

Attitudes Towards Breastfeeding in Public

Ashley Maxwell and Victoria Villalobos

Eastern Oregon University

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine if the media could influence a person's attitude towards the acceptance of breastfeeding in public. Participants were recruited via facebook and read a short article before they took a survey. The participants either read the neutral article about breastfeeding in general or the experimental article which promoted breastfeeding in public. Results showed that there was no significant difference between the two groups; this shows that the media (the article read) did not impact the participants attitudes towards breastfeeding in public.

Attitudes Towards Breastfeeding in Public

There are many societal norms that reflect a negative attitude towards women breastfeeding in public. It seems common that although it is known that breastfeeding is the best for an infant's health, it is more accepted as something that should be done in the private sphere of a woman's life. The impact of the media and other social interactions have directly supported the perception that breastfeeding "normally" occurs within the confinement of the home. This lead researchers to point out how important it is for the media to encourage breastfeeding in public so that more people can be exposed to it and begin to form a new "normal" expectation for where breastfeeding can and should occur.

It has been shown that the attitudes of the community in which a mother resides can have a large impact on whether or not she breastfeeds in public. Meng, Daly, Pollard, and Binns (2013) conducted a study to assess attitudes, and if these attitudes have changed in regards to breastfeeding in public places such as shopping centers, restaurants, workplaces and public transportation in adults aged 18-64 years old from Western Australia between 1995 and 2009. Data was collected as a part of the Australian Nutrition Monitor Survey by telephone interviews. These interviews were conducted in 1995, 1998, 2001, 2004 and 2009. Participants in the 1995 survey were selected based on geographic area. The studies conducted in 1998, 2004 and 2001 included participants that were selected based upon geographic area and gender. The 2009 survey selected participants by geographic area. A total of 5,496 people aged 18-64 participated in the studies between 1995 and 2009. Meng et al. (2013) found that around 70% of participants agreed that it was acceptable to breastfeed in public places. More support for breastfeeding was found for shopping centers and public transportation when compared to other public places. 95% of the participants agreed that breastfeeding in public in a separated room was acceptable. Multinomial regression models showed that sociodemographic characteristics

were more important determinants of attitudes than the time at which the survey was administered. In every case it was found that women more often than men viewed breastfeeding in public unacceptable. Lastly, the more education a participant had, the more breastfeeding in public places was accepted. A large majority of participants over the age of 44 years old said “it depends on how obvious” the act of breastfeeding occurs, or in other words the amount of skin that is shown by the mother in public. If a woman is unabashedly breastfeeding without any sort of cover it is considered to be more obvious than if the woman at least attempted to use a blanket or something else to cover herself. Overall in 2009 fewer people disapproved of breastfeeding in public when compared to 1995, but it was more widely accepted when done discreetly.

It is likely that the practice of breastfeeding in public reflects societal attitudes towards the behavior. Scott et al. (2015) compared the attitudes of citizens from four European countries (Scotland, Spain, Sweden and Italy) in order to examine if societal norms impact the duration of breastfeeding. A longitudinal study and cross sectional survey were conducted in 2004 and 2005. Healthy mothers and their babies were recruited from the maternity wards of participating hospitals in the areas of interest. The survey included questionnaires designed to assess feeding practices and the duration of breastfeeding. The consumer survey administered six weeks postpartum was designed to gather information about attitudes and behaviors of parents in regards to feeding related issues such as breastfeeding in public. The Iowa Infant Feeding Scale (IIFAS) was used; which has been shown to predict the choice of feeding method and duration of breastfeeding. The results from the 389 participants showed that 90.4% of Scottish participants, 91.4% of Swedish participants, 58.3% of participants from Spain and 43.7% of participants from Italy disagreed with the statement “women should not breastfeed in public places such as restaurants.” In support of these findings, it was found that the more a mother

agreed with the statement, the less likely they were to have ever breastfed in public. Also it was found that if a woman had breastfed in public there was a lower chance of the discontinuation of breastfeeding in the first twelve months. A discontinuation of breastfeeding in the first twelve months was also decreased when a mother had a high IIFAS score showing a positive attitude toward breastfeeding. Overall societal norms towards breastfeeding may influence the willingness of future mothers to breastfeed.

