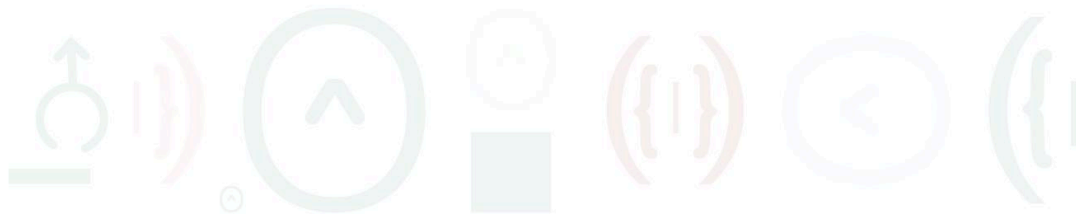




From Sharing to Silence:

Assessing Social Media Suppression of **SRHR Content in WANA**





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This research was conducted as part of the Masarouna project, a five-year program that mobilizes young people in the Middle East and North Africa to claim their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Researchers and policy analysts at SMEX explored SRHR within the scope of digital rights in the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region. They analyzed SRHR-related content moderation policies and practices on social media platforms Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube and provided recommendations based on these findings.

The researcher, who prefers to remain anonymous, took the lead in collecting data, conducting interviews, and writing the research.

Nathan Silber provided support in shaping the research question, methodology, and structure.

Marianne Rahmé, Dionysia Peppas, and Metehan Konur analyzed the SRHR-related policies on social media platforms.

Afef Abrougui provided mentorship and editorial support.

SMEX is a nonprofit dedicated to safeguarding human rights in digital spaces across West Asia and North Africa. We advocate for safe and uncensored access to the internet, mobile services, and networked spaces for people in the region and the diaspora. Recognizing the inseparable link between digital rights and human rights, SMEX focuses on the impact of technology on fundamental freedoms.

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List of key terms and definitions

- **Ads Manager** — A Meta tool for advertisers to create, run, and manage ads.
- **Ads reach** — The total number of individuals who see an ad.
- **Appeal** — Appeals include processes through which users request a formal change to a content moderation or account restriction decision made by a company.
- **Account restriction** — Limitation, suspension, deactivation, deletion, or removal of a specific user account or permissions on a user’s account.
- **Advertising content** — Any content that someone has paid a company to display to its users.
- **Advertising content policies** — Documents that outline a company’s rules governing what advertising content is permitted on the platform.
- **Content curation, recommendation, and/or ranking** — The use of algorithms, machine learning, and other automated decision-making technologies to manage, shape, and govern the flow of content and information on a platform, typically in a way that is personalized to each individual user.
- **Content moderation** — The process of monitoring and reviewing content generated by users to limit or remove content that does not comply with a platform’s standards and guidelines.
- **Content-moderation action** — Content-moderation actions are steps platforms take to restrict the visibility of content or the capabilities of a user account. They may be performed by humans, automated systems, or both.
- **Content restriction** — An action the platform takes that renders an instance of user-generated content invisible or less visible on the platform or service. This action could involve removing the content entirely or can take a less absolute form, such as hiding it from only certain users (e.g., inhabitants of some country or people under a certain age), limiting users’ ability to interact with it (e.g., making it impossible to “like”), or reducing the amount of amplification provided by the platform’s curation systems.
- **Flag** — The process of alerting a company that a piece of content or account may be in violation of the company’s rules or the signal that conveys this information to the company. This process can occur either within the platform or through an external process. Flaggers include users, algorithmic systems, company staff, governments, and other private entities.
- **LGBTQ+** — An abbreviation for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and/or questioning.” The “+” in LGBTQ+ is a way to include and recognize the many different identities that exist within the LGBTQ community beyond the traditional categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning.
- **Organic reach** — The number of people who viewed an unpaid social media post.



- **Pinkwashing** — The appropriation of LGBTQ+ causes (usually by a government or a company) as evidence of liberalism and democracy to distract from practices that are undemocratic, violent, or illiberal:
<https://femmagazine.com/feminism-101-what-is-pinkwashing/>
- **Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR)** — The Guttmacher-Lancet Commission provides the following definition: “Sexual and reproductive health is a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being in relation to all aspects of sexuality and reproduction, not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Therefore, a positive approach to sexuality and reproduction should recognize the part played by pleasurable sexual relationships, trust, and communication in promoting self-esteem and overall well-being. All individuals have a right to make decisions governing their bodies and to access services that support that right.”¹ For the purpose of this research, we also recognize the importance of access to information, freedom of expression, and access to the internet as enablers of SRHR.
- **Shadow banning** — The practice of restricting the visibility and reach of a user’s content visibility without their knowledge.
- **SRHR content** — All types of content, including posts, ads, videos, photos, etc., posted on platforms by anyone, including individuals, artists, activists, NGOs, health practitioners, etc., addressing sexual and reproductive health and rights, including but not limited to access to contraception, protection from sexually transmitted diseases, pleasurable sex, childbirth, and LGBTQ+ rights.
- **Terms of service** — This policy may also be called Terms of Use, Terms and Conditions, etc. The terms of service “often provide the necessary ground rules for how various online services should be used,” as stated by the EFF, and represent a legal agreement between the company and the user. Companies can take action against users and their content based on information in the terms of service².

¹ Guttmacher-Lancet Commission, “Accelerate Progress: Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights for All — Executive Summary,”

<https://www.guttmacher.org/guttmacher-lancet-commission/accelerate-progress-executive-summary>.

² Electronic Frontier Foundation, “Terms of (Ab)use,” <https://www.eff.org/issues/terms-of-abuse>



Executive summary

This research analyzes the content moderation policies and practices of Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube regarding content related to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region. The aim of this research is to establish, through policy analyses and interviews with SRHR-promoting organizations, how these platforms treat such content, both in theory and in practice, and what the impact of their policies is.

The data for this research, both qualitative and quantitative, was retrieved from desk research, policy analyses, and interviews with ten organizations and activists from WANA who have active experience in facing and dealing with content moderation of SRHR-related posts and ads. Through an adaptation of the [Ranking Digital Rights methodology](#), the content moderation policies of five social media platforms were carefully analyzed and compared. In addition, the interviews conducted in this research show the practical application and implications of these policies.

