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“I...don’t want to see you flashing your bits around”: Exhibitionism, Othering and Good Motherhood in online Perceptions of Public Breastfeeding

Abstract

Stigma and concern about public breastfeeding have been identified as contributing towards low breastfeeding rates in high-income countries. Despite this, very little research has examined public perceptions of breastfeeding. Among existing studies, lack of familiarity with breastfeeding, sexist views and hyper-sexualisation of the breast were identified alongside discomfort at viewing breastfeeding [by strangers](#). During 2014, in the United Kingdom (UK), several cases of women being criticised for breastfeeding in public appeared in national newspapers. A Critical Discourse Analysis approach was used to theoretically frame analysis of 884 naturally occurring comments relating to a protest supporting women’s right to breastfeed in public from the UK’s most popular online news site, Mail Online. Findings are discussed in relation to mothers’ roles as citizens and sexual beings, with a particular focus on the visibility of breasts in public space. Women who breastfeed in public were viewed as unattractive, lazy, bad parents and lacking in self-respect. More specifically, women who breastfed in public were viewed as exhibitionist. This was contrasted with the desirability of breastfeeding within the home, which was seen as an appropriate way to feed an infant. The undesirability of public breastfeeding was inherently linked to sexuality, with breastfeeding women viewed as sexual aggressors (“flashers”) or inviting sexual contact from men. It is argued that these views originate in unequal gender relationships in society and the framing of breasts as sexual rather than nurturing. These discourses are played out in public space in which mothers are marginalised in a [heteronormative-patriarchal](#) society.

Keywords: breastfeeding, public breastfeeding, online news comments, sexuality, surveillance, women's rights, [Daily Mail, Mail Online](#)

1. Introduction

The World Health Organisation advises that for optimum health, babies should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life, with continuing breastfeeding alongside complementary foods until two years of age or beyond (World Health Organization, 2014). In the UK only 1% of mothers breastfeed exclusively for six months, and there are significant variations between age, income and ethnic groups with young white women from deprived areas the least likely to breastfeed (Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2012). Whilst breastfeeding is often constructed by health promotion literature and health professionals as “natural” and easy beyond minor difficulties with initiation, not all women are able to successfully breastfeed without support and many mothers experience significant challenges (Crossley, 2009) and a lack of support to overcome these (G. Thomson & Dykes, 2011). Alongside these biological challenges, women who breastfeed longer term experience the societal challenge of needing to regularly find a safe space outside of the home in which to breastfeed, including at short notice. It has been noted that the experience of breastfeeding, that is establishing a functional latch¹ and feeding the baby an adequate amount of milk, outside of the home is portrayed as problem free in health promotion literature (Boyer, 2012), but that this does not always reflect the reality for women ([Author et al, under review;](#) Dowling & Brown, 2012).

In the UK, the need to find safe space to feed ones infant is protected by the Equality Act 2010, which gives women the right to breastfeed in public spaces, and also emphasises that businesses must allow women to breastfeed in their premises unless it would be dangerous (for example, if she were near radiation or chemicals). However, a large survey conducted by

the UK's NCT and accompanying qualitative research (Boyer, 2012) found that around half of breastfeeding women in the UK had experienced a negative reaction to breastfeeding in public. Moreover, further research with mothers in the UK found that although only some breastfeeding mothers had experienced a negative reaction, the fear of scrutiny by strangers (Brown, Raynor, & Lee, 2011) or a negative reaction (G. Thomson, Ebisch-Burton, & Flacking, 2015) resulted in some mothers deciding not to breastfeed in public, including some who decided not to breastfeed at all. Women have also reported a lack of private spaces in the work place to enable expressing breast milk on return to work, and negative reactions from colleagues (Stearns, 2010).

1.1 Infant feeding and morality

Concepts of good citizenship, that is behaviour which is viewed as positive for society, are situated within shifting gender, class, political and historical contexts (Hacking, 1986). Accordingly, socially acceptable behaviour will vary within cultures over time, and some groups who previously were viewed as “good mothers” may become defined as “bad mothers” using these updated societal norms (Mills, 2009; Tyler, 2008). In contemporary society, citizens are actively encouraged to take responsibility for their own health and wellbeing (World Health Organization & UNICEF, 2003). Accordingly, medicine has shifted from providing paternal care to promoting positive health choices (Pérez-Escamilla, 2012). It has been suggested that good modern mothering requires selfless dedication with a focus on maintaining the health of infants (Lupton, 2012). Moreover, discourses within health promotion appear to suggest that motherhood is “natural” and easy (R. Thomson, Kehily, Hadfield, & Sharpe, 2011). Despite this, the many challenges and labours of the role

are acknowledged by [contradictory accounts](#)~~competing discourses~~ (for example, those which [both describe the inability to conform to today's normative child rearing practices, but simultaneously express attempts to do so](#)) written by mothers for mothers as part of online forums (Boyer, 2012). It is within this pressurised and idealised concept of motherhood that infant feeding fits in today's society.

