

# Bare Flesh and Sticky Milk: An Affective Conflict Over Public Breastfeeding

Mari Lehto 

Social Media + Society  
October–December 2019: 1–10  
© The Author(s) 2019  
Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/2056305119881696  
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms  


## Abstract

On New Year's Day 2016, a photograph of a breastfeeding woman taken by a Finnish celebrity sparked a social media debate over mothers nursing in public. By analyzing Instagram posts and a discussion forum thread, this article explores the affective body politics involved in this short-lived yet intense social media debate. It examines the power of hashtags and images in mobilizing motherhood as a site of political agency. Concurrently, it investigates how social media users negotiated the appropriate public presentations of the female body and how the celebrity's gayness became an object of negative affect. The analysis of the incident makes visible how social norms concerning motherhood and heteronormativity are articulated in social media. It also demonstrates how affect sticks to images, texts, and bodies and becomes a binding force in social media discussions concerning them. The article argues that Instagram's hashtag practices facilitated affective engagement for those following #teriniitti. It further argues that the affective dynamics of the case demonstrate how affective intensities stick on gay bodies and lactating bodies as objects of disgust, fascination, and desire.

## Keywords

social media, breastfeeding, hashtags, affect, sexuality

On 1 January 2016, Finnish celebrity fashion stylist and television presenter Teri Niitti took a photograph of a woman breastfeeding on a Finnair flight as it prepared for takeoff. He then posted it on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter with the following hashtags: #breast, #breastfeeding, #mothers, #publicbreastfeeding, #opinion, #decency, #firstclass, #businessclass, #finnair, #feelfinnair, #newyork, #mothers, and #scarf. In the caption,<sup>1</sup> he asked women to cover up when breastfeeding in public:

I know I am going to raise hell with this post but would it be too much to ask for mothers breastfeeding in public to cover the activity with a scarf?

While Niitti flew from Helsinki to New York, the post attracted a lot of negative attention. It was shared again and again in social media, and relatively quickly the situation escalated to personal attacks against Niitti. The Finnish evening paper *Iltalehti*<sup>2</sup> was the first to report on the situation, and later the same evening Finnair issued a statement<sup>3</sup> declaring that on their flights everyone should be able to breastfeed freely. During the next 48 hr, the incident became national news.<sup>4</sup> Upon landing, and once he became aware of the controversy he had caused, Niitti deleted the post and made his Instagram account private. He later apologized for his lack of

judgment, but over the next few days the post caused an uproar and led to heated conversations all over social media.

Drawing on a feminist scholar Sara Ahmed's (2004) notion of sticky and circulating emotions and media studies scholar Susanna Paasonen's (2015) work on intensity and stickiness of online discussions, this article analyzes this highly intense social media debate. In particular, the affective dynamics of the incident—the criticism of breastfeeding in public and its immediate aftermath—are explored by mainly focusing on the period of 1–4 January 2016 during which the incident gathered the most attention. The article considers the power of hashtags and images when motherhood is mobilized as a site of political agency and investigates how social media users negotiate appropriate public presentations of the female body. Concurrently, it examines how Teri Niitti's sexuality became an object of negative affect. The case contributes to existing social media research by investigating the role of mediated feelings of connectedness and the use of hashtags in a debate that was strongly

University of Turku, Finland

## Corresponding Author:

Mari Lehto, Department of Media studies, University of Turku, FI-20014 Turku, Finland.  
Email: mari.t.lehto@utu.fi



driven by shared outrage. Simultaneously, it offers an opportunity to examine how certain bodies are subjects to sustained scrutiny and how hierarchical lines are drawn between them. Following Ahmed (2004b, 2010), I do not differentiate affect from emotion but instead see them as interlacing and sticking together in day-to-day encounters. That is, I emphasize the social qualities of emotions and consider affect to be a bodily intensity that is born and lived in encounters with the world (Ahmed, 2004b, 2010). Taking into consideration that, on the level of experience, affective reactions cannot be distinguished from memories, values, and experiences and that my study focuses on social media, I note that there is always mediation involved (Hemmings, 2005; Koivunen, 2010; Paasonen, 2011; Sundén, 2010).

The case of Teri Niitti demonstrates how affect sticks to images, texts, and bodies and becomes a binding force in social media responses to them. I argue that it was the hashtag practices of expression on Instagram that facilitated affective engagement for participants following #teriniitti. Drawing on Ahmed (2004b) and Paasonen (2015), I further argue that the affective dynamics of the case demonstrate how affective intensities stick on gay bodies and lactating bodies as objects of disgust, fascination, and desire.

In what follows, I first start by zooming in on the incident through a study of photographs of breastfeeding on Instagram organized around and making use of the hashtag #teriniitti. To trace how affect moved through and across social media platforms and created dynamic connections between bodies, I then zoom out to analyze the affective dynamics of a single thread featured on a Finnish discussion forum, *Vauva.fi* (English: *baby.fi*), which, despite its name, is popular among diverse audiences.

## Hashtag Takeover

At the time of the incident, despite having appeared on television and print media, Teri Niitti's celebrity status in Finland was not particularly high. He had around 2,000 Facebook friends and approximately 500 followers. On Twitter, he was followed by 800 people, and on Instagram he had 1,500 followers (Nousiainen, 2016). It is possible that by using a hashtag like #publicbreastfeeding, Niitti caught the attention of audiences who would normally not encounter him on social media. In 2016, however, it was not possible to follow specific hashtags on Instagram, so #publicbreastfeeding alone would not have been enough to capture the attention of a significant number of people. The defining moment was perhaps a discussion on the incident starting in the closed Facebook group of the Finnish Association for Breastfeeding Support. According to Finnish evening paper *Itälehti*, this is where the idea of a "hashtag takeover" was first conceived (Korpela, 2016). Mothers and "lactivists"<sup>5</sup> started to post pictures of nursing women on Instagram with the hashtags #teriniitti, #teriniittistyling, and #coveryourselfteriniitti accompanied by tags like #normalizebreastfeeding as a form

of protest. As a result, a search for Niitti's name yielded a seemingly endless stream of pictures of breastfeeding, rather than his own posts or photos of his work. New Year's Day 2016 was also a slow news day. Due to the lack of more substantial topics, newspapers picked up on the conversation and the discussion began to resonate and amplify across a larger audience. Some people responded directly to Niitti, but many started their own discussion threads on Facebook, Twitter, and a number of online discussion forums.

