



Lesbian Poetics of Intimacy: A Study of Homoeroticism and Sexual Subjectivity on Instagram

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Abstract

The modern society of the twentieth century has vouched for a kind of exhilaration of lesbian subjective reflex with the hand of some professional female photographers. These female subjective expressions are enhanced to move into indubitable and subtle details with the advent of a technological boon: social media. Instagram is one of the digitally available visual media helping to communicate sexual and gender identities. It has an abundance of spectacles and firsthand expressions of LGBTQ experiences. This paper will examine the visual media, Instagram, and its relation to homoerotic subjectivities. It will explore the role of this kind of digital representation and visual codes in connection with lesbian desire, identity and intimacy. My study will delve deeper into the already 'visible' lesbians' bodily experiences on Instagram and explore the inevitable interaction between digital space, the female body, semiotics, feminism, and queer-subjectivity.

Keywords: female homoeroticism, psychoanalysis, feminism, photography, Instagram, visual semiotics.

Introduction

Female homoeroticism was an essential manifestation of the ancient social structure. They found expression through sculptures of vases, polychrome plates and other performative visuals in public surroundings. Due to religious, cultural and social prohibitions, female homosexuality failed to get a discursive place in dominant discourses after Sappho, Alcman and other unknown poets of the seventh century BCE. A later depiction of erotic desire between women began in the nineteenth century in the hands of painters and male illustrators, providing explicit visuals of naked lesbians but

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these are heavily burdened with the male point of view. Japanese erotic art is one of the supreme examples of these. In the modern technology of the digital era, lesbian erotic gets a new dimension at the hand of female photographers like Nancy Goldin, Tee A. Corinne and Judy Francesconi. They started to claim the subjective position of lesbians in their photographs on lesbian eroticism and lifestyle. Advanced technology helps minor sexualities to communicate their own identity by themselves on various platforms, digitally available to everybody. Instagram is one of those popular social media spaces which offer the virtual scope to generate firsthand queer experiences without the intervention of mainstream media and its reinterpretation of minorities on the ground of gender and sexuality. This undeniable scope of self-representation by lesbian women on Instagram shows up another segment of its artistic and aesthetic site of female vision, which altogether turns up a potentially political and poetical sight.

Against this backdrop, this paper attempts to examine this resourceful side of visual media, specifically Instagram and its relation to homoerotic subjectivities. It will explore the role of semiotics in this kind of digital representation in connection with lesbian desire, identity and intimacy. Further, it is to recognise lesbian poetics on the visual platform of Instagram. The paper incorporates the interplay of psychoanalytic French feminism and visual semiotics to critically observe and reinvent the philosophical possibilities behind the essential ontological enquiry into female sexuality/subjectivity.

Female Body and Sexual Visibility: Dominant Discourse on Sexuality

There is an egregious probability of sexual objectification when it comes to the visual/visibility of the female sexual self. Female homoeroticism is at stake in the dominant discursive field of visibility. It has undergone a potential paradoxical situation where, on the one hand, visual texts have been primordial and have presented a potential way of coming out of the closet. On the other hand, it relegates the female homosexual body to sexual exploitation and objectification to ascertain ideological catastrophe. This domain of argument on visibility/visual and its relation to identity and sexual difference foregrounds the psychoanalytic discourses. Sigmund

Freud propagated the theories of sexuality, prioritising the 'sight' in the enactment and formation of social identity, which assures a perpetual 'lack' of the female body. However, within the Lacanian system, this 'lack' is further engraved to recognise women as a mere sign of difference. The amalgamation of the symbolic order or language and sexuality flared the intellectual move to eradicate female subjectivity.