The idea that "breast is best" is commonly accepted in medical literature throughout the world (World Health Organization, 2014). ~~However, p~~Promotion of breastfeeding, as a way to improve the health of their infant [from health professionals, other individuals and sources of information](#), has been experienced by women as overenthusiastic and sometimes aggressive within the context of exclusive breastfeeding being an atypical choice for the majority of women [in many developed countries](#) (Beasley, 2010; Carter, 1995; Crossley, 2009; Gurrieri, Previte, & Brace-Govan, 2013; Wall, 2001). In addition, it has been argued that women who are supported by La Leche League and the National Childbirth Trust (NCT) are strongly encouraged to parent in a particular way, including breastfeeding for extended periods (Faircloth, 2013), but that they receive competing advice from friends, family and strangers about extended feeding ~~-(Author et al., under review,~~ (Dowling & Brown, 2012; Stearns, 2011). Alongside these conflicting versions of appropriate breastfeeding duration, women are presented with moral messages about how a good [British](#) breastfeeding woman behaves more generally when in front of others, including advice to be discreet and wear particular clothing to breastfeed to avoid exposing their (sexual) breasts (Wall, 2001). Many mothers also need to manage multiple roles, including as a worker and partner, and face scrutiny of in their behaviour related to these roles (Copleton, McGee, Coco, Shanbaky, & Riley, 2010). Accordingly, ~~maintaining~~[maintaining](#) a positive self-identity within this context of [unstable](#) acceptable identities is challenging (Hacking, 1986), and requires

ideological work [in order for the mother to reassure herself that her parenting decisions are the optimal in her particular circumstances](#) (Copleton et al., 2010).

This ideological work, in today's increasingly internet dependent society, may occur in the online world, where mothers validate their choice of parenting identity through online commentary (Skeggs, 2011). Examination of online discourses relating to parents has found that disgust reactions directed towards mothers in poverty resulted in the term "chav mum" being used to mark these mothers as an undesirable other (Tyler, 2008). Moreover, mothers who rejected public health advice regarding [the health of their children having healthy lunches at school](#) have also been subjected to negative online attention (Fox & Smith, 2011).

These online examples allow individuals to adopt one of several identities. First, readers may differentiate themselves from the undesirable "other" by contrasting their own healthy behaviour with that of mothers who appeared to allow less healthy – and thus responsible – practices (Fox & Smith, 2011; Holdsworth & Robinson, 2008). [For example, Holdsworth & Robinson \(2008\) found that mothers who smoked cigarettes constructed a hierarchy of smoking behaviours that were undesirable for their children, ranging from the extreme of holding a baby whilst smoking, to smoking at the back door whilst the baby was in another room. All of these behaviours fell outside of guidance from health professionals to smoke outside the home.](#) Alternatively, they may identify with the group of mothers who are being vilified in a show of solidarity (Fox & Smith, 2011).

1.2 Infant feeding and space

The everyday practices involved in caring for an infant hold multiple meanings to those participating and observing, and these meanings vary depending on the physical context in which the act occurs (Dyck, 1990). These locations can be divided into public, semi-public

and the home and are discussed in turn. Until the 1920s, parenting was largely confined to the home [in the UK](#), and this can be viewed as part of a society in which public space was male-dominated (Anderson, 2010) and in which care work was performed away from the public gaze (Boyer & Spinney, 2016). However, in recent decades, parenting has increasingly moved into public spaces. Parenting in public involves negotiating the right of individuals (parents, infants and potential observers) to use shared public spaces. The acceptability of parenting in public can be dependent on a range of factors the noise involved in the activity, (Battersby, 2007), the space required (Boyer & Spinney, 2016), how much of the body may be on display (Mahon-Daly & Andrews, 2002) and views of the cleanliness of the activity being undertaken (Battersby, 2007; Mahon-Daly & Andrews, 2002). The input of multiple gazes and brief contacts has led to the suggestion that public parenting is a type of community co-parenting, as judgements are felt by parents and their actions are changed (Aitken, 2012). [Where mothers feel that their public breastfeeding has been negatively judged, for example when they have been excluded from a public space](#) Accordingly, activism [in the form of public breastfeeding](#), sometimes with other mothers in the form of protest “nurse-ins” may be undertaken by those who seek to redress this imbalance in rights in favour of parents and infants (Boyer, 2011).

In the contemporary UK, mothers may use semi-private public spaces in order to breastfeed. “Mother and baby rooms” are commonly provided in public spaces and are generally located beside or within public toilets and may also contain facilities to change a baby’s nappy. The quality of such rooms can be variable, including small windowless rooms and chairs that make it difficult to breastfeed (Boyer, 2012). In her interview study of mothers, Battersby (2007) found that rooms were often dirty, not always welcoming, and were not always private or restricted to women only. In contrast, some of Boyer’s (2012) participants enjoyed using particular mother and baby rooms, but other participants reported isolation, regardless of the

quality of the room. A second semi-private public space is the “‘portable’ lactation module” described by Boyer (2012) as a small space (large enough only for mother and baby) that may be positioned in public spaces to allow private breastfeeding.

A further semi-private space is a parenting group (such as a breastfeeding support group, or baby massage class), which is generally not open to the general public. Many women choose to have their first feeds away from home within the security of such settings (Grant, Sims, Tedstone, & Ashton, 2013) ~~(Grant et al., 2013)~~. However, an ethnographic study of breastfeeding in these spaces found that many women were attempting to create a private space and were not able to feed in the same way that they did at home, [for example, by using shawls to cover their bodies or turning their body away from the group](#) (Mahon-Daly & Andrews, 2002).

Whilst the home may be viewed as an unproblematic “private” space in which breastfeeding can be undertaken, mothers have reported that, particularly in the early weeks after birth, the home may contain visitors around who they do not feel comfortable breastfeeding, and thus in some instances a public space may be a preferable alternative (Anderson, 2010). Overall, the physicality in which breastfeeding occurs is related to moral messages about the acceptability of parenting and mothering in particular. ~~and it~~ [it can be seen that in contemporary UK society, public and semi-public spaces are not problem free for breastfeeding women, and may serve to isolate breastfeeding women from public space, as staying out of the public gaze becomes the easiest way to maintain breastfeeding.](#)

1.3 Breastfeeding, Surveillance and Women’s Bodies

The study of female bodies, clothing and sexuality highlights that in contemporary Western society women are required to look attractive and available, but simultaneously respectable and chaste (Klepp & Storm-Mathisen, 2005). As such, if women's bodies become too visible, particularly outside of the home, they risk damage to their reputation (Kehily, 2012). However, whilst society at large values chastity and modest dressing as part of an acceptable femininity, women's bodies are commonly displayed as sexual objects in the media and popular culture (Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 1993). Misogynistic messages, [around the sexual availability of women and non-consensual sexual activity](#), commonly accompany these bodies, which has been found to influence adolescent expectations and behaviour (L'Engle, Brown, & Kenneavy, 2006). This creates a dichotomous societal view where girls and women are expected to behave in one way – the acceptable way - but are regularly exposed to discourses which show women behaving in another – unacceptable - way.