The outcomes of this research revealed a bleak picture. Platforms do not have SRHR-specific policies; instead, regulations are generally scattered around different policies, such as community guidelines and advertising policies. These regulations often fall under “adult” or “sexual” content, leaving room for poor and summary regulation. The restriction or removal of posts, ads, and accounts often happens on vague grounds, sometimes with illogical or irrelevant explanations, despite the content being innocuous and far from explicit in any form. Ad rejection, in particular, has proven to be a challenge for SRHR advocates, who engage in lengthy and time-consuming appeal processes, making self-censorship a common practice. Finally, Arabic content is met with harsher restrictions than similar English-language content.

It is worth mentioning that no cases were documented where a platform took action due to third-party demands, particularly government demands to restrict content and accounts violating local laws. Hence, this report focuses only on restrictions and actions platforms take to enforce their own policies and rules.



The report's first section provides an overview of platform content moderation practices and censorship of SRHR content in the region, including the types of restrictions organizations and activists face. The second section explores platforms' strict moderation of advertising content on sexual and reproductive health from regional organizations. In the third section, the research looks into how platforms contradict their own policies by restricting these organizations' or activists' informative and artistic content. In the fourth section, we assess the appeal mechanisms provided by platforms and how they are failing users in the region. Finally, the fifth section documents the censorship of regional queer voices and LGBTQ+ organizations by platforms.



Key findings

- We documented restrictions on all platforms that are the focus of the study (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X, and YouTube), in addition to LinkedIn, which Microsoft owns. Regarding Meta’s platforms, Instagram was responsible for the most restrictions, followed by Facebook. Five out of 10 interviewees said they faced 15 to 20 cases of restrictions in 2022 alone on both platforms.
- Restrictions imposed on organizations and content creators posting about SRHR included content takedowns, removal of accounts, ad rejection, and limited organic reach. Their content was restricted mainly for violating platform policies on “sexual” and “adult” content. The reasoning provided by platforms did not always make sense to interviewees who shared cases of innocuous content, such as medical or informative information, being removed by platforms because they were deemed “sexual” or “adult” content.
- In their policies, all platforms make exceptions for the publication of “sexual,” “adult,” and nude content if it falls under educational, medical, or artistic purposes. However, we documented several cases where platforms contradicted their own policies by removing SRHR-related content that is educational, artistic, etc.
- Ad rejection, in particular, has proven to be a challenge for SRHR advocates, preventing them from widely disseminating their content and essential information. Four out of 10 organizations and activists we interviewed said they lost access to one or more of their ad accounts. Most rejected ads get approved after review. However, interviewees criticized the appeal process, describing it as time-consuming, inefficient, and unpredictable.
- According to our policy analysis of five platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X, and YouTube), all platforms disclosed mechanisms for users to submit content moderation appeals. However, these mechanisms did not always cover all forms of content moderation actions. In the case of TikTok and X, very little information was provided on how they handle appeals. Meta was the most transparent about its process for reviewing appeals. Not a single platform disclosed the role of automation in reviewing appeals.



- Interviewees slammed platforms' content moderation practices as “biased” towards the WANA region and the Arabic language, arguing that platforms often fail to consider the context in which their content is published.

Recommendations to platforms

- **Conduct human rights impact audits.** Platforms should conduct human rights impact assessments on how their rules and policy enforcement impact sexual and reproductive health and rights, in addition to freedom of expression and access to information as enablers of SRHR. These assessments should investigate reports of bias toward the region and its languages and dialects, in addition to double standards in moderation of content dealing with female anatomy and sexual pleasure. These types of publications face much more severe moderation than other content, particularly when they use Arabic. They should also consider the role and shortcomings of AI in content moderation in languages spoken in the region.
- **Clarify the reasoning for restricting “adult” and “sexual” content.** Platforms should clearly specify which content, including advertising, is considered “sexual,” “adult,” or “inappropriate,” and they should refrain from using vague and broad interpretations for content and ads that also fall under these categories. We documented several cases where platforms cited this policy violation to restrict rather innocuous content.
- **Improve the training of content moderators in recognizing SRHR content and its local nuances.** Platforms should train their content moderators to recognize SRHR-related content that, instead, gets flagged as “adult” or “sexual” content. In addition, given the nuance of these cases, a higher percentage of human content moderators is required.
- **Enforce and improve exceptions for educational, medical, scientific, and artistic content.** Platforms should consistently enforce their own policies on granting exceptions for “nude,” “partially nude,” “adult,” or “sexual” content when posted for health, informative, artistic, and scientific reasons. They should also improve existing policies by steering away from vague language (e.g., “exceptions may be made...”) and granting more exceptions (for example, TikTok does not allow artistic exceptions).
- **Review advertising policies on sexual and reproductive health and well-being.** Platform advertising rules on these topics are very strict, banning, for example, advertisements that focus on “sexual pleasure” (Meta, TikTok) and “display excessive visible skin.” While it is understandable that some of this content needs to be restricted to minors, blanket



bans prevent the broader dissemination of essential information on SRHR. Platforms should also **clarify how they enforce their advertising rules**, particularly the role of automation in deciding whether an ad is rejected or taken down.

- **Clarify the legal basis for local ad restrictions.** Platforms place restrictions on advertising related to sexual and reproductive health and wellbeing in specific markets, such as non-prescription contraceptives (X) and “birth control or fertility products” (YouTube) for most markets in the WANA region. Platforms must specify the legal bases under which these are banned in each country. They should refrain from imposing generalized bans about what activities or content are acceptable in the region.
- **Be transparent about restrictions on visibility.** Platforms must be transparent about their practices of decreasing the visibility of content, ads, accounts, pages, etc. They should notify users when they take such actions, including their reasons, and provide avenues to appeal these restrictions.
- **Dedicate resources for fair and human rights-centered content moderation in the region.** Platforms should improve their content moderation in Arabic and its dialects and other languages spoken in WANA. They should ensure that their content moderation teams are adequately trained on human rights, linguistically diverse, and have the contextual knowledge needed for making human-rights-centered content moderation decisions. By deploying diverse training data sets, platforms should also ensure that their content moderation AI is adequately trained in the region’s languages, dialects, and contexts.
- **Improve content moderation appeal process.** Platforms should improve their content-moderation appeal mechanisms to cover all types of restrictions, including removal of content, ad rejections, suspension of accounts, pages, advertising accounts, and deliberate decisions to decrease the visibility of content and accounts. When a platform removes content using automation, users and advertisers should be able to appeal to a human moderator or team. Platforms should also specify their timeframes for notifying users of content moderation appeal decisions.
- **Take action against users abusing flagging mechanisms.** Platforms should address the practice whereby a group or groups of users massively report content or accounts they want to silence. Repeat abusers should be banned from reporting or flagging content in the future.