Rewriting of Female Body: A Feminist Discourse on Female Sexuality

Lacanian and Freudian theories of psychoanalysis have certain implications for future feminist critiques, regarded as post-structuralist and post-Lacanian feminist theories for having deconstructed and reinvestigated the female body within the frame of the unconscious. The two French feminist thinkers and theorists, Luce Irigaray and Helen Cixous, have approached the female body in intriguing ways. Irigaray critiques the fundamental pillars, castration, "penis envy", phallocentrism of Western psychoanalytic theory and describes feminine sexuality as fluid and polymorphous. Likewise, Helen Cixous challenges the representation of the female body and female sexuality in the dominant discourse of psychoanalysis as "dark continent" and rejuvenates the territory of self-exploration as "newly born woman". She talks about writing the body with the feminine libidinal economy. Thus, they differ from the historical and sociocultural representation of the female body and sexuality which is largely ruled by 'sight' and they communicate the female body and its qualities of 'tangibility' as a gateway to enter into the new realm of imagining female language for the upcoming discourse on female sexual realities at large.

Visual World of the Digital Era and Female Body

The contemporary era is largely governed by digitalisation and the increasingly indispensable Internet, along with its inseparable dimension of virtual entertainment, which gradually displaces the mainstream sources of entertainment at large. The world implies sight as a primary sense in the domain of communication and comprehension. The impeccable growth of AI contributes to this worldwide engagement in visual cues. The invention of mobile 4G

and faster internet access through smartphones has been largely responsible for turning visual media into a norm in communication. The widely used smartphones have simplified visual creation and online distribution to assert and flaunt self-representation. By the same token, it has brought back the effective play of phallic 'sight' in the public domain of comprehending the world around. This has also generated the primordial risk for women to become prey to patriarchal ideology and gendered ways of understanding the sexual body. The power of masculinity comes from the 'vision' which demarcates their sexual difference and generates their power while subordinating the female body (whose visibility confirms 'the lack'). Nonetheless, embarking on the other side of the same coin, the sight of the female body is indispensable in the representation of female sexuality to constitute an altogether new definition of 'sight' through 'tangibility'/ vision. Hence visual material is the ultimate source to resist and explore the new possible light of interpretation. This paradoxical situation has supplied the significant demand to investigate the possible involvement of the French feminist approach in soaring visual texts of social media by demarcating the 'newly born woman' in the new era of the twenty-first century.

Instagram: The Popular Photo-Sharing Social Media Platform

Now the truth is not unified: 'One' when it comes to sexuality and desire, but diverse and heterogeneous, enhanced and liberated through social media — Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etcetera. Reporter Sarah Frier in her book *No Filter: The Inside Story of Instagram*, writes, "If Facebook was about friendship, and Twitter was about opinions, Instagram was about experience...and *anyone* could be interested in anyone else's virtual experiences, anywhere in the world" (45). Visual texts, like photographs, are important as their coded reality differs from filmic reality. Instagram is a well-known photo-sharing application with exceptional quality for organising mobile photographs or short clips into one. Instagram is more suitable for consideration for two reasons. First, it prioritises the visual texts, and second, it is the platform of personal interpretation and representation of self and body, which might contribute to the storehouse of 'femaleness' through the visual representation of the lesbian female body. Thus, it becomes a significant and necessary

area to reinvestigate the contemporary visual appeal of the female body from different feminist angles to subvert the ideological interpretation.

Survey of Literature

Marika Skowronski and Robert Busching (2021), in their research article, have discussed the exposure of sexualised images to adolescent Instagram users and its effective influence on their self-objectification. Karina Sokolova, Hayer Kefi and Vincent Dutot (2022) have illuminated that “. . . highly visual social media platforms such as Instagram, Body image exposure has become a common practice” (1). Women's bodies, physical attractiveness and potential objectification, have become a natural and obvious phenomenon to Instagram users. Marika Tiggemann and Isabella Barbato (2018) have mentioned how Instagram images of women's bodies lead to Instagram imagery and body dissatisfaction in teenagers. Also, Francesca Guizzo (2021) has commenced with a similar social issue of Instagram sexualisation and participants' body dissatisfaction limited to a particular geographical space. Jessica Cwyner-hora (2016), in her thesis, sheds light on social media platforms like Instagram, which have enabled women to present themselves outside of any conventional and stereotypical gender normative criteria of feminine beauty by conducting a survey-based study. Sofia P. Calderia (2018) directed a case study of Marisa Papen and concluded that self-representation on Instagram can re-appropriate the normative gender role. While Paul Ayodele Onanuga (2022) talks about Black queer women on Instagram for the proliferation of their visibility on the ground of sexuality and gender, Stefanie Duguay (2019) has identified the tension between self-commodification and representation of sexual minorities. The existing research, publications and monographs have largely highlighted the social issues of female body exposure on Instagram and its effect on adolescents and teenagers and how it is enhancing body discrimination and dissatisfaction among the woman users. The survey of the available literature helped me to comprehend how Instagram has become sexualised and objectification has become a norm nowadays. Though literary critiques have delved deeper into the feminist perspective of looking into female body image on