In contemporary society, at the time of pregnancy and maternity, women's bodies and attire are subjected to additional scrutiny (Fox, Heffernan, & Nicolson, 2009; Longhurst, 2005; Reid, Greaves, & Poole, 2008), as societal convention signifies that they are more “open” to being interacted with (Brouwer, Drummond, & Willis, 2012; Goffman, 2005). It is within this context that women's breasts fit in contemporary UK [society](#), as primarily sexual objects with infant feeding a secondary function (Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2006). This dual functionality can be seen as difficult for society [to](#) reconcile through an examination of research with observers of breastfeeding. Public breastfeeding was reported as being uncomfortable to observe by one third of respondents to a telephone survey (Mulready-Ward & Hackett, 2014). Further qualitative research has highlighted that public breastfeeding was only seen as acceptable if there was minimal visibility, such as being discreet or using bathrooms to breastfeed (Spurles & Babineau, 2011). It has been suggested that those who

are uncomfortable with viewing breastfeeding are more likely to be unfamiliar with breastfeeding, to express sexist views or to view breasts sexually (Acker, 2009).

This has led to many women reporting uncomfortable experiences of breastfeeding around others, including young mothers (Woods, Chesser, & Wiperman, 2013), those living in low income areas (Newhook et al., 2013), and those who breastfeed longer term (i.e. beyond six months) (Dowling & Brown, 2012; Stearns, 2011). In all four of these studies, surveillance of breastfeeding and negative reactions to breastfeeding from partners, family and friends were mentioned. Accordingly, women in one study reported that they performed their public breastfeeding as though it were a deviant act, with reports of trying to be discreet, feeling embarrassed and attempting to be “invisible” (Stearns, 2011: p 313), or only breastfeeding in “safe” places. These negative public breastfeeding experiences have also been explored in longitudinal interviews with breastfeeding mothers in Australia (Brouwer et al., 2012). Stearns (1999) found that breastfeeding in the presence of male strangers forced women to navigate the boundary between the nurturing and sexual breast, and was often avoided for this reason. Several interviewees commented that men either openly treated their breastfeeding as a sexual display, or attempted not to look at all, which was also viewed by women as uncomfortable. However, these negative experiences do not appear to affect all women, and some women report positive reactions to public breastfeeding, which alleviate their fears regarding public breastfeeding (Boyer, 2012).

There is a dearth of research on the views of those observing breastfeeding, and as such, this research sought to understand views of those who may observe public breastfeeding, to compliment research on mothers’ experiences. The research also builds on the concept of

online space as somewhere that can be used to confirm or refute dominant discourses about acceptable femininity, motherhood and infant feeding choices.

2. Methodology

The research reported in this paper used a detailed analysis of one high profile case to understand online responses to public breastfeeding within the context of a single protest relating to women's (lack of) right to breastfeed in public. Below, further details are provided on the case under study, the use of documents as data, data collection and data analysis.

2.1 The incident

Several high profile cases of women breastfeeding in public spaces in England, UK and receiving negative reactions had been reported in the media since 2013. First, a woman breastfeeding at the side of a swimming pool in Manchester was asked to stop by a member of staff (BBC News, 2013). Following this, a woman breastfeeding in Rugeley town centre, Staffordshire, had her photograph taken by a stranger who annotated the photo with the word "tramp" and shared it using social media (BBC News, 2014a). The third incident, and which this paper focuses on, involved a 25 year old white woman, Wioletta Komar, who was asked to leave a sports shop in Nottingham in which she was breastfeeding while her father was shopping (BBC News, 2014b). Following this incident, a group of breastfeeding women staged a protest in the sports shop, in which they breastfed their infants. The media and social media response to this incident was larger than to the previous two incidents, with a [protest in the branch of the shop and a](#) petition containing 70,000 signatures asking the sports

shop to change its policy. The incident was covered by several national news sites and many local news sites.

2.2 Research Design

Documents have been used as sources of data in social research throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Prior, 2003), and their use to understand the use of space is common within human geography (Hay, 2010). For example, documents have been used to understand the way in which surveillance occurs (Elden & Williams, 2009) and may shape society (Devaney, 2013). However, the use of documents to understand infant feeding has been minimal to date. In undertaking documentary analysis, the data are interrogated to understand if they are authentic – they have been written by the suggested author -, credible – it is free from error and distortion - and representative of its kind (Scott, 1990). Within research using documents, the reason for creating a record is also of interest (Prior, 2003). Documentary analysis has frequently been used as a method to interrogate gender relations in other areas within society, including magazine covers and advertisements (Ferguson, 2006; McCracken, 2006). Accordingly, as there is a lack of evidence of the views of those observing breastfeeding, this method felt appropriate.