Introduction

According to the Guttmacher-Lancet Commission,³ sexual and reproductive health constitutes a “state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being concerning all aspects of sexuality and reproduction, not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity,” emphasizing that “achieving sexual and reproductive health relies on realizing sexual and reproductive rights.”⁴

In this sense, SRHR touches upon a range of issues that include, but are not limited to, sexual pleasure, protection from sexually transmitted diseases, access to contraception, gender equality, and the health of mothers and children in all the stages of their lives, as well as their roles in society. Due to various factors, such as socioeconomic status, societal norms, tradition, access to education, laws, and family environment, access to SRHR-related information and educational content can vary greatly. Many hindrances to these conditions exist in the WANA region, translating into a lack of access to abortion services and difficulty accessing contraceptives, among other challenges. When society, the educational system, health institutions, and other vital actors fail to provide adequate education on sexual and reproductive health, including guidance and debate, online content can, to an extent, be an essential and sometimes a life-saving resource. Content moderation policies from social media platforms do, however, represent an obstacle to the circulation of SRHR content, posing a serious challenge to rights activists, educators, experts, and NGOs active in the sector.

Platforms pledge to allow free expression in their content moderation policies and community guidelines while ensuring no harmful content is published and spread. While no provisions specifically address SRHR matters, incidents under this category are addressed through various policies. In WANA, however, policies on SRHR-related content (such as sexual education and ads for contraceptives) are enforced much more harshly, challenging the publishing and dissemination of this type of content via posts or ads.

This research, conducted by SMEX, presents the results of a thorough investigation into the policies and “community guidelines” of Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X. Its goal is to understand the censorship and content moderation of SRHR-related content on these platforms in the region. In addition to conducting policy analysis, the research addresses their concrete implementation, as the unwritten practices can differ from the written policies.

³ The Guttmacher-Lancet Commission is a collaborative initiative between The Lancet, one of the world's leading medical journals, and the Guttmacher Institute, aimed at providing comprehensive analysis and recommendations on global sexual and reproductive health and rights issues.

⁴ Guttmacher-Lancet Commission, “Accelerate Progress: Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights for All — Executive Summary,”

<https://www.guttmacher.org/guttmacher-lancet-commission/accelerate-progress-executive-summary>.



Methodology

The methodology for this research was tailored to the goals and objectives established in its early stages and adapted to the availability of partners and potential interviewees in dialogue with SMEX. After a stage of desk research and internal consultations, SMEX reached out to partner organizations and activists working on SRHR in the region (mainly Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, Egypt, and Tunisia) to participate in a survey intended to explore content moderation in the field of SRHR in WANA and its impacts. The survey included qualitative and quantitative questions specifically developed to understand both the characteristics and the far-reaching qualities of platform censorship of this type of content. Its first section covered information about the respondent. Secondly, the survey addressed censorship, asking organizations about instances where they faced content removal or restriction; thirdly, it asked organizations to provide details about these cases, such as on what platform they took place, what the reasons provided for it, whether or not there was an attempt to appeal, etc. Fifteen organizations and individuals who are fully or partially active in the field of SRHR in the WANA region filled out the survey, five of which said they had not faced previous cases of social media restrictions.

To collect further information and gain in-depth knowledge, we interviewed ten survey respondents in Arabic who said they had previously faced restrictions. The interviews aimed at getting more details of social media restriction cases provided in the survey as organizations and activists were able to elaborate more on their content creation, publishing, launching ads, and appeal process. At this stage, SMEX was able to get in touch with more organizations as the willingness to discuss the topic in a conversation seemed higher than through a survey. Cases of content restrictions collected through desk research were also included.

Six of those interviewed are members of officially registered organizations in the region or abroad and follow work approaches such as raising awareness, advocacy, media coverage, or capacity building. The remaining four interviewees are individuals who express their opinions through artwork and LGBTQ+ activism.

The content published by organizations and individual activists is mainly educational and generally covers a range of SRHR-related topics such as access to medical services, mental health, gender-based violence, relationships, circumcision, HIV, history of homosexual practices in the Arab world, etc.

During the interviews, content creators could recall cases of restrictions, provide screenshots, elaborate on their content creation process, and, most importantly, express their impressions over social media policies and standards, mainly Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X, and YouTube.



In parallel, SMEX's policy team conducted in-depth qualitative policy assessments of the leading social media platform policies to moderate SRHR content. The indicators used for these assessments, adapted to the research scope from the [Ranking Digital Rights methodology](#),⁵ were the following:

- Appeal mechanism: Whether the platform provides a clear and accessible remedy mechanism for users whose content is restricted.
- The rules of the platform in relation to SRHR content and how they enforce them, including the role of algorithms and flagging mechanisms.
- The advertising rules of platforms in relation to SRHR and how they are enforced.
- Data on the volume and nature of content (including ads) and accounts restricted over sexual/reproductive health/rights content.
- Platforms' processes for responding to government requests to censor content, including in relation to SRHR.
- Data about government demands to censor content related to SRHR.
- Platforms' processes for responding to private requests to censor content, including in relation to SRHR.
- Data about private requests to censor content related to SRHR.

The combined information gained through these processes was then reviewed, analyzed, and compared, and ultimately put together in this report.

⁵ Ranking Digital Rights (RDR) is an independent research program with the mission to promote freedom of expression and privacy on the internet by creating global standards and incentives for companies to respect and protect user's rights.



Overview of platform censorship of SRHR content

According to SMEX’s findings, Instagram and Facebook are the most used social media platforms by civil society organizations and activists in the field of SRHR, followed by X, YouTube, and TikTok. Although content creators have maintained an online presence on Facebook way earlier than Instagram, they prefer the latter for several reasons. Their main reasoning is the fact that Instagram is a visual platform and enjoys high popularity among target audiences, mainly youth. It is worth mentioning that while most cases of restrictions we documented took place on Facebook and Instagram, these platforms are also the most widely used in the region.