Instagram as a step towards non-normative body representation, some articles have generated the risk of being re-appropriated into a normative gender role. Other research related to queer woman and Instagram have talked about how queer women are benefitting, economically and socially, by self-commodification through their Instagram accounts, how the platform is helping a black homosexual woman in their visibility, and some case study of lesbian athletes and their lifestyles has also been the subject of analysis. But they fail to address the female body of queer, lesbian women and their self-representation against the backdrop of erotic gesture and sexual subjectivity.

Research Questions

As the existing feminist scholarship and research is almost silent on the issue of female homoerotic subjectivity on the ground of lesbian poetics, the study wants to investigate and answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the forms and patterns of signs engaged in exhibiting the female homoerotic phenomena on popular lesbian Instagram accounts?

RQ2: How do they contribute to enriching the lesbian desire, intimacy and identity, breaking away from the frame of heteronormative sexualisation?

Research Methodology

The article has progressed with a qualitative study and observation of the visual content of select Instagram posts with the incorporation of the theoretical tools that subsume Helen Cixous' concept of 'female imaginary', 'écriture feminine', her influential views on 'castration'. On the other hand, I have also taken into consideration the premises given by Luce Irigaray in her work "This Sex Which Is Not One" (1977), *Speculum of Other Woman* (1974) and "When Our Lips Speak Together" (1980) to proliferate the understanding of female subjectivity and their sexual desire. The semiotic dimension will enable a deeper insight into the patterns and forms of lesbian sexual

self-expression and will help in decoding the photographs and their mise-en-scene into a meaningful rack.

Sample Selection

The efficacy of Social Networking sites is thwarted by the drawback of increasing threats like false information and increasing fake accounts on Instagram. As a matter of fact, to maintain the validity and avoid fake accounts, I have to conduct a purposive sampling method in the selection of Instagram pages by keeping in mind several numbers of factors such as the number of posts and their consistency, number of followers and following-follower relationship. I have chosen four lesbian Instagram handles - @sarah and kokebnesh, @janineandgen, @emxsofi, @julia and diana. These are some popularly followed lesbian accounts, with a minimum of fifteen thousand followers and up to ninety-six thousand followers. They are consistent in updating their self in this visual and graphic space. For this proposed study, I have adopted the 'stratified random sampling' method to choose the samples in which the select lesbian accounts' photographs are subdivided into two strata based on their contents for analysis. The two groups are one, showing no sexual explicitness or nudity of the lesbian body, and the second, showing physical and sexual assertiveness towards each other. Three representative photographs are identified and extracted from these respective strata for observation and analysis.