Comments were taken from one UK based online news site. This approach has been used to examine discourse relating to a range of issues including: Barack Obama's eligibility to be president of the USA (Hughey, 2012; Hughey & Daniels, 2013), immigration in Canada (Krishnamurti, 2013) and how comments can affect the family of victims of murder (Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011), but has not previously been reported in research attempting to understand

views of infant feeding. It can be argued that in using such a data source, that is comments from one online news source, it is not possible to understand who the author is, and that this reduces their authenticity according to Scott's (1990) criteria. Moreover, it was not possible to know if the majority of comments were made in relation to the article alone, or the commenters' experiences of breastfeeding and/or observing breastfeeding. However, that something is said on a public forum in relation to breastfeeding in public is of interest in this study. Alongside this, it is not possible to assert that the comments on this individual article were representative of comments left in response to other articles related to a similar topic within the same news site, or that they would have been similar to comments left on other online news sites in relation to the same story. Again, the area of importance is that a large volume of these comments were left on the most popular online news site in the UK. From the data itself, it is not possible to understand the motives for posting, however existing research suggests that readers of news contribute for a wide variety of reasons (Thurman, 2008).

2.3 Data collection

In order to understand public reaction to the case, social media and news sites were searched for user generated comments. Comments from social media sites did not provide data that was appropriate or available for discourse analysis. Limited individual contributions were made by authors on Twitter, because of restrictions on the length of posts to 140 characters and the fact that many posts were simply sharing a pre-existing link to a media report. Alongside this, Facebook posts are largely restricted to those who are "friends" with the individual, and were not available for research purposes. Traditionally, newspapers

themselves may have been searched to attempt to understand public opinion because journalists held control over both the structures and content of popular discourse (Van Dijk, 2001). In an age of increasing user generated content, however, an examination of content from the individual level is appropriate to gain a more nuanced understanding of societal views and norms (Sloan et al., 2013).

This paper focuses on comments from one UK news site, Mail Online (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/>), the online arm of the Daily Mail newspaper. This site was chosen as it was the UK's most popular online news site at the time of the research (Media Week, 2014), and it has been suggested that the Daily Mail is the most powerful newspaper in Britain, with growing international readership (Collins, 2010). The news site is conservative and caters for a middle-aged and middle-class readership (Sointu, 2005), and had a higher than average readership by women for a UK news site (Media Week, 2014). Like other UK tabloid news sites at the time, it focused upon celebrity news and sensationalist stories, with people-focused reporting, rather than reporting focused on events (Altikriti & Al-Mahadin, 2015). The ~~celebrity gossip~~ people-focused reporting is based around individual celebrities that fit with the site's identity (Collins, 2010) and includes mostly female celebrities alongside comments on their body or attire displayed vertically along the right hand side of the online site. The Daily Mail has been described as similar to the American news channel *Fox News*, because it is "berserk and shouty" and has a strong focus on family values (Collins, 2010).

The Mail Online article on which this research was based was somewhat inflammatorily titled "Angry mothers stage mass breastfeeding protest at Sports Direct store that asked woman to leave because it was against 'company policy'" (Newton, 2014). The article reported the incident of the woman being asked to leave the shop based on an interview with the woman, including pictures of her with her infants. The interviewee, is clearly a good

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“front-page victim” for the media site; she is young, pretty, white and blonde (Stillman, 2007, p. 491). Moreover, her two children are clean and smiling. The article then moves to talk about the protest, including large quotes from the organiser of the protest who described the protest as “peaceful and calm”, despite the headline and text of the article describing the mothers as “Angry”.

Within 24 hours of the media reporting of the incident, 884 comments had been left on the article covering the original incident and the subsequent protest. All of the 884 comments were collected using the NCapture for NVivo tool, which stored the comments as a series of seven .pdf files. These documents were input into NVivo 10, which acted as a data management tool, and allowed coding of individual comments and groups of comments together, where relevant.

2.4 Analysis

A Critical Discourse Analysis approach theoretically framed the research. Those who use this research strategy believe that discourses found in talk and text create and reinforce ideology (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Van Dijk, 2001). Accordingly, any negative comments about breastfeeding posted online are likely to belong to individuals who may have negative views about breastfeeding in real life, irrespective of the fact that those posting online have a tendency to be less inhibited when posting than they would if they were communicating in real life (Suler, 2004). However, by displaying ~~negative~~ these views in public, Critical Discourse Analysis assumes that this reinforces a ~~negative~~ attitude towards

breastfeeding in public among readers, [regardless of multiple voices which may express a range of negative opinions](#).

Within this theoretical stance, a discourse analysis technique which has previously been applied to written texts (Gill, 2006) was used to understand the underpinning ideologies in public understandings of breastfeeding outside of the home in relation to language, discourse and calls to action. Data were initially coded for language, discourse and calls to action with sub-codes developed as part of an iterative process. Alongside this, comments were coded for their semiotic tone, with all codes assigned a label of “positive”, “negative” or “conflicted”. The use of semiotic analysis has been previously used to understand racism within social media posts (Burnap et al., 2013), and seemed appropriate to provide an overall understanding of whether the comments were broadly pro- or anti-breastfeeding.

2.5 Ethical considerations

As all data were freely available in the public domain, the chair of the appropriate University ethics committee stated that ethical review was not required, and that text-based data could be freely reproduced (but that any images posted could not). This does not imply, however, that ethical issues were simple; some researchers suggest that individual posts made on social media should not be included in academic outputs [because of the potential for individuals who have not consented to taking part in research being identified in research outputs](#) (Sloan, Morgan, Burnap, & Williams, 2015), whilst others publish user names alongside content (Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011). As part of the research reported here, the British Sociological Association’s code of ethics (British Sociological Association, 2002) was consulted and a middle approach was adopted; quotations are reproduced, but without usernames and no attempt was made to disclose real world identities (Mann & Stewart, 2000).

3. Findings

This section begins with an overview of key findings and a brief comment on the type of language used within the data, which was coded by the author as often harsh and sometimes offensive. Attention then turns to how breastfeeding women were constructed as good and bad citizens and mothers. The third section focuses on how women's bodies, and more specifically their breasts, were perceived when situated in a public space. Finally, the ways in which motherhood and womanhood were constructed in these discourses are discussed. Throughout the findings, data extracts are copied exactly, including grammatical and spelling errors and emoticons.