Platform	Ownership and Headquarters	Popularity in WANA
Facebook	Meta Platforms, Inc., known as Meta, is headquartered in Menlo Park, a city in California, the United States.	Facebook, along with Meta platforms, Instagram, and the messaging app WhatsApp, is one of the region's most widely used social media platforms. Egypt, for example, is home to more than 50 million active Facebook users , making it one of the platform’s biggest markets.
Instagram	Meta Platforms, Inc., known as Meta, is headquartered in Menlo Park, California, United States.	Instagram, along with Facebook and WhatsApp, is one of the region's most widely used social media platforms. As of April 2023, Instagram had 172.4 million users in WANA.
TikTok	TikTok, the most recent of these platforms, is owned by China-based ByteDance.	In KSA and the UAE, TikTok has the highest global penetration rate. Seven out of the ten countries, by reach, are in WANA. The total number of users across the region is attested at 127 million as of 2023.
X	Formerly Twitter, X is owned by U.S. technology company X Corp. after business magnate Elon Musk bought it in 2022. It is headquartered in San Francisco, California.	X is popular, particularly among the Gulf youth. More than 50% of KSA youth are active on the platform. Region-wide, however, the use of X has halved since 2013. As of 2022, the number of users has been assessed at around 237 million.
YouTube	YouTube is owned by Google, with headquarters in San Bruno, California.	The top five countries for reach are in WANA, and eight of the top thirteen as of 2023.

Based on the research findings, most restrictions were recorded on Instagram, followed by Facebook. During the interview stage, five out of ten participants said they faced 15 to 20 cases of restrictions in 2022 alone on both platforms owned by Meta: Facebook, and Instagram. TikTok, an [increasingly popular](#) platform in the region, was the least-used platform among study participants. Yet, problematic cases of censorship of SRHR content were still documented on the platform.

All participants in the study said they faced at least two forms of restrictions on social media, e.g., ad rejection, post deletion, account suspension, appeal rejection, and blocking or limiting the organic reach of content.

For organizations and individuals interviewed by SMEX, the reasoning provided by platforms for restricting their content is often unconvincing and even “illogical.” For example, Facebook rejected an informative ad by the Palestine-based Arab Forum for Sexuality Education and Health (also known as Muntada Al-Jensaneya) explaining Kegel exercises that help strengthen pelvic floor muscles. As the post is visualized in illustrations and does not show any nudity, the organization was surprised with the platform’s decision and the reason provided is “adult products or services.”

Description of content:

Illustrations showing how to practice Kegel exercises.

Date: March 2, 2023

Platform: Facebook

Cited policy violation:

“Adult product or service.”

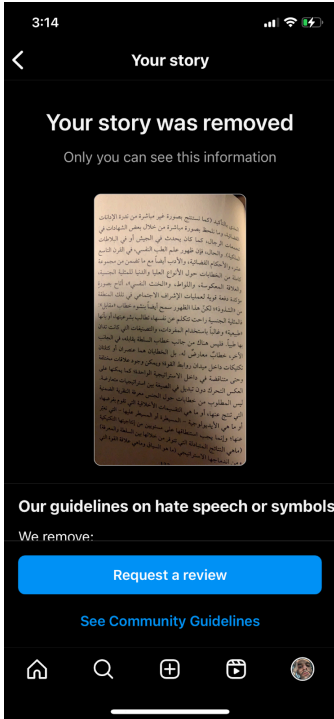



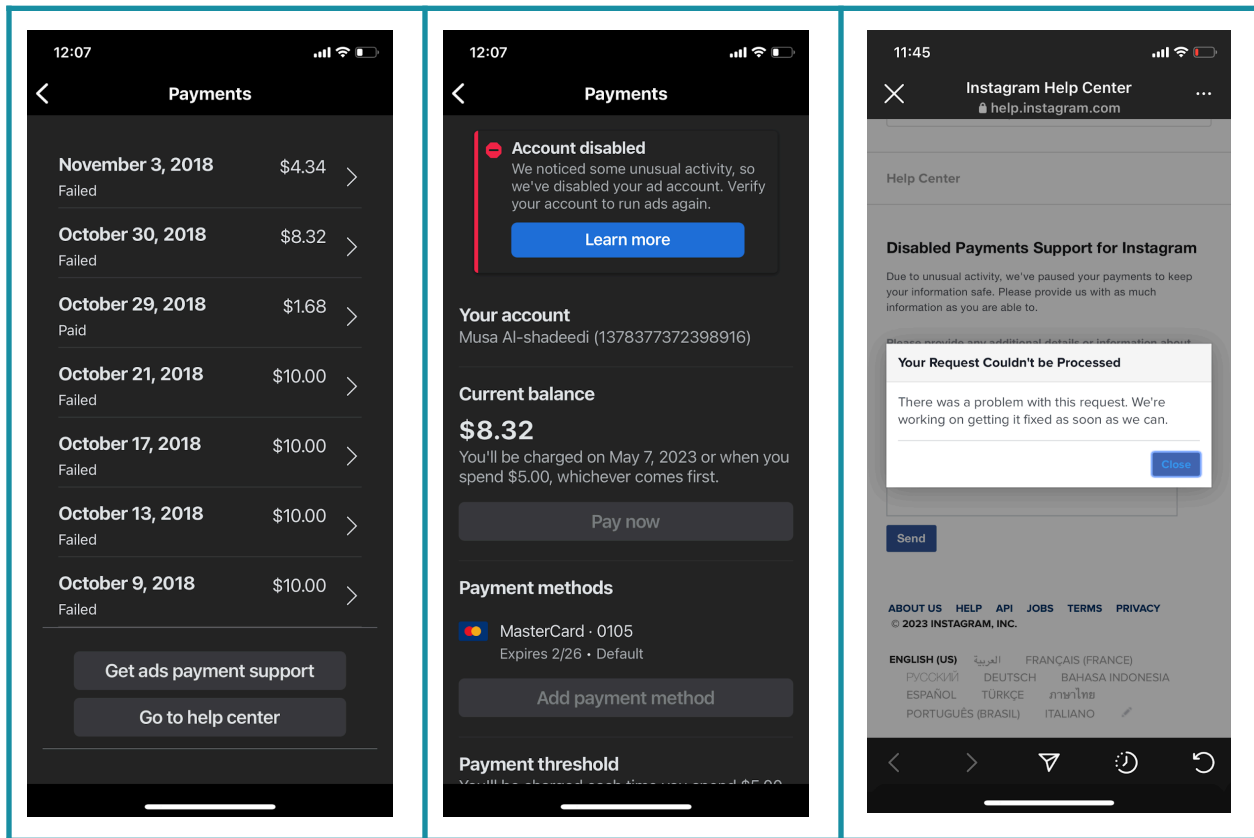
Image 1: Screenshot provided by Muntada Al-Jensaneya.