In this section, I concentrate on the waves of resistance that oscillated around the hashtag #teriniitti on Instagram. I have utilized content analysis to explore the pictures and their captions shared between 1 and 4 January to understand both the content and the logic of protest. I focus on public content uploaded to Instagram during the initial and most active 4 days of the social media storm<sup>6</sup> by examining 324 posts that in one way or another comment on Niitti's original post. This excludes not only the images posted after this time period but also the cases in which the hashtag was later added to photos of nursing uploaded prior to the incident. This enables an exploration of how hashtag practices on Instagram facilitated affective engagement for participants who were drawn into the #teriniitti discussion.

The affective waves of resentment fluctuating around #teriniitti on Instagram were activated, and for a while sustained, by public displays of feeling. Despite being short-lived and fragmented, #teriniitti was quite efficient in its ability to claim space and promote public breastfeeding. I suggest that the connective practices of social media involvement in the #teriniitti debate allowed the participants to comment on public breastfeeding through their connected, but at the same time individual, positions (see also Papacharissi, 2015, p. 8). In this process, Instagram's hashtag function was essential.

The search conducted on 2 January 2018 using the hashtag #coveryourselfteriniitti (one of the hashtags invented to protest Niitti's position) resulted in 641 posts. #teriniitti delivered 1,848 posts. Most of the photos under this tag were obviously related to Niitti's work and life, but the top nine posts shown first on the page were still, 2 years after the controversy, pictures of breastfeeding women. The main reason for this is Niitti's untimely death in 2017. One year after weathering the storm, Niitti died of heart failure, and the debate remains one of the main things for which he is remembered in the general public. It is possible that some of the more critical statements relating to the 2016 case, possibly posted in the heat of the moment, may since have been deleted. Moreover, if the user account is set to private, posts will not appear publicly on the corresponding hashtag page, even if a hashtag was added.

Two hundred thirty-eight posts depicted mothers and/or children. They can be divided into four main types that in some cases overlap: breastfeeding selfies, breastfeeding portraits taken by another person, collages, and photos of children often taken before or after nursing. Most of the pictures

were photographs shot in everyday contexts and classifiable as snapshot photography (also Locatelli, 2017, p. 4; Tiidenberg, 2015, p. 1746). Many of the captions defended breastfeeding in public—but, regardless of this promotion, only a small minority of the photographs actually showed women nursing in public. There were few pictures taken, for example, at a supermarket or in a park. Instead, the majority seemed to have been shot in domestic settings. The majority of the photographs were close-ups of the baby's head and the mother's breast. Paradoxically, this type of visual presentation ends up underlining the intimate and private nature of breastfeeding.

Many captions for breastfeeding and baby photos were openly antagonistic. Niitti was told to feel ashamed of himself. He was scolded and cursed at. Most participants employed emotional language to emphasize their own reaction. For example, a young mother who posted a close-up of herself nursing wrote,

My blood is boiling. Now you @teriniitti got a quite a big group of women against you! Apparently, it is ok to dress women in revealing outfits, but public breastfeeding is not ok? I at least feed my child when and wherever the need comes, and I don't force anyone to watch. (170 likes)<sup>7</sup>

The comment was representative of many messages attached to the nursing photographs. It talked directly to Niitti, communicated irritation and anger, and defended public breastfeeding on a personal level. Like this one, many of the posts called out Niitti for what is seen as hypocrisy: One of the reoccurring criticisms pointed at Niitti was that in his work as a stylist he was promoting revealing fashions and sexualized images of women but reacted negatively at the sight of a maternal body.

Several users shared stories about their own experiences as nursing mothers. They underlined positive emotions connected to nursing and in many cases referred to Niitti only through hashtags. In some cases, the hashtags themselves were rather confrontational. #coveryourselfteriniitti was used a lot, as well as different variations of a hashtag in Finnish<sup>8</sup> that tells Niitti to pull a paper bag over his head. Emoticons, especially an angry face and a heart, were in use throughout the hashtag takeover to mediate affect (cf. Paasonen, 2015, p. 30). A lot of the women pointed out that they do not normally post nursing photos or speak out on social media but this incident simply “crossed the line.” Some mothers wrote about being shamed for nursing in public. Several women stated that they felt they had to take a stand because others had. Comments on the posts followed a similar line of emotional expression: Pictures were described as “beautiful” and “lovely,” and many heart emojis were in use. Meanwhile, Niitti continued to be simultaneously reprimanded as commentators expressed their disbelief and anger.

Eighty-six posts in my sample did not depict breastfeeding, per se. Rather, these posts—including memes, screenshots,

and pictures of Teri Niitti himself along with various jokes mocking or laughing at him or making fun of the incident in general—undoubtedly fanned the flames of the debate. Jodi Dean (2015) argues that social media users are largely driven by a search for intensity. Drawing on this, I suggest that the affective waves circulating around #teriniitti were sustained not only by online media content but also by affective intensity. This kind of affective attunement enabled people to “feel their way” into the debate and simultaneously to affectively attune with it (Papacharissi, 2014, pp. 4, 118). These waves pushing against Niitti were formed when individuals felt their own way into the event by contributing to a stream that blended emotion with anger, opinion, and amusement. The event connected strangers through a collective display of feeling, with the hashtag functioning as that which Nathan Rambukkana (2015) describes as “an affective amplifier” (p. 2).