3.1 Key findings and language

The comments were assessed for being positive about public breastfeeding, conflicted, or negative. Comments which were overwhelmingly positive about public breastfeeding were in the minority, with 84 comments (9.5%) suggesting that public breastfeeding was acceptable. Conflicted comments overtly stated the superiority of breastmilk over formula, but suggested that women should regulate their behaviour by either not breastfeeding in public, or breastfeeding in a way that was "discreet"; 5.4% of comments were conflicted. A small minority (3%) of comments were coded using an additional code: "flippant". These comments were neither positive, negative or conflicted about public breastfeeding, but were dismissive of breastfeeding as an issue worthy of discussion. The largest category, some 82% of all

comments, were those that were negative about public breastfeeding or women protesting about their right to breastfeed in public. It was not possible to separate out discourses that were specifically directed towards women who were protesting or publically breastfeeding due to a lack of clarity in many posts.

Throughout the comments, harsh or abusive language, as opposed to harsh or abusive messages written in a civil way, was frequent with 28% of posts. Alongside this, 17% of all comments used sexist language. Less than 1% of all comments collected were typed largely or totally in capital letters², but 9% of comments had at least some part of the comment typed in capitals for emphasis. Moreover, ~~excessive~~-normative amounts of exclamation marks (11% of comments) and question marks (2% of comments) were also identified. However, it is interesting to note that these writing conventions were used by posters both pro- and anti-public breastfeeding. Those who were anti-public breastfeeding referred to women breastfeeding in public as stupid and with a skewed moral perception. These same attributes were also used by those who were pro-public breastfeeding to describe, and/or directly comment on, commenters with negative views. For example, in the post below, the author attempts to chastise those who are against public breastfeeding:

The suggestion to go and breastfeed in a toilet is disgusting! Would you eat your meal in a public toilet? Apparently boobs are only allowed to be on show if they are on the 3rd page of a news paper or some grotty lads mag, but a bit of side boob with no nipple on show is deemed unacceptable. The way some of you have spoken about these mothers is disgusting, I bet YOUR mothers are so proud of you.

Within this comment, the idea that women should have to breastfeed in toilets and some of the comments made are reported to be “disgusting”. The commenter finishes by attempting to

shame posters with thoughts of how their mothers would respond to their posts, attempting to infantilise them. However, within all of the comments related to the article, only two suggested that women should breastfeed in public toilets, with a majority arguing for a more vague “private” space or for mothers to act “discreetly”. Accordingly, [it is likely we can see](#) that the commenter is using their pre-existing experiences and views of breastfeeding, [rather than responding to something written by another commenter](#), -to inform their post, and this may be seen as a justification for such an emotive response. A similar level of emotive language could be seen in the many anti-public breastfeeding comments. Despite commenters from both pro- and anti- breastfeeding stances talking about those who had opposing opinions to them, including the regular use of “you” and “your”, the vast majority of comments were not directly linked to a previous comment. The majority of posts did not appear to directly reference the facts relating to the individual case reported in the article, and seemed focused more generally on breastfeeding in public spaces.

3.2 Public Breastfeeding and Citizenship

Within the data, negative comments were either about and directed towards women who took part in the protest covered in the article (6% of all comments), mothers who breastfed in public more generally (35% of all comments), or an undefined group of breastfeeding women (41%). In this section, comments will be divided into those focusing on protesting mothers and publically breastfeeding mothers.

3.2.1 Protesting Mothers

Women who took part in the protest about discrimination towards breastfeeding women were

described almost exclusively in a negative way, including:

“silly”, “stupid”, “the mumsnet brigade”, “tiresome”, “irritating obnoxious”, “earth mothers”, “holier than thou breastfeeding brigade”, “Silly and kinda selfish”, “Stupid and disgusting!!!” “bored”, “self Important mumsnet members”, “lunatic breast feeding lefty exhibitionists” “self righteous activists” and the “breast feeding mafia”.

Accordingly, women who protested about women’s right [to breastfeed in public, as stated in the Equality Act 2010](#),^s were declared to be behaving in an irrational and undesirable way.

Some posters were more explicit in their condemnation in declaring that women were making “such a big deal about it² or were “very sad over reacting hormonal women” trivialising the women’s attempt to enforce their legal rights. Others suggested that women were protesting because they wanted “fame”. Many comments suggested that the women who were protesting looked “silly”; “LOL ([Laugh Out Loud](#)), what a bunch of wallies they look”, detracting from the seriousness of their valid protest.

The role of women protesting about a cause they felt passionate about, and their role as mothers were seen as difficult to reconcile by a small minority of posters. For example, some posters attempted to infantilise these mothers as having a childish “tantrum”: “I just wish they would grow up and stop throwing a tantrum every time they feel 'offended' and / or 'humiliated’”. Others suggested that the issue was relatively minor and the protestors were responding to it in a disproportionately strong way: “...it just annoys me when they make a huge deal out of it.” A third rationale identified for women protesting about a minor issue was a lack of a fulfilling and productive life: “Have these women got nothing better to do. I know these type of women who go out of there way to provoke people and cause arguments.”

Some posters, however, suggested that these protestors were neglecting their duties as mothers, and thus their children were suffering because of their protesting: “Can these silly women not find something better to do? Perhaps take there little ones to the park and play with them?”

The majority of posts specifically referred to the protestors as women or mothers, highlighting gender as a key component in their opinion of the situation. The exception to this was one poster who suggested that mothers who protested were akin to fathers who protested for rights for fathers. Thus it was suggested that it was being a political parent, rather than a political mother per se, which may have been the behaviour which was undesirable for this one poster: “Yup, just like the fathers4justice morons...”