1. First Category: The Less Sexually Explicit Photographs

1.1. How the Vision is Embodied

There is a significant difference between Irigaray and the dominant discourse on vision, accentuated by Platonic philosophy. Vision is interdependent and circumscribed within the periphery of the seer and the object of sight. Irigaray has advocated for a Vision, liberating it from the restraint of sight to touch. She said in her book, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, "But of a vision in between the diurnal and the nocturnal in its touch" (153). Fig. 1 has generated that possible feminine vision. The image has framed two lesbians in a natural backdrop. The spectacular sight is evoked through the obscure natural background and the spotlight of the sun on their physique and

gestural expression. Their manipulative clothing strategy produces a mirror effect of reflecting each other. The natural light illuminates the frame, which is the source of the orange shade in the visual, providing smoothening effect on the skin. Hence, it contributes to conventional beauty and also subverted the feminine vision of touch. They are captured as embracing each other while one of them places her hand on her partner's chest. The posture and the sunlight interconnectedly constitute bodily closeness and assert their desire, passion and sexual engagement in the preferable background. In this particular image (Fig. 1), 'The light on the too close chests' conveys the symbolic signification of the metaphorical gateway to a certain resonant 'vision' through 'tangibility', which is prior to looking. 'Looking' is underestimated by their closed eyes. This vision is pre-symbolic and feminine. It has reinstated the 'female Imaginary'. By the same token, we can draw the sensual qualities of the image which is being produced by the proximity of skin. The two pairs of eyes are lined up in symmetrical order, and each is answering another's call of involvement. The sharp nose foregrounds erection and a medium to touch another woman. In that way, the 'vision' is multiplied, and these are embodied not by the eyes but by several 'touches' and 'touched'.



Fig. 1. Blissful Female Intimacy (Julia & Diana).

1.2. Renouncing Castration

Castration has been the centre of argument and one of the crucial phenomena often referred to in feminine discourse. In this regard,

Helen Cixous had a particular impact in acknowledging the importance of the female body and in resistance to the male power towards the female body. For Cixous, the female body is a medium of discourse. She asserts in her influential essay, "The Laugh of Medusa", that a woman could write or construct *Écriture Feminine* by writing in "white ink" (881). This analytic framework and Helen Cixous's notion of "writing in white ink" enable a woman to become a signifier (instead of a signifier of lack) of another woman on a metaphorical level "Woman must write woman" (887). This feminine writing mirrors her own body and sexuality. This precise demarcation of the feminine quest of writing has been used to communicate the textual strategies in the image (Fig. 2). The image has framed the private space, the bathroom, where the two female bodies are captured in a 'new' white bathrobe. The frame contains no dark side and is well illuminated with natural light and bright-colour preference. Their gesture appeals to playfulness, signified through their giggling eyes and smiling facial expressions. Further, this 'laughing face' of each woman could be regarded as an exercise of Cixous's rewriting of the myth 'Laugh of Medusa' as it holds the power to dismantle the male economy of Castration anxiety, looking straight to the 'phallic lens' without any guilt or shame. Thus, they accomplished the writing of a woman's body, desire and sexuality with the 'white ink', which is emphasised in both symbolical and metaphorical levels on the screen to generate the "new woman" (Cixous 878). Hence, this particular picture connotes a high resonance of power and authority, deflecting from the quite visible white bodies.



Fig. 2. Valentine Spa Day (Janine & Gen).

1.3. Redefines the 'Lack' of Female Body as 'Full'

Freudian conviction of the penis as the only sex organ presupposes that sexuality is controlled by men. This overvaluation of 'penis' and 'sight' as sexual is evident in his book *Sexuality and The Psychology of Love*, where he states that "they (girls) notice the penis of a brother or playmate, strikingly visible and of large proportions, at once recognise it as the superior counterpart of their own small and inconspicuous organ, and from that time forward fall victim to envy for the penis" (177). According to Helen Cixous, this exaggeration of male sexual supremacy has relegated a woman's life to the banks of 'lack'; an unexplored dark continent. She also indicates that women could challenge this 'truth' by breaking the dominant sexual codes. Against this backdrop, Fig. 3 has permitted several codes and signs, unlike the phallogentric order of reality, to strengthen body writing and enable women's bodies to be heard. The image (fig. 3) has configured two lesbian women sitting on the bank of a river, embracing each other with a 'cross-legged' posture. This 'cross-legged' visual reveals and conceals the 'dark continent' (the possible sight of uncanny/castration). Nevertheless, this conventional 'lack' turns out to be a source of strength as it mirrors the desire of another half (another woman's vagina). Facing each other's lack is a way to inscribe the moment of 'fullness' of female sexual possibility, which is implied by this particular lesbian posture. Thus, the lack is

