1). Another person wrote: "If the goal of the brelfie is too [sic] get people used to viewing breastfeeding as normal then yes it's a good idea.... One step at a time" (Waterlow, 2015, February 25). One forum user commented that they "would rather see a cute baby suckling than an orange duckface or angsty eyeliner selfie" (DavidBowiesTrousers, 2015, February 28). A significant portion of posters supported Alyssa Milano's #brelfie as well as her vocal support of public breastfeeding, thus showing the important visibility of celebrity culture for this particular trend.

### ***#brelfie as Attention-seeking***

Much of the anti-#brelfie sentiment from my collected sample centers around the impetus to dismiss it as "silly," or merely geared towards attention-seeking mothers. Waterlow's (2015) *UK Daily Mail* article<sup>1</sup> titled, "The Rise of the Brelfie," inspired dozens of indignant comments from readers. One of these commenters urged the mothers to "go away and stop making a

1 All subsequent Waterlow (2015) citations come from comments on this article.



spectacle of yourself” (Waterlow, 2015, February 25). This view implies that #brelfies are unwanted and that posters are selfishly seeking a “wow” factor. Another commenter on the same article called #brelfies “sad and pathetic” (Waterlow, 2015, February 25). Much of this retaliation centered around the word “brelfie” itself, by suggesting that the practice of taking “selfies” is already ridiculous, and that #brelfie was just simply too much. Comment after comment frames these #brelfie women as narcissistic and desperate to make a spectacle of themselves. It is worth noting that few to none of these posts mentioned anything regarding public breastfeeding, but merely spoke to the inappropriateness of displaying breasts online.

### ***#brelfie as “Offensive” to Others***

Some users have found the #brelfie trend to be shocking and incredible—as almost impossible to believe. Tweets in this category tended to use the most expletives, and expressed visceral reactions of disgust. Interestingly, many of these Tweets rarely included a justification for their disapproval. A common argument against #brelfies is that other bodily functions (most notably, of the bathroom variety) were “natural” too, but no one wishes to post a picture of these encounters. This argument justifies itself by comparing breastfeeding to other bodily functions in asserting that breastfeeding, like bodily waste elimination, should be kept from the public eye. Sex, too, was often proffered as another “natural” function unacceptable to document online. By comparing the #brelfie with portrayals of other bodily functions, these objectors participate in the societal policing of women’s breasts and bodies.

A small body of posts claimed to support *the cause of breastfeeding*, but still did not wish to see #brelfies. There was a significant amount of these, such as the Tweet that said, “I fully understand the message behind #brelfie movement, but... I don’t need to see that much tittie” (Forte, 2015, March 3). Interestingly, again, few of these people provided a reason for their objections, since they just stated (often emphatically) that they just did not wish to see them. The undertones of these comments vaguely point to an opinion that the public display of breasts is indecent, yet they give no explicit reasons for their disapproval—thus further reifying a cultural gendered double standard that attempts to control when and how women’s breasts ought to be displayed in public.

### ***#brelfie as a Breach of Privacy***

Another objection to #brelfies from the sample asserts that breastfeeding is a special and intimate moment shared between mother and child, and should not be shared with the public. Some commenters went further, arguing that displaying children in such a public space poses a security threat, and the infants may someday wish their mothers had never featured them online in a #brelfie. One such person wrote, “I truly believe in time to come the most coveted thing in the world will be PRIVACY” (Waterlow, 2015, February 25).

This comment seems to be rooted less in the disapproval of displaying one's breasts, and more generally concerned with online privacy and children's rights. A small faction of posters seemed to think that all online activity should hold privacy and security in higher esteem.

### ***#brelfie as Discouraging to Other Mothers***

One of the most intriguing objections to #brelfies is how the “growing movement against the ‘brelfie’ is forming among women who feel... it rubs it in for women who can’t [breastfeed]” (buvyporosuc). As noted above, some mothers find it upsetting to be shown happy nursing moments when they themselves suffer from infertility, struggle with lactation, or have lost a child (Barston, 2015; Donnelly, 2015; Lynch, 2015; Maxted, 2015). This perspective only appeared once in my sample, on the Baby Centre forum, with this comment: “You can’t stop people taking selfie[s] because it might or might not offend people. I am struggling to have a 2nd baby so can all the women stop putting selfie[s] with lots of kiddies because it really hurt[s] my feelings???” (PetiteGrenouille, 2015, February 27). Whether or not this is a commonly held belief, it is worth noting for its presence in some of the news sources’ repeated coverage—made even more interesting by the fact that this rebut occurred in an extremely low percentage in the sample. Certainly, my sample was not exhaustive, and there may be many more mothers who similarly feel that #brelfies accentuate their dissatisfaction. While I found several news headlines that proliferated this claim, I only found this one instance across my sample. This outlier certainly deserves further attention, but exceeds the scope of the present study.