A small minority of posters (<1%) however, commended the women for attempting to assert their pre-existing right [to breastfeed in public, found within the Equality Act 2010](#). These comments were largely defensive, in response to other posters’ comments about the unacceptability of mothers behaving in this way, and pointed out the weaknesses in such an argument:

Or perhaps they're fighting for a cause they believe in? I'm not saying I agree or disagree but just to dismiss them as silly women with 'too much time on their hands' is very ignorant of you. I for one applaud anyone who has a back bone and sticks up for what they believe in. Where would the world be without people like that? You just sound childish.

3.2.2 Publicly Breastfeeding Mothers

Alongside an idea that women who protested about breastfeeding rights were silly, some posters (17%) suggested that women who breastfed in public were atypical. Most commonly it was suggested that those who breastfed in public were lacking in “pride” or “self respect”. Accordingly, it was suggested that breastfeeding was not an activity undertaken by ordinary citizens because it was an unusual or deviant behaviour undertaken only by those without self-respect:

What a bunch of sad mothers this lot really are if they think breast feeding a baby in a public place even it is legal is proving anything. All it does is show their ignorance, lack of pride and self respect.

Alongside this, some posters noted a level of class-based unacceptability, suggesting that public breastfeeding was acceptable in some social groups, but that it was generally considered to be uncouth by [the middle and](#) the upper classes: “Yes it's legal, no, a lady wouldn't do it.”

The most extreme comments suggested that breastfeeding mothers were bad citizens came from a small minority of posters (4%) who suggested that women who breastfed in public or protested about women's rights were not productive members of society. Posters contrasted these women's apparent leisure time with their own identity as hard working, productive citizens. Calls for action from these posters suggested that women should get jobs, and find productive roles, and that then they would not have time to breastfeed in public.

Accordingly, this discourse suggests that full time mothering is not a role that is useful for society, and that breastfeeding babies is not beneficial to society:

More proof, if any were needed, that while the rest of us are out earning to pay our way in life, this bunch are prattling around town trying to 'make a point'!

Just remember this the next time a militant mother claims it's a full time job, not a second to spare etc. They can always find time for a bit of shopping!

3.3 Public Breastfeeding, Bodies and Sexuality

The vast majority of anti-public breastfeeding commenters suggested that they “did not want to see” women’s breasts in public. These comments framed breasts and the act of breastfeeding as a distasteful act that should only be carried out in private. Women’s bodies in general, and that of their infants, were absent in posters’ accounts of public breastfeeding. Accordingly, the only bodily focus was on breasts in isolation. Women’s breasts were referred to in a variety of offensive ways including: “hanging”, “sagging”, “flopping” and “flap(ing) it around”.

The context of disapproval of public breastfeeding was mainly contextualised in their visibility to others. The reasons for the inappropriateness were rarely explicitly stated, but some posters suggested that they would feel uncomfortable to see a woman breastfeeding, because they would not know how to react. Occasionally, posters suggested that their (male) partners would feel uncomfortable seeing public breastfeeding. However, this can be seen in the context of a relatively large amount of comments (15%) that suggested that women deliberately exposed their breasts (to men) whilst publically breastfeeding.

The idea that mothers purposefully exposed their breasts, in order to attract attention or to “prove a point”, was one of the central elements of posters’ rationale for objecting to the practice. Many posters did not specifically suggest that women were attempting to be sexual in this practice, but they nonetheless asked women to cover themselves when breastfeeding. For example:

'Breast is best' YES WE GET IT!!! We all have to live in this world and try to get on and that takes compromise on both sides, so why can't you use a muslin or shawl when breastfeeding in a public space? Sorted, everyone happy including the most important person, the baby!

Regardless of if its feeding or whatever the FACT is to breast feed in public you are exposing a breast in public which is not acceptable, facts are facts regardless of your feeble attempt to justify it...

However, alongside comments relating to not wanting to see breasts in public, it was suggested in comments that women who breastfed publically were akin to “flashers”, those who indecently expose themselves to others in order to gain sexual gratification:

I and many others don't want to see you flashing your bits around while we're shopping.

Dont try to force your choices on the public. There are places provided for women to breast feed and if not then go somewhere discreet.. Dont force other people to look at you.

In contrast to the above discourses which saw women as ~~the~~ sexually [dominant partneraggressive](#), a small minority of posters (2%) suggested that if a woman was breastfeeding in public, she was inviting others (mostly men) to view her as sexually available. Some of these comments implied that women breastfeeding in public invited men to watch them. For example: “So is it ok to stare at breastfeeding mothers? it's natural as well!”

The call to action from [all-many](#) of these posters [who did not want to view public breastfeeding](#), however, was the same: women who breastfeed in public should be “discreet”, a word used some 51 times (6%) in the comments. It was suggested that good mothers who chose to breastfeed in public could do so in acceptable way, by covering their baby with some kind of fabric during feeding. This was seen in both discourses which were explicitly anti- public breastfeeding and those in which the commenter framed their views as pro-breastfeeding. Accordingly, those commenters suggest that it was not the general behaviour of public breastfeeding which was objected to, but the female breast being shown in public: “None of these (protesting women shown in the Mail Online photographs) are being v discreet, do any of them know what a pashmina is? Attention seekers the lot of them”.

By comparison a small minority of posters addressed the concept that those who viewed public breastfeeding were, or could be labelled as, voyeurs, and that they should avert their gaze where necessary. Alongside condemnation of public breastfeeding, a handful of posters

suggested that women who breastfeed in public would object to sexual breasts being displayed in public, and noted that they were thus hypocritical. The potential for irony was not noted by the poster, who reads a news site in which sexual breasts were very apparent, and were, in fact, displayed alongside the article from which the data were taken:

This lot heaving out their boobs in public because it's their 'right' will probably be the same ones who object to Page 3 girls displaying themselves in the papers & calendars or females having jobs as strippers. What hypocrites. I heard a radio debate on this subject a couple of years back and some woman came on bragging about how she had heaved hers out in the Sistine Chapel and breastfed there. Presumably that was more to do with cheap points and thrills so she could say she had done it there than any immediate necessity to feed the baby. How pathetic this lot of self righteous activists are.