Hashtagging has become the most popular way to categorize the information we upload on Instagram and Twitter. Rambukkana (2015, pp. 2-5) notes that hashtags resist any singular characterization and describes them as “technosocial events” that incorporate and bring together a network of human and nonhuman actors. They are also contextual metadata. Drawing on Papacharissi's (2014) discussion of affective Twitter publics, I argue that Instagram's hashtag practices facilitated the affective engagement of participants in connection with #teriniitti. First, if #publicbreastfeeding had caught the attention of some, then #teriniitti allowed participants to respond very quickly in relation to the event (see Bruns & Burgess, 2011). Tagging makes content searchable and enters it into the attention economy (Goldhaber, 1997; Marwick, 2015; Tiidenberg & Baym, 2017), and, as this case demonstrates, hashtags have the power to bring attention to and mobilize relatively large groups of people. Threads that were generated through the collaboratively discursive logic of the hashtag worked as affective mechanisms strengthening awareness of the feelings connected to #teriniitti (see Papacharissi, 2014, p. 118).

Second, the innovative use of hashtags enabled the participants in the protest to comment on a larger cultural atmosphere concerning female embodiment. Public images of naked and sexualized female bodies are routine in commercial Western media, yet photographs of lactating bodies can be provocative (Tyler, 2011, 2013, p. 212). As both personal and political acts, they provide an effective way to challenge media depictions of breasts and to defend nursing women's right to exist in public (Boon & Pentney, 2015, p. 1764). From this point of view, hijacking Niitti's hashtag, which had been known for presenting a certain type of content and turning it into a site of maternal embodiment, is a type of performance in and of itself (cf. Tiidenberg & Baym, 2017).

Third, and finally, the hashtag enabled a group of people unknown to one another to appear as a united front. Considering the extent and intensity of the debate, it is evident that emotion was already present at least among mothers of small babies. Feeding is arguably the most noticeably

moralized element of mothering (Faircloth, 2013), and breastfeeding is a common topic on parenting discussion forums and in mommy blogs. That said, it is also a highly contentious subject. These heated discussions often turn into polarized debates. Since hashtags allow messages to be both individual and collaborative, with #teriniitti, a unifying message was not necessary. The hashtag itself said it all (see Antonakis-Nashif, 2015, p. 105).

In the case of #teriniitti, Instagram's connective practices and hashtag function were vital to providing a platform and tools for women—unknown to each other—to share individual, personal stories. The representations, information sharing, and conversational practices that characterized the #teriniitti protest and gave it form were shaped by a variety of structural forces operating within and outside the debate (see Papacharissi, 2014, p. 67). By 2 January, the new content posted under #teriniitti and #teriniittistyling had attracted the attention of Finnish print media. The leading Finnish newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, featured the following headline: “A celebrity disapproved of breastfeeding on the airplane, social media flooded with nursing images” (Kokko, 2016). The evening papers *Ilta-Sanomat* and *Iltalehti* had already covered the outrage directed against Niitti on Twitter and Facebook the previous night. Now, they followed up on the story by interviewing women taking part in the Instagram protest. As the news circulated, this widespread attention attracted new participants to the conversation (see also Paasonen, 2015). As a result, the protest received recognition but simultaneously diverged into new paths and became more fragmented. Next, I will turn my attention to the affective dynamics of a single discussion forum thread on the topic of Teri Niitti.

## Invitation to Shame

Although the protest on Instagram predominantly involved mothers taking a stand in favor of public breastfeeding, the discussion elsewhere flowed more freely in different directions. In the following sections, I focus on the conversation held on the discussion forum Vauva.fi (baby.fi). My analysis speaks to how the various affective discourses in social media construct the “other.” In other words, it demonstrates the way that emotions create connections between bodies and also define who or what does not belong. The Vauva.fi thread's angry, critical, sarcastic, and provocative expressions show how emotional responses align subjects with and against others (see Ahmed, 2004a, p. 32; Rossi, 2010, p. 88).

Launched in 1998, Vauva.fi is one of the biggest lifestyle sites in Finland. The main site covers topics mainly connected to pregnancy, children, and families and also to relationships, entertainment, work, and health (SanomaView, 2015). The site's discussion forum enjoys success among a variety of audiences, and the diversity of the participants is especially evident in its “open topic” section. The section is particularly known for its often-colorful discussion threads

that every now and then get picked up by the evening papers<sup>9</sup> (Vaahensalo, 2018). According to Vaahensalo (2018, p. 16), in Finland the forum is commonly recognized as a site where celebrities and their actions are slandered and ridiculed.

I zoom in more closely on the longest conversation thread covering the incident. From the data itself, it is not possible to uncover the motives behind the anonymous posts, but the fact that something is being said on one of the country's biggest online discussion forums is already pertinent to this study. The data gathered cover the entire discussion thread available at the time it was archived, consisting of 370 comments.<sup>10</sup> The data are freely available in the public domain and the commentators are anonymous. I have archived the thread and translated the selected quotations from Finnish into English. I have then employed thematic analysis to characterize the nature of the comments and to analyze how affect is expressed in an anonymous discussion thread concerning Niitti and public breastfeeding. I focus on two main themes: the affective responses that addressed appropriate public presentations of the female body, and a cluster of negative affect that was directed toward and was attached to Teri Niitti.

