



An Exploration of Dress and Identity among New Mothers: The Implications of Breastfeeding for Clothing Choice

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Upon becoming a new mother, a woman has many important decisions to make, including how she will feed her newborn. Approximately 77% of infants in the United States start out breastfeeding, with up to 50% continuing until the age of six months (CDC, 2013). The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the World Health Organization (WHO) strongly recommend that babies be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life, with the AAP suggesting that mothers breastfeed babies until their first year, and the WHO recommending that mothers breastfeed until babies are two years (AAP, 2014; WHO, 2012). If a mother chooses to breastfeed, she will face the challenges associated with breastfeeding several times each day, often for many months, if not years. One of the biggest challenges associated with doing so is finding clothing that is conducive to breastfeeding.

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of breastfeeding mothers relative to clothing choice. Stone (1962) suggests that the process of conveying identity through symbols or objects includes appearing, reflecting upon that appearance, and describing one's identity in response to that appearance. Dress provides the most immediate and apparent visual cues about an individual's characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, social status, and social roles (Damhorst, Spillman, & Michelman, 2005). New mothers who breastfeed their infants must consider the clothing that they wear during this time, especially in terms of functionality, comfort, and aesthetics (Sheeshka, Potter, Norrie, Valaitis, Adams, & Kuczynski, 2001). At the same time, they must also make clothing choices that help to communicate their identities as new mothers. Yet very little research exists which explores how women use clothing in the development of this identity or the role of breastfeeding within this process.

To address this gap in the research, a qualitative research approach was employed. Upon IRB approval from the researchers' university, in-depth interviews were conducted with 24 women who were mothers for the first time within six months of recruitment. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and lasted between one and two hours. Questions focused on the initial transition to motherhood, feelings about breastfeeding in general, and how clothing plays a role in breastfeeding. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed for emergent themes across the responses (Spiggle, 1994). As a result of this iterative process of analysis, three main themes were identified and are used to structure the interpretation: *(Un)sexy Lingerie*, *To Button or Not to Button*, and *Frumpy and Bumpy*.

One of the problems that participants frequently mentioned is finding nursing bras that fit, provide adequate support, and look attractive. Most nursing bras are sized small through extra-large and do not correlate with typical bra sizes. For this reason, participants expressed frustration with finding the correct fit. They were also concerned with how unattractive the bra designs are and how "unsexy" they feel when wearing them. Likewise, participants had difficulty

finding tops that they thought looked good and were conducive to breastfeeding. Most of the available options are button-up shirts, which participants found unattractive and cumbersome when breastfeeding. Participants considered nursing tops an unnecessary expenditure due to the temporary basis of breastfeeding. The third option, large t-shirts, were too casual for participants to wear all of the time. Because nursing bras are ill-fitting, participants felt that every line and bump could be seen through clothing. Likewise, participants thought that clothing worn to aid in the process of breastfeeding is unfashionable and unattractive in general. New mothers often spend so much time breastfeeding that this process becomes an important part of their identities. The limited clothing choices associated with breastfeeding seem to exacerbate the frustrations experienced by participants as new mothers.

As this study reveals, women who breastfeed their infants face several challenges in terms of clothing choice, and these issues, in turn, impact how they use clothing to integrate breastfeeding into their identities as new mothers. Given the importance of the relationship between clothing and identity, and the negative feelings that participants have concerning clothing worn while breastfeeding, a new mother's identity may also be negatively impacted, in part due to clothing worn during this time. By focusing on new mothers, a sample that tends to be overlooked in the literature, findings expand on research in the areas of breastfeeding and clothing, motherhood and consumption, as well as clothing and identity. Marketers and retailers who understand the clothing needs of this important consumer segment will be better able to address the challenges inherent to being a new mother who chooses to breastfeed. Providing trendy and attractive garments that are conducive to breastfeeding would better address the needs of a wider range of female consumers. Further research on specific clothing attributes that breastfeeding mothers desire would permit a better understanding of their particular aesthetic and functionality needs.

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