In another case, Musa Al-Shadeedi, an Iraqi activist based in Jordan, faced Instagram restrictions for reasons he does not understand. In March 2023, he posted a photo of a page from Michel Foucault’s book, *Histoire de la Sexualité* (History of Sexuality). Instagram took it down for violating its community guidelines on “hate speech and symbols.”

In December 2022, Al-Shadeedi published a written story where he expressed his opinion about the need to question official narratives about the age of consent. Instagram removed it for “nudity and sexual activity.” After his appeal was rejected, Al-Shadeedi also faced a 48-hour ban on sending messages. In addition, Instagram disabled his ad account without providing any reason. The ban remained in force until at least early June 2023, when the interview with him took place.

<p>Description of content: A page from one of Michel Foucault’s books.</p> <p>Date: March 2023</p> <p>Platform: Instagram</p> <p>Cited policy violation: “hate speech or symbols.”</p>	 <p>Image 2: Screenshot provided by the interviewee.</p>	<p>Description of content: A written story by Al-Shadeedi about the age of consent.</p> <p>Date: December 2022</p> <p>Platform: Instagram</p> <p>Cited policy violation: “nudity and sexual activity.”</p>	 <p>Image 3: Screenshot provided by the interviewee.</p>
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Images 4, 5, and 6: Screenshots provided by Al-Shadeedi showing a ban on his ad account by Instagram.



Double standards and bias in content moderation

Several censorship cases illustrate the shortcomings that characterize how platforms moderate SRHR content in the WANA region.

Organizations and activists state that social media platforms do not take into consideration the context in which the content is provided. Jeem, an Arabic media outlet covering gender, sexuality, and body topics, mentioned a case in which the website published an Instagram post about “Four feminist tools to resist violence against women.” Dalia Othman, Jeem’s managing director, explained that engagement with the post during the first three hours did not exceed three likes, which was very surprising to them. However, they noticed engagement increased to 33 likes after deleting the word “resistance” from the caption. Meta considers some words such as “shaheed” (which, in Arabic, means martyr) and “resistance” to be “political” or violent, particularly in relation to Palestine, and often censors posts containing them without adequately considering the context. For example, the word “shaheed” accounts for more content removals than any other word or phrase under Meta’s Community Standards. Under the company’s Dangerous Individuals and Organizations (DIO) [policy](#), the term is considered a praise of people responsible for acts of “terrorism” without consideration for the context. In March 2023, Meta’s Oversight Board announced a [review](#) of the company’s approach to the term.

Description of content:

A post by Jeem about “Four feminist tools to resist violence against women.”

Date: March 14th, 2023

Platform: Instagram



Image 7: Screenshot provided by Jeem.



Interviewees believe that bias towards the region and Arabic language is also involved, arguing that platforms have developed this perception that their accounts are “suspicious,” especially when publishing in Arabic.

Eight out of ten participants said that social media policies are racist against the Arabic language and contexts. Instagram deleted a photo that visualizes an Arab woman and a verse from the Quran in a post that discusses the history of queers in the first Hijri years (the early years of Islam). It was published by Gala, an Iraqi platform advocating for LGBTQ+ rights. The decision was later reversed after Gala appealed.

Description of content:

A photo visualizes an Arab woman and a verse from the Quran, in a post that discusses the history of queers in the first Hijri years.

Date: May 2023

Platform: Instagram

Cited policy violation:

Hate speech (decision reversed)



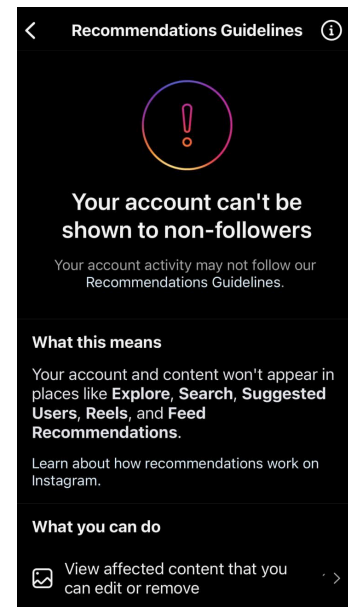
Image 8: Screenshot provided by Gala.

Jeem disclosed in their interview with SMEX that they face fewer restrictions over the content they publish in English, especially regarding the organic reach of posts. Othman from Jeem stated, "Checking the situations of SRHR content in English pages makes us feel that there is something wrong with the Arabic language or the country from which we publish content." Ali Bousselmi, executive director of Mawjoudin, a Tunisian civil society organization that advocates for the rights of LGBTQI+ communities, supports this claim, stressing that social media policies do not take into consideration the specificity of the Arabic language that is spoken in many dialects.



Four out of ten content creators and organizations stated that they got an update that their accounts cannot be shown to non-followers as their activities may not follow [recommendations guidelines](#) that help Instagram decide what content from accounts is eligible to be recommended to non-followers.

Image 9: Screenshot of an Instagram notification sent to Al-Shadeedi informing him that his account and content will not be recommended to non-followers.



Double standards in how platforms moderate content dealing with female anatomy, as opposed to male anatomy, have also been documented.

In May 2023, YouTube, a Google-owned platform, removed the thumbnail of a video by Love Matters Arabic explaining the anatomy of female genitalia with illustrations. According to Youtube, the video, which explains the difference between the vulva and the vagina, violated its “sex and nudity policy.” The platform explained that it removed the thumbnail to ensure that YouTube is a “safe place for all.” Yet, another video from the same series explaining the anatomy of male genitalia and their functions was not restricted. The video has a thumbnail showing an illustration of a penis and testicles. Such double standards only reinforce stigmatizing attitudes around female sexuality and reproductive health.