Concurrently, I explore the affective dynamics of the incident to understand how its intensity oscillated and changed. According to Ahmed (2004b, p. 45), signs gain more affective value the more they circulate. Circulation, in other words, increases the affective value of objects as it accumulates and resonates in and through communication (Paasonen, 2015, p. 28). For Ahmed (2004b, pp. 90-92), the accumulation of affective value is a form of stickiness that depends on historical associations between bodies, objects, and signs. To consider the affective dynamics of the thread and to account for the stickiness of individual comments, I pay particular attention to the platform's upvoting and downvoting features by examining which comments received special attention and how discussion participants responded to one another. It is important to note that the dynamics of online debate tie into the particular affordances of the platforms in question (Paasonen, 2015, p. 19). Vauva.fi fans the flames of heated discussion threads by picking up the most active ones on its main page where they emerge under a headline “The most popular” with a little flame sign next to each especially active topic.

Conversation pertaining to the incident started on Vauva.fi on the evening of 1 January (Nousiainen, 2016). The opening post studied here was published in the open topic section at 7.45 p.m. Its subject read, “Oh Teri Niitti, what did you do . . .” and continued with the following message: “. . .when you went and photographed a nursing mother on a flight and then wallowed in it on Facebook and Instagram? Shame on you.” The replies started pouring in within minutes and the intensity of the discussion remained high during the first 2 days of the thread's lifespan. Three hundred seventy comments in a single thread speak of a lot of activity, yet the flurry of responses is also evident in the swift exchange of messages. The first 109 comments were posted between 7.45

and 11.11 p.m. the first evening. The activity slowed down during the night to just six posts and resumed the next morning at 7:38 a.m. The last comment of the second day (comment number 329) was posted at 11.56 p.m. The next morning the conversation was still ongoing (28 comments between 7.51 and 12.23 a.m.), after which the thread slowed down. The thread attracted a few more posts over the spring and then finally came full circle with a singular comment in 2017, when a commentator—referring to Niitti's death<sup>11</sup>—told the participants of the thread to be ashamed.

The opening comment in thread, which was upvoted 457 times and received 53 downvotes, set the tone by holding Niitti accountable for taking a picture of a stranger's breast without permission. By telling Niitti to be ashamed, it simultaneously employed the mobilizing power of shame by inviting others to shame him for his actions. That is to say, in digital media inflammatory posts have come to stand in for invitations to join in, and if aggression is met with approval by other users, it can escalate into public online shaming (e.g., Rösner & Krämer, 2016). As I will later demonstrate, shaming deployed a language of disgust, contempt, and inappropriateness (cf. Every, 2013, p. 674). Reflective of the opening post, the majority of the feelings were negative, expressing indignation, disagreement, disgust, sarcasm, and provocation. The *Vauva.fi* thread turned sticky fast as anonymous posts began to circulate affect through recognizable representations, many of which revolved around the (lactating) female body. These posts reflect the gendered nature of body shaming and rather conventional assessments of maternal breastfeeding.

The ideological and political implications of breastfeeding have long been the focus of feminist scholarly attention (Blum, 1999; Boon & Pentney, 2015; Hausman, 2003; Stearns, 1999). I am interested in the expressions of affect that circulated around lactating bodies as commentators negotiated suitable public presentations of the female body. In the recent years, there have been several (social media) debates concerning public breastfeeding. In 2012, a group of mothers protested outside Facebook's offices around the world, accusing the social network of repeatedly taking down photos that show mothers breastfeeding their babies (Conley, 2012). In 2015, CNN reported on mothers tweeting out their complaints on numerous instances in which airline employees had interfered with breastfeeding or pumping (Hetter, 2015). In Finland, due to an extensive maternity and child health care system, women can choose long-term nursing without having to worry about losing their jobs, for example. Despite that, and despite how heavily breastfeeding is promoted in Finland, social attitudes on the practice of public nursing vary widely. A representative of the Green Party made headlines in 1995 for nursing in parliament, but breastfeeding in public is still often frowned upon. In 2017, a Finnish gastro pub attracted a lot of negative attention when a customer posted on social media about being asked to breastfeed in a bathroom.

The debate on whether public breastfeeding is acceptable was an expected main theme of the thread. In her study of Finnish mothers who have breastfed extendedly (in the Finnish context, this means for more than 1 year), Jenny Säilävaara (2016) found that some mothers choose to breastfeed in public despite the possibility of negative reactions, whereas others feel that they need to perform the act in secret. The argument that nursing is a private matter reflects the feelings of many commentators on *Vauva.fi*, who express anti-public breastfeeding attitudes and frame public nursing as provocative and rude (see also Grant, 2016). These attitudes intertwine with a reoccurring theme in the thread: manifestations of disgust. The female body in contemporary Western society is controlled and contained, even as it is simultaneously displayed (Bordo, 1993). The lactating body defies women's corporeal containment as breasts ache, swell, leak, and erupt (Boon & Pentney, 2015, p. 1761). The "general unease with the lactating body" (Rose, 2012, 49) marginalizes breastfeeding as the "ultimate private act" (Duvall, 2015, p. 328). The discomfort manifested itself in the following comment in which breastfeeding was compared with other bodily functions and therefore framed as private:

Yeah, yeah, we know that it is natural, normal and WOMEN have a right! So is farting, public urinating, digging your nose and ears, burping, making smacking noises while eating, etc., but most of us try to avoid them because we find them embarrassing. (34 upvotes/237 downvotes)

Labeling something as disgusting is an effective way to stop people from breaking social norms. Yet, the comment here gathered a large number of downvotes, which shows the rather obvious fact that that in social media the attention is not always positive. The reaction reflects not just the attitudes on the larger issue of breastfeeding in public but also demonstrates that even though something is perceived as disgusting, it nevertheless grabs our attention (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 86). The author of the comment recited a list of bodily functions generally considered unpleasant and compared them with feeding. Citing Ahmed (2004b), "The fear of contamination that provokes the nausea of disgust reactions hence makes food the very 'stuff' of disgust" (p. 83).