deconstructed into 'fullness'. The dismal 'void' in between them seems to be the magnetic field, fluid, mobile and energetic. This sensual, energetic expression is engraved by the mise-en-scène; the water body ('Lake full of water' is a symbol of fluidity and femininity) and the reflection of red sunlight on the river bed constitutes the passionate flow of feminine fluidity. Hence, the image (Fig. 3) has penetrated the homoerotic essence of the female body, its passion and the eccentric nature of sexual expressions.

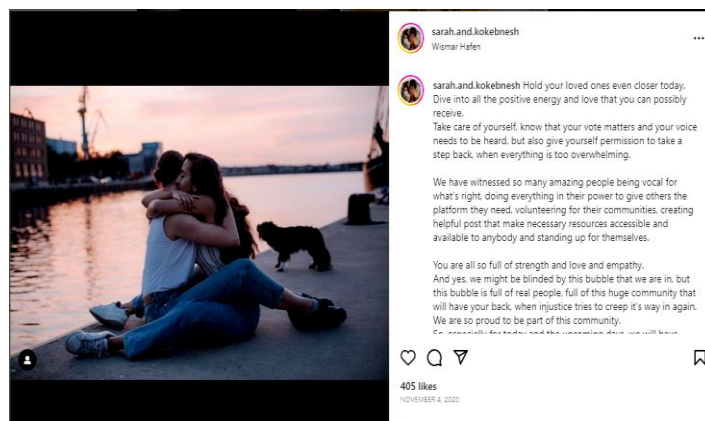


Fig. 3. Feminine Embrace (Sarah & Kokebnesh).

2. Second Category: Sexually Explicit Photographs

2.1. The Feminine Erogenous Zones

Luce Irigaray points out in her essay, "This Sex Which Is Not One", "But the woman has sex organs more or less everywhere. She finds pleasure almost anywhere" (28). Irigaray's premises on female sexual pleasure have impeccable space in the advocacy of the lesbian pleasure economy. The photograph (Fig. 4) has subscribed to that irreducible erotic sensory pleasure between two women. It has framed two female figures exposing their body in black swimsuits surrounded by water in a pool from head height. The Sunbeam is flashing in the background and on the faces of women, partially. The frame is shortened from the lower portion to feature the waist-up body intimacy against the natural backdrop with plenty of greenery and overemphasised by banana leaves hanging over the pool. In the

picture (Fig. 4), one woman is embracing another from the back, making one's skin touch the other's skin, and the facial emotion is implied through the close contact of their faces and their closed eyes. This exposure to the female body accounted for the feminine value of 'touch', which amplifies their embracing stature to the experience of pleasure hailed by their facial expression.

This inscribed phenomenon of female pleasure is empowered with the selection of lots of natural elements like water, trees and the ultimate blue sky, peeping in between the trees. Nature is closely linked to female sexuality beyond any phallic order of society. The nature of water is itself very intimate as it connects the bodies into it through its waves. It constantly touches the skin of each body into it and provides the sensation which reaches the depth of the inner realm of wonder. Water reflects auto-erotic vibrations that resemble female sexual 'multiplicity', which is magnified in lesbianism. Thus, water and its metaphorical relation with a woman's body on the base of 'touching from within' are interwoven in this particular picture. At the same time, the water body has symbolical significance in regard to women as both connotes fluidity itself.



Fig. 4. Water Intimacy (Sofi and Em).