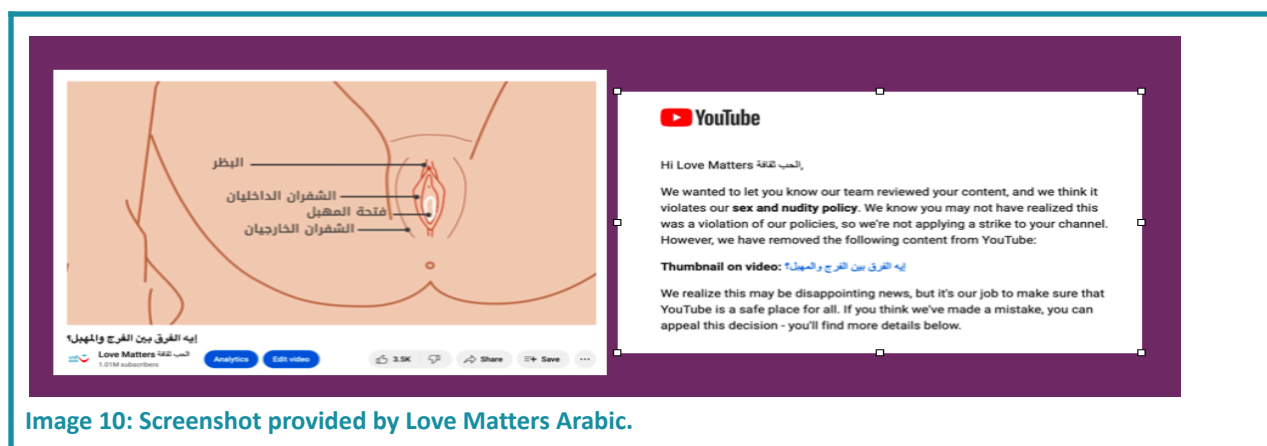


Image 10: Screenshot provided by Love Matters Arabic.



Description of the content: A thumbnail of a video titled “What is the difference between the vulva and the vagina?”

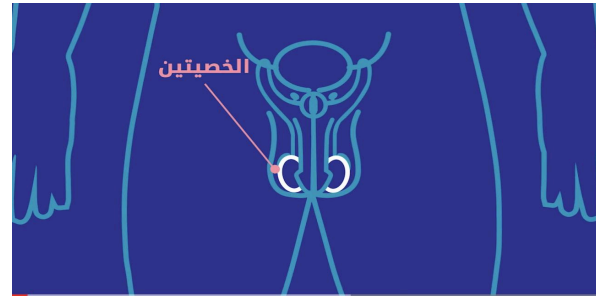
Date: May 5th, 2023

Platform: Youtube

Cited policy violation: Sex and nudity policy

Another video, from the same series, that shows male reproductive organs; penis and testicles, did not violate Youtube’s policy.

Image 11: Screenshot provided by Love Matters Arabic.



تركيب ووظائف الأعضاء التناسلية الذكورية

14K views 6mo ago ...more



Love Matters الحب ثقافة 1.02M

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In response to Tiktok’s suspension of her account, Lebanese sexologist Sandrine Atallah who uses the platform to spread awareness about SRHR, [tweeted](#) on May 27, 2022: “When I talk about male pleasure, I get views. But, when I talk about women, their bodies, rights, and pleasure, I get canceled as women in our societies get canceled.” She further [described](#) Tiktok as a “patriarchal, sexist platform that hates women.”



Strict moderation of advertising on sexual and reproductive health and well-being

A major challenge for organizations and individuals working on SRHR in the region is navigating the advertising policies of social media platforms and their enforcement.

Eight out of ten organizations and activists we interviewed believe that most of their content cannot be addressed in social media advertisements, so they tend to be highly self-censored due to online restrictions that enhance social threats and risks. Four out of ten interviewees said they lost access to one or more of their ads accounts, while three interviewees said they had decided not to sponsor posts as this increases exposure to online attacks and harassment.

In fact, according to our policy analysis of social media advertising policies, all platforms included in the study place several restrictions on ads promoting content, services, and products related to sexual and reproductive health and wellbeing, mainly under their own community guidelines that ban nudity and sexual content, in addition to regulations banning certain advertising for certain “adult” products and services.

YouTube does not allow [“sexually explicit”](#) ads under its “Inappropriate content” policy. On the [“Google ads policies” page](#), under “Restricted content and features,” the company states the following: “Ads should respect user preferences and comply with legal regulations, so we don't allow certain kinds of sexual content in ads and destinations. Some kinds of sexual content in ads and destinations are allowed only if they comply with the policies below and don't target minors, but they will only show in limited scenarios based on user search queries, user age, and local laws where the ad is being served.”

Under [a company-wide policy](#) that applies across its products, including YouTube, “Google prohibits the promotion of HIV home tests everywhere in the world except in the United States, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.” Abortion ads are also prohibited in more than 70 countries, including Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. The company further states that it “doesn't allow ads related to birth control or fertility products in the following countries: Bahrain, China, Djibouti, Egypt, Hong Kong, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestinian Territory, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Thailand, Tunisia, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, Yemen.”

X discloses a number of rules governing ads related to sexual and reproductive health and well-being. Under the ["Adult Sexual Content" section](#), it is stated that services such as breast or penis enlargement are prohibited; so are sex toys and nudity. Under the [healthcare section](#), it is



explained how ad content may vary from country to country: for instance, ads promoting non-prescription contraceptives are prohibited in Iraq, Yemen, UAE, Tunisia, KSA, Qatar, Palestine, Oman, Morocco, Libya, Lebanon, Kuwait, Jordan, and Bahrain. Advertisements for lubricants are also banned in Algeria.

In the [“TikTok Advertising Policies - Industry Entry,”](#) the platform lists the types of ads it prohibits under “Adult sexual products, services, and entertainment.” These include the “Promotion, sale, solicitation of, or facilitation of access to pornographic material, sex toys, and supplies such as lubricants, fetish, or sexual fantasy costumes” and the “Promotion, sale, solicitation of, or facilitation of access to the enhancement of sexual performance, pleasure, or bodily appearance, in the form of drugs, medications, tools, devices, or any of such products or services.” The platform also labels “abortion services” as “unsuitable.” The [“Ad Creatives and Landing Page”](#) policy provides additional information, stating that Ad Creatives & Landing Page must not “display sexual activities or behaviors that are overly suggestive or sexually provocative,” “display nudity, make sexual references, or sexually portray a person,” “display excessive visible skin,” and “must not focus on individual intimate body parts, such as a genitalia, buttocks, breasts.”