Looking at the votes and responses in general reveals a fascination with the sexual and the intimate. The stickiest comments were often those that were linked to sexuality or, in many cases, contained obscene language. The idea that mothers intentionally expose their breasts to attract attention was brought up in several comments opposing public breastfeeding. In her analysis of online comments relating to a protest supporting women's right to breastfeed in public in the United Kingdom, Aimee Grant (2016) found that the undesirability of public breastfeeding was inherently linked to sexuality, and women who breastfed in public were viewed as exhibitionists. This is visible in my data as well. The following comment reflects how women are expected

to manage the scrutiny of their breasts by striking an appropriate balance between attractiveness and respectability (Blum, 1999; Carter, 1995; Klepp & Storm-Mathisen, 2005; Wall, 2001). According to this commentator, by breastfeeding in public, women invite men to stare:

For example, subconsciously the only point of mothers' breastfeeding photos in social media is to present breasts publicly because due to the baby excuse, the permission is given. Apparently, women don't take into consideration the pervs jerking off behind screens, for sure there are more of them for every picture than admiring grandmothers. I just saw a woman breastfeeding on a shopping mall bench and there was a man staring with a hand in his pants. I didn't bother to say anything, I was just grinning by myself—it's your own choice if you want to expose yourself and your child to all kinds of perverts just because of your own pride. (10 upvotes/64 downvotes)

The rather contradictory claim here was that women can never tell which man they will cause to lose control but that it is nevertheless their responsibility to not invite this kind of attention. Within this context, women's breasts are seen as primarily sexual objects, infant feeding being a secondary function (Grant, 2016, p. 55; Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2006). This transparently provocative statement was also one of the sticky nodes of the thread. Despite failing to collect especially large number of up- or downvotes, the comment received several irritated responses from commentators, expressing their disbelief or calling the author "unstable" (44 upvotes/2 downvotes), among other things.

The anti-public breastfeeding comments were fairly consistently voted down and challenged, and the majority of the commentators in the Vauva.fi discussion thread can be characterized as pro-public breastfeeding. These commentators saw nursing as a natural part of life, stressed that babies need to eat, and defended nursing women's right to exist in public. The double standard, however, remained in many of these statements as well. For example, consider this comment that received the most upvotes in the whole thread:

Before I went to see the photo, I thought that some mom is there with both boobs out and a baby hanging on to one udder or something like that, really revealing (having seen that, too). But there is just a baby's head, no boob at all?! How can you get so bothered that you have to do a public post? It's your own problem if you needed to stare when the boob was dug out. Welcome to the year 2016 when it's still ok to walk around with your boobs out in some revealing top (and post it filtered on Instagram) but breastfeeding is an unpleasant sight. xD. (786 upvotes/21 downvotes)

The comment's popularity was undoubtedly linked to its position in the conversation. As the fifth comment from the top, it was situated on the first page of the thread. Still, it summarizes the reoccurring theme of the thread in which the

female body was both sexualized and naturalized. That is, it demonstrates the tension between sexualized breasts ("boobs out in some revealing top") and the naturalized maternal body ("baby hanging on to one udder") and defines breastfeeding as a gendered performance: Nursing is acceptable as long as it is a non-sexual act done *discretely*.

On 2 January, *Ilta-Sanomat* reported on the #teriniitti protest on Instagram and announced, "Nursing mothers tell Teri Niitti: 'The original purpose of breasts has been forgotten'" (Juuti, 2016). In a similar manner, many commentators on the Vauva.fi thread framed their criticism of Niitti by stating that he could not stand when female breasts were used for their "real purpose." For example,

On the catwalk you can of course show those boobs freely, but of course they shouldn't be used for what they were made for, should they? (248 upvotes/9 downvotes)

This reflects the dichotomous way that breasts are often discussed. Many criticisms of representations of women's bodies suggest that the sexualization of female body parts is always oppressive, ignoring those women who derive sexual pleasure from their breasts and those women who derive sexual pleasure from the breasts of other women. Often such criticism is used to promote breastfeeding. This discourse that frames breasts as purely functional fails to acknowledge the experience of those who cannot or choose not to breastfeed or who have no relationship with the practice whatsoever.

According to Ahmed (2004b), "disgust shapes the bodies of a community of the disgusted through how it sticks objects together" (p. 15). It is a sticky process that involves both desire for and repulsion by the object of disgust (Ahmed, 2004b). My analysis of the affective dynamics of the thread demonstrates how intensities stick on lactating bodies as objects of disgust and desire. However, breastfeeding women were not the only cluster of affective intensity in the debate. In next section, I will look more closely into how Teri Niitti's gayness became an object of negative affect.

## Disgusted (by) Gay Men

Although the incident served as a rallying point around which to defend nursing mothers' rights, it simultaneously demonstrated how in online debates rational argumentation and negotiation are often side-lined (cf. Paasonen, 2015, p. 33). As Papacharissi (2014, p. 94) points out, online technologies thrive on dissembling public and private boundaries, consequently affording opportunities for expression that may not only empower but also compromise individuals. The majority of the Vauva.fi thread comments were directed against Niitti. He was reprimanded for posting a picture of an intimate situation without permission, which was described, for example, as "distasteful" (169 upvotes/19 downvotes). His anti-breastfeeding attitude was criticized repeatedly, and

he was accused of being a “child hater” (152 upvotes/13 downvotes). In some cases, he was simply insulted. Affective value stuck onto him, and in this particular case, the discussion more or less resulted in an increased polarization of views and online public shaming (see also Paasonen, 2015). This kind of process of affective expression is typical of social media where the gathering and the behavior of audiences can be hard to predict. It also reflects how different groups have different access to public forms of culture (see Ahmed, 2004b, p. 151).