### ***#brelfie as a “Craze”***

In addition to the posts described above, the sample also contained a significant number of re-posts of news articles announcing the trend. Most of these dealt with Alyssa Milano’s sadness at the backlash she received, as well as her casting “shade” (a slang term for aspersion or disapproval) on concurrent celebrity Kim Kardashian’s famously nude cover photo in *PAPER* Magazine. #brelfie’s occurrence at the same time as Kardashian’s influential photo is significant, as her photo was often celebrated while Milano’s was criticized. Indeed, #brelfie has many wider social implications, as I discuss presently. News headlines in the sample often positioned #brelfie as a fad, or as a “shocking,” passing trend. Much of this type of backlash came from parenting magazines or motherhood blogs, but nearly as many came from tabloids and scandal-oriented outlets that often called it a “craze.” A few such outlets needlessly included a “warning label” for the “explicit photos” contained within the article. The mothers posting #brelfies have little-to-no control over articles of this kind. The #brelfie-posting mothers are part of an online discourse that seeks empowerment; and yet, they cannot dictate how their photos will be shared, commented on, or framed.

## Discussion

In the months following Alyssa Milano's #brelfie post and the subsequent media discourse, mothers have continued to post #brelfies—although many of these women were not targeted by the media's sensationalization of the trend. Across all the manifold daily public displays of the female breast, why did #brelfie receive such intense scrutiny and backlash? Indeed, the controversy surrounding #brelfie firmly underlines Stearns' (2013) "tension between the maternal and sexual breast" (p. 363). If it amounts to only a flash in the pan, #brelfie is nonetheless an important phenomenon along the historicized and ongoing trajectory of feminist activism.

According to #brelfie posters themselves, breastfeeding selfies seek to advocate for and exhibit public support for motherhood, as well as to normalize breastfeeding through this exposure. Perhaps this fact alone renders the "bodily function" argument invalid—as no one disputes the necessity of this occurrence nor the desire to relegate its public display to the private. The few posters who critiqued the trend on the grounds of privacy for the children (who may grow up to regret the images in later life) perhaps have a more benevolent motive. This aside, since the self-proclaimed purpose of #brelfie is to normalize the act of public breastfeeding, assuming that future generations might regret these photos later in life, is to presuppose a failure of the movement. If, indeed, #brelfies fade from the timeline of social media trends, they have at least made their stance clear concerning "the prudish double standard that exists over the naked body of women" (ceclatore). Dominant Western online culture, it seems, still rejects public displays of the female breast, even as some mothers are attempting to change this oppression through their deployment of #brelfies.

Unlike artwork from previous eras that featured the breastfeeding mother as a detached subject (or even as an object), #brelfies place mother and child in active positions of participation, and may even be able to enact social change. Contrasting this with the passive nature of early depictions of *Maria Lactans*, #brelfie centers mother and child in a deliberate and meaningful locus of control. Some mothers noted that they felt more comfortable breastfeeding in public after performing the public act of posting their photos online. Perhaps this best speaks to both the intimate and intentional nature of taking a photo while breastfeeding, writing a caption, and sharing it on social media.

On the other hand, #brelfie fits under the umbrella of hashtag activism—a highly debated topic in recent literature (Thimsen, 2015; Wright, 2016; Howard, Savage, Saviaga, Toxtli, & Monroy-Hemández, 2016; Kligler-Vilenchik, & Thorson, 2016). Scholars favor hashtag activism as generally successful, although many also note its capacity for being perfunctory and superficial (Thimsen, 2015; Wright, 2016; Kligler-Vilenchik, & Thorson, 2016). Further, while selfies are often used in empowering ways, some scholars also observe that they can, in fact,

promote harmful aspects such as cyberbullying, objectification, and further marginalization (Kedzior & Allen, 2016; Shah & Tewari, 2016). Shah and Tewari (2016) performed a focus group study of graduate students and emphasized the complexities of selfies. They found that selfies can have both empowering and harmful effects. Certainly, the #brelfie posters from my sample experienced a great deal of pushback; yet, many of them still wrote of their empowerment, unity, and celebration. #brelfie, as a form of hashtag activism, lands in this area of controversy. While the mothers claim it to be empowering, #brelfie is clearly becomes more complex as it unfolds before a public audience of strangers.