2.2. Body as Political Weapon

The next photo (Fig. 5) from @sarah.and.kokebnesh, is a low-key image that frames two lesbians sitting face to face and kissing each other. The setting seems to be a platform, having some seating arrangements and big windows in the background. The background is out of focus with no props, which allows the focus only on the two figures. It also enforces the calmness of the place and the sexually active flow of energy of the female figure. The big iron bars, making a big cross in the background, presents a strong contrast with the partly red faces of lesbian, brushing their lips against each other with crossed hands, holding each other by the neckline. The material expression of the obscure big Cross is symbolic of the phallogocentric society and its heteronormative roles and regulation, which they leave behind. The red complexion of the two intimate faces implies their passion and love. Their crossed hands are displacing the Cross Bars of inhibition with acceptance of the love of the same. As Helen Cixous, in her essay "Laugh of Medusa", remarks: "To write and thus to forge for herself the antilogos weapon. To become *at will* the taker and initiator, for her own right, in every symbolic system, in every political process" (880). She emphasises the logic of female body speech to ground the feminine language; ". . . its with her body . . . the "logic" of her speech. Her flesh speaks true" (882). Hence, the entire self-representation of the lesbian in this picture is challenging the absolute power of society and establishes homoerotic values and love.



Fig. 5. Women Kissing Each Other (Sarah & Kokebnesh).

2.3. Diffusing the Binary Order

In *Speculum of Other Woman*, Irigaray talks about the concaved mirror or the curved mirror, which is different from the flat mirror. Unlike a flat mirror, which reflects the male economy of sameness, a curved mirror helps women with the looking glass to look at themselves to anticipate woman's self-representation. The final picture (Fig. 6) incorporates the curved mirror strategy. The picture represents two women lying on the bed in casual clothing from head height. The two figures facing each other, cross-legged and cross-arms make a rhythm of an illusion of sameness. But this sameness is neither 'one' nor 'two'. This value of such illusion is increased by their pose, posture and by their essential female body. It could be considered an aesthetic arrangement put forward. The texture of the picture is smoothened with the artificial lights of the bedroom and the sober colour preferences of the materials. The exposure of the orange tone constitutes the warmth that is enhanced by the comfort level implied by their relaxed bodies on the cosy bed. The meticulous detail of their hair, facial expression, and kinesics of hands provides its audience to breathe the same air as this picture. The sensuality is implied through the touch of the fingers of one of them on the other's neck. Their closed eyes and the closely de-touched lips make a void in between the lips, which they are filling with the breath of their sensually aroused body. The void is also inscribed metaphorically by the book cover containing a picture of two hands, close to holding tight. It is placed by the side of the head in a lateral position with the lips. This lateral rhythm of a void between the lips and between the hands in the cover is indeed their area of jouissance which they are living within the space of the frame. Thus, they are diffusing the binary of self-other and enabling the mirroring of looking into the same other by means of their desire and pleasure. This phenomenon makes every touch sexual regardless of the unitary idea of an erogenous zone.



Fig. 6. Cosy Bed Intimacy (Sofi and Em).

Conclusion

Regardless of the sexual explicitness, the self-representation of lesbian female bodies on Instagram has several common gestures when it comes to expressing feminine desire, intimacy and sexuality. Such forms include woman-to-woman interactions in which tangibility plays a vital role in communicating non-verbal emotions between the women. The body remains the leading head in speaking the unheard sensual commitments. Ordinary affairs of 'kissing' and 'embracing' are elevated into multi-layered and non-registered sign-system. Innovative, playful creative touch is accountable in each representative image of the study, among which closed eyes, cross-legged and cross-arms are recurrent phenomena in lesbian erotic expression. This has finely established the feminine economy of imaginary, 'woman imaginary'. By the same token, they have successfully accomplished female 'vision' through 'tangibility' which advanced a new realm of body-writing. On the other hand, these female homoerotic expressions contribute to redefining the female 'lack' into 'fullness'; the deep repository of potency. The binary distinction of self-other dissolves through the ultimate reflection of self into another woman. This has failed the phallogocentric order of the symbolic reality of sexuality and fostered the domain of female sexual fluidity. Thus, the study has constituted the poetics of female

homoerotics, encouraging the political and aesthetic dimension of the female body.

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