Online debates are both driven and animated by affect which circulates and sticks to certain comments and people (Tyler, 2006). Niitti was openly gay and known for his flashy fashion sense. Many commentators on the Vauva.fi thread directed their outrage directly toward him, and soon the affective dynamics of the thread started to circulate and intensify around the topic of his sexuality. The associations between gay men, misogyny, the superficial fashion world, and general frivolity formed one unit of stickiness. Niitti was characterized as a “disgusting faggot”<sup>12</sup> and accused of “living in ‘a rainbow bubble’” (80 upvotes/3 downvotes). His anti-breastfeeding message was repeatedly linked to his gayness, and many commentators projected values and assumptions onto him, following a cultural narrative according to which gay men are assumedly free from the norms and expectations of heteronormative existence (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 164). For example,

I guess if you are born gay and live in gay circles, in ‘me, me, me and my new lovely sandals and sequins’-world, it can make sense to do something like this. (169 upvotes/19 downvotes)

What pisses Teri off the most is that there is a mother and a child in first class. And she even dares to feed that child. There should have been Adam Lambert in first class who Teri could have enjoyed some sparkly and joined the mile-high club with. And not some damn sour milk smelling MOM! In first class and all! (246 upvotes/6 downvotes)

These generously upvoted comments reflect heterosexual prejudices against gay culture and the free pleasures and frivolous enjoyment it is assumed to represent (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 164; Bronski, 1998, p. 2). The second comment referred to Niitti’s original post that included the hashtag #firstclass. As some commentators feistily noted, Finnair does not have a first class but a business class. This mistake, and someone seeming to desire to advertise their travel class in the first place, evoked ridicule of his pretentiousness and subject Niitti to accusations of being divorced from reality.

Gay men are also often stereotyped as being more fashionable than straight men (Cotner & Burkley, 2013; Levina, Waldo, & Fitzgerald, 2000; Morrison & Bearden, 2007). Intertwined with this cultural script is the claim that gay men control the fashion industry and are therefore responsible for

perpetuating the thin body ideal that oppresses women. Niitti’s Instagram account featured models showing bare skin as well as pictures of himself wearing rather little. In the context of his remark on public breastfeeding, this public profile inspired indignation, ridicule, and led to the appearance of various memes popping up all over social media. The theme was addressed on Vauva.fi as well. Several commentators suspected that maternal embodiment was the main thing disturbing Niitti, for example, suggesting that gay men in the fashion industry want women to look like “teenage boys” and that they harbor “anti-women attitudes” (167 upvotes/370 downvotes). Niitti and gay men in general were also accused of more wide-ranging misogyny, and Niitti’s actions were, for instance, proclaimed as “hate speech” (44 upvotes/4 downvotes).

Although gays have been constructed as abject beings, they are simultaneously sources of curious speculation and fascination (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 162). Interestingly, some commentators were most concerned with what Niitti himself was suspected to have been appalled by. For instance, this comment took the narrative of the assumed misogyny of gay men further by speculating that because Niitti is gay, women’s bodies must disgust him:

My gay friend once told me that even the thought of having sex with a woman repulsed him because women’s parts are so sickeningly slimy and disgusting. He had once slept with a woman while drunk and had a hard time getting over the disgust. (159 upvotes/10 downvotes)

Heteronormativity and homophobia have effects on specific bodies and subjectivities. Affect sticks to gay bodies, and these bodies, following Ahmed (2004b), “take the shape of norms that are repeated over time and with force” (p. 145). The comments on the Vauva.fi thread exhibit an affective production of the figure of a shallow, disgusted, and misogynistic gay man that takes shape through its continuous circulation. The stickiness is demonstrated in the number of othering comments referring to Niitti’s gayness, as well as in the votes and emotional responses to these comments. Stickiness, Ahmed (2004b) writes, is an effect that depends on the history of contact: “when a body becomes an object of disgust, then the body becomes sticky” (p. 91). In other words, the body of Teri Niitti could not pass unnoticed: The stereotypes and insults circulating around him illustrate how gay bodies come to be saturated with affect and how shame sticks to gay bodies in order to other them. At the same time, this incident is representative of counter-shaming. Feelings of shame a can turn the shamed into the shamer when a sense of being shamed triggers the need to shame others in return (Sundén & Paasonen, 2018, p. 648). The Vauva.fi discussion on Teri Niitti makes evident the multitude of ways in which bodies are politicized as their gendered and sexualized features are woven into mediated discourses.

## Conclusion

In many ways, the fallout of Teri Niitti's post was a typical social media chain reaction in which publicity is difficult to control and where different discourses collide. The developments discussed in this article offer insight into the dynamics that shape the affective body politics of social media. By demonstrating how affect connects to different bodies and how the connective practices of social media enable participants to be simultaneously connected and unattached, the analysis enhances current understanding of the logics and cultural power of social media.

My analysis of the storm around Teri Niitti suggests that while the role of sociocultural context in shaping the outcome of digitally enabled expression and connection is essential (see Papacharissi, 2014, p. 122), social media discussions are mainly driven by affective intensities (Dean, 2015). As I have argued above, Instagram's hashtag practices accelerated the affective engagement of participants in the debate and illustrated the role of social media in fostering connective action. I suggest that the connective practices of social media involvement in the #teriniitti debate allowed the participants to comment on public breastfeeding through their simultaneously connected and individual positions. These viewpoints constructed collaborative but not collective narratives (see Ahmed, 2004b). Instagram's hashtag function was essential to this process. Concurrently, the discussion at Vauva.fi showed that as different social media sites feed one another and different audiences are invited to join the narrative, affective responses intensify and accumulate. As the anonymous Vauva.fi posts circulated affects through recognizable representations, the affective dynamics of the case made visible how intensities stick to both gay male and lactating female bodies as objects of disgust, fascination, and desire.