Finally, Meta has two key policies under its advertising standards restricting ads that fall or may fall under SRHR content: [Adult content](#) and [Adult products and services](#). Under the adult content guidelines, the company states that “Ads must not contain adult content. This includes nudity, depictions of people in explicit or suggestive positions, or activities that are overly suggestive or sexually provocative.” It includes a list of what advertisers can and cannot publish under this policy. Under the adult products or services policy, the company mentions, “Ads must not promote the sale or use of adult products or services. Ads promoting sexual and reproductive health products or services, such as contraception and family planning, must be targeted to people aged 18 or older and must not focus on sexual pleasure.” Under these guidelines, ads cannot “promote products or services that focus on sexual pleasure or enhancement, such as sex toys or sexual enhancement products” or “contain content that focuses on sexual pleasure or enhancement.”

Wafi Bilal, the CEO of Qafzeh, a digital marketing company that manages the social media accounts of Muntada Al-Jensaeya, told SMEX that the organization faces around five content rejections out of the 60 posts they publish monthly on Instagram and Facebook. Bilal added that all of the organization’s ads were rejected at first. In the example below, Facebook rejected their sponsored post on “sexual stimulants” for promoting an “adult product or service.” In fact, Meta, along with other social media companies, as mentioned above, bans ads for products that “focus on sexual pleasure or enhancement.”



Description of content:

An ad by Muntada Al-Jensaeya explaining “sexual stimulants” with an illustration.

Date of post or ad: January 16th, 2023

Platforms: Facebook and Instagram

Cited policy violation:

“Adult product or service.”

Muntada Al-Jansaneya منتدى الجنسانية
16 Jan · 🌐

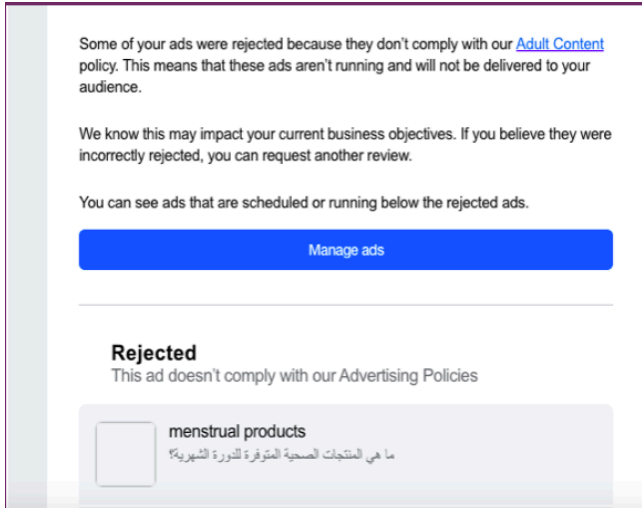

هي الأدوية أو المستحضرات التي تستخدم لزيادة المتعة أثناء الجنس، مبدأ عملها هو توسيع الأوعية الدموية مما يسهل تحقيق الانتصاب ويحل مشاكل العجز الجنسي التي تمنع الفرد أو الزوجين من الشعور بالرضا من النشاط الجنسي.
#الصحة_الجنسية #المنشطات_الجنسية #الحبة_الزرقاء #منتدى_الجنسانية



Image 12: Screenshot provided by Muntada Al-Jensaeya

Love Matters Arabic, a digital community in Egypt and the Arab world that addresses Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), received similar reasoning from Facebook when its sponsored posts about pap smears, a method to screen for cervical cancer and menstrual products, were rejected. In an interview with SMEX, the initiative’s Samaa Elturkey said the ad rejections go beyond content related to sexual pleasure and include educational content that seeks to raise awareness on medical procedures. Elturkey from Love Matters Arabic described “adult content” as a “loose term,” claiming that such restrictions reinforce some social perspectives that consider menstruation a taboo and a stigma.



<p>Description of content: An educational video ad by Love Matters Arabic highlighting differences between menstrual products.</p> <p>Date of post or ad: December 18th, 2022</p> <p>Platform(s): Facebook</p> <p>Cited policy violation: “Adult content.”</p>	 <p>Some of your ads were rejected because they don't comply with our Adult Content policy. This means that these ads aren't running and will not be delivered to your audience.</p> <p>We know this may impact your current business objectives. If you believe they were incorrectly rejected, you can request another review.</p> <p>You can see ads that are scheduled or running below the rejected ads.</p> <p>Manage ads</p> <p>Rejected This ad doesn't comply with our Advertising Policies</p> <p>menstrual products ما هي المنتجات الصحية المتوفرة للدورة الشهرية</p>
<p>Description of content: An ad by Love Matters Arabic explaining the medical steps of a pap smear with an infographic.</p> <p>Date: January 17th, 2023</p> <p>Platform(s): Facebook</p> <p>Cited policy violation: “Adult content.”</p>	 <p>Love Matters ثقافة الحب 17 Jan · 🌐</p> <p>اختبار مسحة عنق الرحم يساعد في الكشف المبكر عن سرطان عنق الرحم والتي يسببها أحد أنواع فيروس الورم الحليمي البشري، أكثر أنواع العدوى المنقولة جنسياً انتشاراً. أعرّفوا المزيد من التفاصيل عن الاختبار من الصور.</p> <p>#الحب_ثقافة #صحة #عدوى #HPV #papsmear #health #صحة_جنسية #sexualhealth #womenshealth #menshealth</p> <p>اختبار مسحة عنق الرحم Pap Smear</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> إجراء التناك من وجود سرطان عنق الرحم عند النساء من عمرهن يوصى بتكرار اختبار كشف سرطان عنق الرحم كل ثلاث سنوات للنساء في الأعمار من 21 إلى 65 إذا كانت لديك عوامل خطر فقد يوصى بتكرار مسحات أكثر تكراراً تتضمن عوامل الخطر هذه ما يلي: تشخيص سابق لسرطان عنق الرحم أو ظهور خلايا ما قبل العنقية لسرطان عنق الرحم التهاب العنق الذي لم يعالجه بسبب زرع عضو أو المعالجة الكيميائية أو استخدام الكورتكوستيرويدات عدوى فيروس نقص المناعة البشرية تاريخ من التدخين <p>التحضير للفحص</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> تجنب ممارسة الجنس أو الدخول المهبلي أو استخدام أي أداة مهبلية أو مرهم أو مبيد الحيوانات المنوية أو مرغقات لمدة يومين قبل إجراء الفحص تجنب إجراء الفحص خلال الحيض كثيرى مسحة عنق الرحم في عادة الطبيعة وستتكرر بنوع دقاتك فقط قد يحدث شعور بالحط في منطقة الحوض أثناء إدخال المنظار المستخدم خلال إجراء المسحة بعد إجراء الفحص يمكن مواصلة يومك دون قيود