Some limitations of this study include the narrow scope of a 90-day sample, as well as the lack of image analysis involved. Similarly, choosing a later time period may have provided more content from non-news media posters, assuming this trend is still popular at this time. Radian6 is also limited to social media profiles which have “open” privacy settings, and therefore is somewhat limited in scope. Still, my sample exhibited a broad look at the specific discourses surrounding #brelfie, and illuminated its place in online and broader cultural body politics. As I have noted previously, #brelfie is a micro-discourse positioned in broader interrelated discourses of motherhood, breastfeeding taboo/s, and feminist activism. #brelfie is merely one specific form of online “lactivism,” yet it still illuminates three discursively embodied areas in important and significant ways. Mothers’ performance of #brelfies speaks to 1) the power of practicing taboos, 2) the impact of online talk (both for and against cultural norms), and 3) the efficacy of social networking as support (and counter-comment). Other practices (both online and off) accomplish similar goals, but #brelfie responds to these particular norms in a significant and perhaps entirely unique ways.

While I was tempted to include visual analyses of #brelfies in this project, the online talk surrounding #brelfie better demonstrates its broader cultural meanings and implications. In focusing on the text associated with #brelfies, rather than the images themselves, I avoided the practice of possibly rushing to the same conclusions as the aforementioned news sources, which dismissively labeled #brelfies as “obscene.” A future study might expand this point and consider the images in relation to the discourse surrounding #brelfie. Future studies might also look more carefully at celebrity involvement in #brelfies, which seems to play a significant role. In addition, the intriguing point about the mothers who allegedly felt left out by #brelfie deserve a closer look. It remains to be seen whether #brelfies will have a lasting significance, as well as their impact on cultural beliefs about femininity and motherhood. The test of time will reveal the extent to which #brelfie impacts body politics, hashtag activism, and public motherhood practices.

Alyssa Milano (2015) wrote in an online contribution to *Time* magazine about her concerns with other activist movements displaying the feminine breast (such as the #freethenipple campaign). Milano worries that these

campaigns contribute to taboos rather than combat them, as they still display the breast in a sexualized way (Milano, 2015). She wrote, in part, that:

Normalizing breastfeeding will be a lot more effective in advancing women's issues and desexualizing breasts... [as] their main purpose is to feed another human. And I think that's way more special—and more relevant to humanity—than being allowed to go topless in Times Square. (Milano, 2015)

Milano, thus, contends that nursing is the most important and, perhaps, only viable context in which to bare the female breast. Her argument, as well as the overall controversy surrounding #brelfies, illustrates the cultural difficulties concerning mother's breasts, their purpose, and the appropriate context of their display. #brelfie will continue to be a controversial topic as long as the functionality of breasts is in question, since #brelfies bare the female breast in a way that bucks many cultural expectations. The #brelfie movement might even be unique, as it provides a nuanced and specific way of displaying the female breast for reasons rooted in motherhood and femininity, rather than for generalized empowerment. Perhaps this uniqueness alone renders #brelfie a crucial consideration, both in scholarly work and as a form of online activism. I suggest that mothers are the first and best authorities on the purpose, function, and meanings of #brelfies, as well as breastfeeding in general. Since many mothers declare #brelfies to be personally empowering, I will defer to their judgement.

## Conclusion

#brelfie has implications in social media research, as it explores a phenomenon that is sensational and has evidenced a (potentially) brief but powerful online surge. #brelfie is a form of activism that is arguably more important, necessary, and effective than most; and yet, it has received significant backlash. As several mothers noted, posting a #brelfie embattles a specifically objectifying taboo in Western culture and, for them, is a form of feminist empowerment. #brelfie discourse illuminates how women's breasts remain at the center of important societal beliefs surrounding the display and function of women's bodies, as well as signal a gendered cultural double standard. While these mothers attempt to push back against cultural taboos through the practice of taking and sharing #brelfies, online users, as well as news sources, continuously police this progress through discursively retaliatory means.

When mothers post a #brelfie, they are engaging in a specific kind of activism. They simultaneously attempt to break taboos and connect with others, making #brelfie a significant and meaningful kind of practice. However, the personal meanings #brelfies hold for the mothers is only one side of the question. Clearly, #brelfie is one more instance in which societal norms re-solidify the objectification and gendered double standards

consistent throughout Western culture. While breastfeeding mothers have been a common subject in artwork for centuries, and public breastfeeding is supposedly less stigmatized today, #brelfie discourses demonstrate that some of contemporary society still censor this self-portraiture of breastfeeding through online talk. As such, Western society consistently exploits sexualized images of the female breast for commercial use, and it also sometimes shames women who celebrate motherhood through posting a #brelfie. Even if #brelfie is a short-lived phenomenon, I have hope that its existence may lead to other forms of online “lactivism,” as #brelfies illuminate the long-lasting ability of embodied motherhood to unite and empower.

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