## Acknowledgements

The author thanks issue editors Professor Susanna Paasonen and FM Kaisu Hynnä for the feedback, anonymous reviewers, as well as the participants at the Media Studies research seminar at the University of Turku.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## ORCID iD

Mari Lehto  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1696-2063>

## Notes

1. Written in English.
2. <https://www.iltalehti.fi/viihde/a/2016010120897254>

3. The company also pointed out that photographing on its flights is allowed, but if the picture is to be published, it would be polite to ask the permission of the person in the photo.
4. Articles and opinion pieces appeared in print and on online platforms. For example, the leading Finnish newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, *The National Broadcasting Company YLE*, evening papers *Ilta-Sanomat* and *Ilta-alehti*, a women's magazine *Me Naiset*, and some regional newspapers covered the case.
5. A portmanteau to describe activists who promote breastfeeding.
6. Teri Niitti's Instagram account remains private, so it is not possible to account exactly what images were hashtagged with #teriniitti and how many likes did they usually get prior to the storm.
7. This caption is translated from Finnish to English.
8. #pussipäähänteriiniitti
9. Especially *Ilta-Sanomat* that is part of the same corporation as *Vauva*.
10. There is a discrepancy between the amount of comments available and the numbering: The final comment is marked as 396/370. This implies there was a larger set in total, but 26 comments have been removed by participants or possibly the moderators.
11. Finnish evening papers that had fanned the flames during the first days after the incident essentially framed Niitti's death as an outcome of vicious social media rage.
12. The particular comment insulting Niitti has been deleted. It shows only as quotation when another user is commenting on it. Therefore, the possible votes are no longer visible.

## References

- Ahmed, S. (2004a). Collective feelings. Or, the impressions left by others. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 21, 25–42.
- Ahmed, S. (2004b). *The cultural politics of emotion*. London, England: Routledge.
- Ahmed, S. (2010). Creating disturbance: Feminism, happiness and affective differences. In M. Liljeström & S. Paasonen (Eds.), *Working with affect in feminist readings: Disturbing differences* (pp. 33–46). London, England: Routledge.
- Antonakis-Nashif, A. (2015). Hashtagging the invisible: Bringing private experiences into public debate: An #outcry against sexism in Germany. In N. Rambukkana (Ed.), *Hashtag publics: The power and politics of discursive networks* (pp. 101–114). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Blum, L. (1999). *At the breast: Ideologies of motherhood and breastfeeding in the contemporary United States*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Boon, S., & Pentney, B. (2015). Virtual lactivism: Breastfeeding selfies and the performance of motherhood international. *Journal of Communication*, 9, 1759–1774.
- Bordo, S. (1993). *Unbearable weight: Feminism, Western culture, and the body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bronski, M. (1998). *The pleasure principle: Sex, backlash, and the struggle for gay freedom*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Bruns, A., & Burgess, J. (2011, August 25–27). The use of Twitter hashtags in the formation of ad hoc publics. Paper presented at the European Consortium for Political Research Conference, Reykjavik, Iceland. Retrieved from <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/46515/>