Six out of ten content creators believe that the ad disapprovals they get are automatically issued. In other words, platforms use algorithms to quickly review whether ads comply with community guidelines without considering the context.

In its [Introduction to the Advertising Standards](#), Meta vaguely explains its ad review process and how it enforces its advertising policies. Under “Enforcement of our policies,” the company states that it uses automation and “in some instances, manual review” to enforce its policies. The company also relies on users flagging ads for violating ad policies to learn of violations and enforce rules.



In its [Google Ads policies](#), Google states, "We use a combination of Google's AI and human evaluation to ensure that ads comply with these policies. Our enforcement technologies use Google's AI, modeled on human reviewers' decisions, to help protect our users and keep our ad platforms safe. More complex, nuanced, or severe cases are often reviewed and evaluated by our specially-trained experts."

TikTok reviews ads before they go live, a process described in section 2.2 of the [Advertising on TikTok - First Things to Note](#). The platform states: "In order for your ads to run smoothly and successfully on our platform, it is important for your business and ad creative to be compliant with all of our policies." The platform adds: "While some TikTok Ads might take longer than usual for the review process to complete, most TikTok Ads are reviewed within 24 hours. You will receive a notification once your TikTok Ads have been approved and published. Suppose the ad is rejected, and there are changes that can be made to help publish your ad. In that case, you will be notified as well, through the Ad Group in the TikTok Ads Manager platform." It is unclear what technologies it uses (if any) to enforce these policies.

No exceptions for educational and artistic content

Platforms state in their own policies that "sexual" or content tailored to adults is allowed if published for educational, artistic or medical purposes. Yet, the examples mentioned previously and other cases we collected throughout this study show that platforms contradict their policies by restricting SRHR content that is informative and/or artistic.

In its ["adult nudity and sexual activity"](#) policy, Meta makes exceptions for nude content when published for several reasons that include "as a form of protest, to raise awareness about a cause or for educational or medical reasons." Examples are provided: "For example, while we restrict some images of female breasts that include the nipple, we allow other images, including those depicting acts of protest, women actively engaged in breast-feeding and photos of post-mastectomy scarring. For images depicting visible genitalia or the anus in the context of birth and after-birth moments or health-related situations, we include a warning label so that people know the content may be sensitive." Yet, Facebook previously restricted ads by Love Matters Arabic (about pap smear and menstrual products) and Muntada Al-Jensaeya on Kegel exercises. These ads were educational and did not include any nudity.

In another case, an ad containing a video invitation to an art exhibition by Jordanian artist Mary Abu Zaid was rejected by Instagram. Abu Zaid, who does fine art focusing on sex and nudity, told SMEX in an interview that she did not know that her posts constituted a problem to Instagram until she decided to sponsor one of them. The artists added that now she also knows why her account is not getting the deserved attention, despite the hard work she is putting into it.



Image 15: Screenshot provided by the artist.

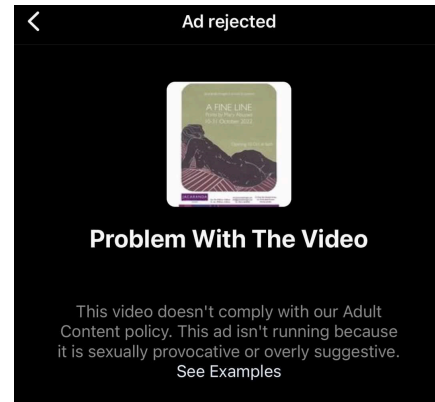


Image 16: Screenshot provided by the artist.

Description of content:

An invitation video showing the drawing of a nude woman's body.

Date: May 10th, 2022

Platform: Instagram

Cited policy violation

Violation of adult content policy, content deemed “sexually provocative or overly suggestive.”



Conclusion

Social media platforms pledge to allow free expression in their content moderation policies and community guidelines while ensuring no harmful content is published and spread. While no provisions specifically address SRHR matters, incidents under this category are addressed through various policies. SRHR touches upon a range of issues that include, but are not limited to, sexual pleasure, protection from sexually transmitted diseases, access to contraception, gender equality, and the health of mothers and children in all the stages of their lives, as well as their roles in society. In WANA, policies on SRHR-related content are enforced much more harshly, challenging the publishing and dissemination of this type of content via posts or ads.

This research aimed at analyzing the content moderation policies and practices of social media platforms; Facebook, Instagram, Tiktok, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube pertaining to content related to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) in the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region, mainly Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, Egypt, and Tunisia. The data for this research, both qualitative and quantitative, was retrieved from desk research, policy analyses, and interviews with ten organizations and activists from WANA who have active experience in facing and dealing with content moderation of SRHR-related posts and ads. The interviews aimed at getting more details of social media restriction cases as organizations and activists were able to elaborate more on their content creation, publishing, launching ads, and appeal process.

SMEX found that platforms do not have SRHR-specific policies; instead, regulations are generally scattered around different policies, mainly community guidelines and advertising policies. Restrictions, mostly happening on Meta, imposed on organizations and content creators posting about SRHR included content takedowns, removal of accounts, ad rejection, and limited organic reach. Their content was restricted mainly for violating platform policies on “sexual” and “adult” content. Ad rejection, in particular, has proven to be a challenge for SRHR advocates, preventing them from widely disseminating their content and essential information. The reasons provided by platforms did not always make sense to users who also described the process of content moderation appeals as ineffective.