3.4 Public Breastfeeding and Contemporary Womanhood

In addition to the idea that women who breastfeed in public were bad citizens and exhibitionists, it was suggested that women who breastfed in public were, in a more general sense, bad mothers and partners. Posters who stated that they were mothers or fathers, suggested that if women were more dedicated mothers, who were either less selfish or had better time management skills, it would never be necessary to breastfeed their infant in public:

I didn't venture far from home as my baby may have wanted a feed while out. It may have been different then, but as mothers we were willing to curtail our lives for a few months, but of course this was before the age of entitlement.

I breast fed my 2 children over 30 years ago but managed it easily without the need to do it in shops of swimming pools or restaurants...Nowadays there are mother and baby rooms everywhere or feed before you go out, babies don't have to hang off the breast every half hour !!

In a small minority of cases (6%), posters suggested that these poor mothering skills would lead to their infants growing up to be bad citizens. Some posters also commented on the desirability of the protesting women or women who were breastfeeding in public in relation to their status as partners (mostly referred to as "wives") and sexual beings. For example, one poster suggested that women who were strongly politically active were particularly unattractive and that this must be difficult for the women's partners: "Can't bare women like these, all me, me, me. Pity the poor husbands." This suggests that women who consider their own needs (and to an extent debateable by these posters, those of their infants), are neglecting their role as a good wife.

However, within these posts, there were also elements where it appeared that posters felt that the actions of others made them feel that their own different behaviour was being judged as inferior: "sick of parents thinking they're above everyone else just for popping out a prog." The notion of strong feeling regarding child rearing strategies was also reported by parents who did not report strong pro-breastfeeding views:

This kind of fanatical self-righteousness is what annoys me the most about those who are pro- breast feeding.... And breast feeding is a CHOICE so stop pushing it down everybody's throats.

4. Discussion

Overall, it could be seen that Mail Online readers who chose to post to the comments section of an article regarding a protest relating to a lack of rights for public breastfeeding were largely anti-public breastfeeding, and against women protesting to ensure their existing rights were enforced. Commenters argued that women who protested about women's rights were an unusual, undesirable "other" and bad mothers. Moreover, it was suggested that breastfeeding in public was a negative action for society more generally, because women were lacking the qualities needed to be good members of society. Alongside this, considerable attention was paid to women's breasts, but not the rest of their bodies, and how breastfeeding in public could be constructed as inviting sexual contact from adult men.

In contemporary UK society, breasts are viewed as primarily sexual, with a secondary function for feeding babies (Wall, 2001). In this context, breastfeeding in public is atypical, [with only 1% of women breastfeeding exclusively for six months, in line with public health guidelines](#) (McAndrew et al., 2012), [ref:MacArthur1](#), and as such those who breastfeed in public came to be seen by the majority of Mail Online posters as different from themselves (Hacking, 1986). This translated into breastfeeding reportedly being viewed by Mail Online commenters as an undesirable public behaviour (Mills, 2009), undertaken by those who were seen as a morally different "other" by many, but not all, posters (Fox & Smith, 2011; Tyler, 2008). Several interwoven factors can be seen as contributing towards negative discourses

within the online comments. Breastfeeding was seen as appropriate for only the very youngest of infants (Dowling & Brown, 2012), and thus those who breastfed beyond the initial weeks were viewed as particularly different. Alongside this Mail Online commenters stated that mothers should undertake their breastfeeding in a public space, as opposed to a semi-private space like a “mother and baby room”, but should do so in a “discreet” way in order to avoid exposing their breast (Wall, 2001) (Mahon-Daly & Andrews, 2002). This shows some agreement with the right to breastfeed in public found within the Equality Act 2010, but was expressed in a hostile way.

In addition to discourses found in the existing literature, many posters suggested that women were able to find time to breastfeed in public, or protest for breastfeeding in public to be allowed, because they were not productive citizens, and this fits within a dimension of class bias seen in some comments [where those who were protesting were viewed as “benefit scroungers”](#), and a more general sense of deviance. Interestingly, discussion of ethnicity or race was absent from the comments, although the majority of the women photographed in the newspaper coverage were white, [implying the universality of whiteness](#). Discourses focusing on lazy parenting were also present. These were particularly common when posters self-reported that they were parents and had remained in the home to feed their infants.

Accordingly, these posters’ parenting styles were framed as more responsible than mothers who breastfeeding public, in order to validate their parenting choices (Lee, 2008). In stating their superiority, these posters argued that mothers who were breastfeeding their babies were, in some circumstances, less responsible than they had been *and* bottle feeding mothers were. This shows that in today’s society, women construct their own identities as responsible mothers in contrast to mothers behaving differently to themselves (Fox & Smith, 2011; Hacking, 1986). [In order to do so, hierarchies of behaviour are created and internalised, and](#)

[the mother is able to place herself within the context of those who behave more and less desirably than she does.](#)