- Carter, P. (1995). *Feminism, breasts and breastfeeding*. Houndmills, UK: Macmillan.
- Conley, M. (2012, February 8). *Breastfeeding advocates protest Facebook with nurse-in*. Retrieved from <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/breastfeeding-advocates-hold-facebook-protest/story?id=15530012>
- Cotner, C., & Burkley, M. (2013). Queer eye for the straight guy: Sexual orientation and stereotype lift effects on performance in the fashion domain. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *60*, 1336–1348.
- Dean, J. (2015). Affect and drive. In K. Hillis, S. Paasonen, & M. Petit (Eds.), *Networked affect* (pp. 89–102). Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Duvall, S.-P. (2015). Not “simply the breast”: Media discourses of celebrity, breastfeeding and normalcy. *Feminist Media Studies*, *15*, 324–340.
- Every, D. (2013). “Shame on you”: The language, practice and consequences of shame and shaming in asylum seeker advocacy. *Discourse & Society*, *24*, 667–686. doi:10.1177/0957926513486223
- Faircloth, C. (2013). *Militant lactivism? Attachment parenting and intensive motherhood in the U.K. and France*. New York, NY: Berghahn Books.
- Goldhaber, M. H. (1997). The attention economy and the net. *First Monday*, *2*, 4–7. Retrieved from <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/519/440>
- Grant, A. (2016). “I . . . don’t want to see you flashing your bits around”: Exhibitionism, othering and good motherhood in perceptions of public breastfeeding. *Geoforum*, *71*, 52–61.
- Hausman, B. (2003). *Mother’s milk: Breastfeeding controversies in American culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hemmings, C. (2005). Invoking affect. Cultural theory and the ontological turn. *Cultural Studies*, *19*, 548–567.
- Hetter, K. (2015, March 13). *Breastfeeding mom says flight traveled to unfriendly skies*. Retrieved from <http://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/feat-united-airlines-breastfeeding-incident/index.html>
- Juuti, M. (2016, January 2). *Katso kuvat: Imettävät äidit vastaavat Teri Niitille—“Ollaan unohdettu tissien alkuperäinen tehtävä”* [Nursing mothers answer to Teri Niitti – “Original purpose of the boobs have been forgotten]. Retrieved from <https://www.is.fi/viihde/art-2000001060345.html>
- Klepp, I. G., & Storm-Mathisen, A. (2005). Reading fashion as age: Teenage girls’ and grown women’s accounts of clothing as body and social status. *Fashion Theory*, *9*, 323–342.
- Koivunen, A. (2010). An affective turn? Reimagining the subject of feminist theory. In M. Liljeström & S. Paasonen (Eds.), *Working with affect in feminist readings. Disturbing differences* (pp. 8–28). London, England: Routledge.
- Kokko, T. (2016, January 2). *Julkismies paheksui lentokoneessa imettämistä, sosiaalinen media täytyi imetyksuvista* [A celebrity disapproved of breastfeeding on the airplane, social media flooded with nursing images]. Retrieved from <https://www.hs.fi/kotimaa/art-2000002877742.html>
- Korpela, T. (2016, January 1). *Äideiltä vastaisku Teri Niitin mölättykselle—imetyskuvat leviävät somessa* [Mothers’ counterattack to Teri Niitti’s blurt – breastfeeding images are spreading in social media]. Retrieved from <https://www.iltalehti.fi/viihde/a/2016010220898427>
- Levina, M., Waldo, C. R., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (2000). We’re here, we’re queer, we’re on TV: The effects of visual media on heterosexuals’ attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *30*(4), 738–758. doi:10.1111/j.1559-1816.2000.tb02821
- Locatelli, E. (2017). Images of breastfeeding on Instagram: Self-representation, publicness, and privacy management. *Social Media + Society*, *3*(2), 1–14. doi:10.1177/2056305117707190
- Marwick, A. (2015). Instafame: Luxury selfies in the attention economy. *Public Culture*, *27*, 137–160.
- Morrison, T. G., & Bearden, A. G. (2007). The construction and validation of the Homopositivity Scale: An instrument of measuring endorsement of positive stereotypes about gay men. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *52*, 63–89. doi:10.1300/J082v52n03\_04
- Nousiainen, A. (2016, February 6). *Teri Niitti joutui kohun silmään: Kun some suuttuu, väkijoukko lynkaa ihmisen muutamassa tunnissa* [Teri Niitti was caught in an eye of a storm: When social media gets angry, the crowd lynches the person in a matter of hours]. Retrieved from <https://www.hs.fi/kuukausiliite/art-2000002884432.html>
- Paasonen, S. (2011). *Carnal resonance: Affect and online pornography*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Paasonen, S. (2015). A midsummer’s bonfire: Affective intensities of online debate. In K. Hillis, S. Paasonen, & M. Petit (Eds.), *Networked affect* (pp. 27–42). Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2014). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2015). Affective publics and structures of storytelling: Sentiment, events and mediality. *Information, Communication & Society*, *19*, 307–324. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2015.1109697
- Rambukkana, N. (2015). #Introduction: Hashtags as technosocial events. In N. Rambukkana (Ed.), *Hashtag publics: The power and politics of discursive networks* (pp. 1–12). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Rose, L. M. (2012). Legally public but privately practiced: Segregating the lactating body. *Health Communication*, *27*, 49–57.
- Rösner, L., & Krämer, N. (2016). Verbal venting in the social Web: Effects of anonymity and group norms on aggressive language use in online comments. *Social Media + Society*, *2*, 1–13. doi:10.1177/2056305116664220
- Rossi, L.-M. (2010). Daughters of privilege: Class, sexuality, affect and the Gilmore Girls. In M. Liljeström & S. Paasonen (Eds.), *Working with affect in feminist readings: Disturbing differences* (pp. 85–97). London, England: Routledge.
- Säilävaara, J. (2016). Imettämässä kaapissa: pitkään imettäneet äidit ja normatiiviset tilat [Breastfeeding in the closet: Long-term breastfeeding mothers and normative spaces]. *Sukupuolentutkimus*, *29*, 7–20.
- SanomaView. (2015). *This is why the community of Vauva is so important*. Retrieved from <http://www.sanomaview.com/en/inspiring-brands/case-this-is-why-the-community-of-vauva-is-so-important/>
- Stearns, C. (1999). Breastfeeding and the good maternal body. *Gender & Society*, *13*, 308–325. doi:10.1177/089124399013003003
- Sundén, J. (2010). A sense of play: Affect, emotion, and embodiment in World of Warcraft. In M. Liljeström & S. Paasonen (Eds.), *Working with affect in feminist readings: Disturbing differences* (pp. 45–57). London, England: Routledge.

- Sundén, J., & Paasonen, S. (2018). Shameless hags and tolerance whores: Feminist resistance and the affective circuits of online hate. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18, 643–656.
- Tiidenberg, K. (2015). Selfies—Odes to heteronormativity: Presentations of femininity in Russian-speaking pregnant women's Instagram accounts. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1746–1758.
- Tiidenberg, K., & Baym, N. K. (2017). Learn it, buy it, work it: Intensive pregnancy on Instagram. *Social Media + Society*, 3(1), 1–13.
- Tyler, I. (2006). Chav scum: The filthy politics of social class in contemporary Britain. *Journal of Media and Culture*, 9(5). Retrieved from <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0610/09-tyler.php>
- Tyler, I. (2011). Pregnant beauty: Maternal femininities under neoliberalism. In R. Gill & C. Scharff (Eds.), *New femininities: Postfeminism, neoliberalism and identity* (pp. 21–36). London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tyler, I. (2013). Naked protest: The maternal politics of citizenship and revolt. *Citizenship Studies*, 17, 211–226.
- Vaahensalo, E. (2018). Keskustelufoorumit mediainhokkeina—Suositut suomenkieliset keskustelufoorumit mediassa [Discussion forums as media dislikes – Popular Finnish discussion forums in the media]. *Inhokki—The Dislikey* [name of the special issue of the WiderScreen]. *WiderScreen*. Retrieved from <http://widerscreen.fi/numerot/2018-3/keskustelufoorumit-mediainhokkeina-suositut-suomenkieliset-keskustelufoorumit-mediassa/>
- Wall, G. (2001). Moral constructions of motherhood in breastfeeding discourse. *Gender & Society*, 15, 592–610.
- Ward, L. M., Merriwether, A., & Caruthers, A. (2006). Breasts are for men: Media, masculinity ideologies, and men's beliefs about women's bodies. *Sex Roles*, 55, 703–714.

### Author Biography

Mari Lehto (MSc, University of Tampere) is a doctoral candidate of media studies at the University of Turku (Finland). Her research interests include social media, digital cultures, and motherhood.