These findings can also be viewed within the context of the relative newness of care work being performed in shared (public) space (Anderson, 2010; Boyer & Spinney, 2016). Previous research has found that the use of an amount of space perceived as larger than is fair (Boyer & Spinney, 2016), or creating an amount of noise which is viewed as inappropriate (Battersby, 2007) can result in disapproval of public parenting. It may be that, whilst breastfeeding *per se* would not ordinarily be considered as noisy or space-consuming activity, the protest within the retail establishment resulted in feelings among readers that both of these conventions had been breached. [even though they had not personally been inconvenienced. This kind of online outrage is not uncommon, and can be viewed as a type of crowd-mentality \(Fox & Smith, 2011\).](#) Concerns over the cleanliness of breastfeeding (Mahon-Daly & Andrews, 2002), were much more apparent [than those relating to noise or the amount of space taken up,](#) with some concerns expressed that breastmilk might soil goods, whilst other posters suggested that the act itself was akin to urination, defecation or a sexual act. As has been found in other research on acceptable motherhoods (Tyler, 2008), authors' negative reactions towards the act of public breastfeeding were often formed from a belief that it was "disgusting" to breastfeed, particularly in the public arena. ~~[Previous research on public parenting has identified that observers may find it unacceptable if too much of the body is shown \(Mahon-Daly & Andrews, 2002\), further strengthening the link with discourses around being "discreet".](#)~~

An alternative contextualising lens for the findings is that of their origin. Mail Online (and its print edition The Daily Mail) are well known for being conservative with a middle-aged, middle class readership (Sointu, 2005). Some commenters stated that they had been parents and would not conduct breastfeeding in public, and it may be that the transition from largely private parenting to public parenting is less acceptable to parts of the Mail Online's readership. Alongside this, the Mail Online website regularly shows images of young women in bikinis, displaying "sexual" breasts (Yalom, 1997) down the right-hand side of the screen, and this exhibition of the sexual role of breasts can be seen as contributing towards the view of their purpose among readers. This may have influenced their statements about the need for breastfeeding mothers to be "discreet". Moreover, the language used to describe the way in which women breastfed their babies and women's breasts at this time had a highly sexual component, suggesting that for Mail Online posters, breasts are primarily sexual (Yalom, 1997), and this is likely to be related to them finding the act distasteful (Acker, 2009).

Field Code Changed

Field Code Changed

Field Code Changed

These types of comments, at least some of which were written by people reporting to be women, including some claiming to be mothers, show a strong level of surveillance and judgement towards women's bodies and behaviour (Foucault, 1977). The repetition of these discourses, and the telling of stories of women being denied their right to breastfeed in public act as a cautionary tale for women, which aims to regulate their behaviour (Stearns, 2011). This is likely to affect society as a whole: women who are considering breastfeeding in public may become more concerned about negative reactions; their partners, family and friends may (rightly) be concerned that they may experience a negative reaction and may contribute to pressure not to breastfeed in public (Brown et al., 2011). In addition to this, readers of these comments may come to believe that the dominant discourse (and thus the acceptable behaviour) is not to breastfeed in public; women may thus self-regulate their behaviour

(Foucault, 1977; Hacking, 1986). Ultimately, women's bodies during and after pregnancy are highly regulated and subjected to surveillance related to competing discourses from medical professionals, those close to them, and strangers (Foucault, 1977), and there is thus no easy infant feeding choice.

Strengths and limitations

The anonymous comments analysed in this research represent an unusual ~~naturally occurring~~ data source in current social research which were created without reference to a research question—a, and this has both strengths and limitations. In an area of study in which there is a dearth of literature from the point of view of the observer of breastfeeding, this study provides a useful insight. However, the comments would have been informed by the title of the article, which stated that the protesters were “Angry”, and other comments that were on display, and this may have influenced opinion towards the subject matter. Moreover, anonymous online interactions are known to have a disinhibition effect (Mann & Stewart, 2000), and this may account for some of the strong language used and opinions expressed. The Critical Discourse Analysis framework would suggest that at least some level of the sexism demonstrated in the comments reflects real life views and actions. However, it was not possible for commenters to elaborate on their rationale for their stance, nor to clarify remarks which were unclear, allowing significant scope for researcher interpretation.

The research has expanded the evidence base in two key ways. First, it has added to the small body of research on the views of those who observe (or potentially observe) public breastfeeding. The research supports existing findings, by confirming a preference among observers for women to be “discreet” (Spurles & Babineau, 2011) and confirms that

hypersexual views of breasts are held by some who find public breastfeeding an uncomfortable concept (Acker, 2009). Second, the research uses documentary analysis of online content to understand a new area of motherhood, health and place, which has been found to be illuminating in other studies (Fox & Smith, 2011). However, this research should lead to more in-depth qualitative research with adults and children regarding their experiences of seeing breastfeeding in public, which would allow for clarification, in order to gain insights which could not be found from the current data source.

5. Conclusion

Within the UK, breastfeeding women should be protected from discrimination when breastfeeding in public by the Equality Act 2010. High profile cases and previous qualitative research with pregnant women have shown that this protection is not universal and that many breastfeeding mothers feel vulnerable and stigmatised, [showing a lack of enforcement of such protection](#). The research reported here built on this body of work to understand public perceptions of breastfeeding. Using a Critical Discourse Analysis approach to apply findings from the individuals [who posted](#) to [the Mail Online society as a whole](#) (Van Dijk, 2001), it is argued that the continuity in negative comments can create and reinforce a shared belief [among readers](#) that public breastfeeding is undertaken by mothers who are abnormal, exhibitionist and bad mothers. Whilst individuals or small groups lack the power of the legal system, they perform regular surveillance of mothers in public (and sometimes private) spaces, and thus they are powerful and can shape social norms regarding acceptable motherhood (Lupton, 2012) and use of public space. Accordingly, whilst society holds views that breasts are sexual, not nurturing, and that breastfeeding should not occur in public unless

the woman covers her body (and the baby), breastfeeding rates will not increase dramatically. Lessons about performing care in public can be learned from countries in which breastfeeding in public is normalised.

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¹ 'Latching on' is the term used most frequently to describe the connection between the baby's mouth and the mother's nipple. If the latch is incorrect, the mother is more likely to experience pain, and the baby will not get an adequate supply of milk from the feed.

² The use of capital letters in inonline content is commonly viewed as representing shouting.