It has been shown that mothers in the United States fall short of the recommended breastfeeding duration (6 months), and that there could be societal reasons as to why this occurs. Acker (2009) examined specific attitudes others may have of mothers who breastfeed in public or in private, in order to understand social attitudes that affect breastfeeding outcomes. Acker's (2009) study focused on whether pre-existing attitudes that a person may have had would impact a person's attitude towards a woman who breastfeeds in public. The pre-existing attitude that was studied was if benevolent or hostile sexist attitudes would impact if a person had a neutral or biased attitude against breastfeeding in public. The participants were aged 18-72 and included a combination of 106 college students (33 males and 72 females) from a midwestern college and 80 adults (48 males and 31 females) from a large business. The study used a between subjects design and manipulated one factor (location) with two levels (private or public). There were a total of nine photos shown to each participant that included women in different attire and locations, with the target photo being one that showed a woman breastfeeding. The private group saw a woman breastfeeding at home, while the public group saw a photo of a woman breastfeeding in a coffee shop. Responses were measured on feelings of approval, negativity and normalcy on a seven point likert scale. The participants were sent a randomly selected password that allowed them to access the hosting school's website with the program for the experiment. Participants were told that the experiment was designed to

examine how dress and behavior influenced people's perceptions. After the photo part of the experiment was done, the participants completed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory which measures a person's level of sexism, and provided demographic information. The results showed that women breastfeeding in public evoked more negative judgments than women who breastfed in private. This stems from the fact that it is almost unavoidable for a woman to be able to breastfeed without exposing at least a portion of her breast. The reason for the negative attitude is that exposing any portion of a woman's breast is typically frowned upon by society. Breasts are usually exposed in the media only in sexualized manners and not in a way that encourages their use to provide nutrients for a child. It has been found that men high in benevolent sexism were more likely to have strong negative judgments against women breastfeeding in public, and that hostile (or more aggressive) sexist men had a general dislike for women who breastfed in either private or public. Results also showed that women who were older (age 26-71) were more likely to approve of breastfeeding in public than the younger participants (age 18-25). These results were interpreted as reflecting the hypersexualization of breasts, a function of familiarity with seeing the female body uncovered, and sexist attitudes.

In a study conducted by Smith, Hawkinson, and Paull (2011), mothers who were seen breastfeeding a child were perceived as more attendant and nurturant towards their children, but they were also perceived as less competent compared to their bottle feeding counterparts. The results of the study indicated that the general impression felt by 30, young, childless females is that, while breastfeeding demonstrates more warmth and affection from the mother, it also implies that the mother is not as competent, generally or in math. The results suggest a competency bias towards women in association with breastfeeding. In another experiment conducted on the topic of breastfeeding perceptions, the findings supported the results of Meng et al.'s study (2013). A group of participants were subjected to a study in which they were

presented with one of four different voicemails. The voicemails presented either had a breastfeeding emphasis, a mother only emphasis, a sexual breast emphasis, or no emphasis. The voicemails stated different reasons as an excuse for their tardiness to a previously planned meeting. Breastfeeding emphasis messages stated that the woman needed to feed her child, mother only messages stated that the woman had to give the child a bottle and sexual breast messages stated that the woman needed to change into a shirt that revealed less before they could leave their house and be on their way to a meeting. All messages resulted with the woman in the voicemail being equally late for a meeting. After participants listened to the voicemails, they were asked to create a Myspace account as if they were the person that had left the message. The Myspace accounts had the ability to demonstrate attributes that were considered to demonstrate certain characteristics in the setup process. These key characteristics were general competence, workplace capability, math competence, and the likelihood that they would hire the person who had left the voicemail. These resulting accounts were then separated to see how the voicemail that the participants had heard at the beginning of the experiment impacted their opinions. The results showed that the participants scored the woman that had a breastfeeding emphasis the lowest out of any other category.

There have been mixed results for the impact of age on perceptions about breastfeeding in public. Meng et al. (2013) showed that participants over the age of 44 were more likely to approve of breastfeeding in public if done so discreetly. Acker (2009) found that people between the ages of 26-71 were more likely to approve of breastfeeding in public with no indication of the level of discreteness compared to younger participants aged 18-25. Further research should study if age affects attitudes of breastfeeding in public.. Because society is influenced by the media, any attitudes portrayed by it are more likely to be mirrored by the population, results from

future research should address the importance of the media in regards to the impact it may have on attitudes about breastfeeding in public.

It is our belief that people are influenced by the manner in which breastfeeding is portrayed in the media. Women are encouraged to cover themselves while feeding their child, and have at times been shamed for not doing so. The following study will present participants with a short article meant to influence their opinion on breastfeeding in public. This will be done by having participants either read a control (neutral) article or a manipulative article. The hypothesis is that participant's opinions would be impacted by the experimental article. It is expected to be demonstrated by the results of the statistical tests that will follow that participants who read the manipulative paragraph will show more acceptance of a women who breastfeeds in public than participant's who read the neutral paragraph.

Method

Participants

A total of 84 participants took the survey, there were a total of 10 men and 71 women who participated in the survey with a remainder of three participants who did not indicate their gender. Participants were recruited via the researcher's personal Facebook accounts to participate in a survey that would study if the knowledge people had about breastfeeding was accurate in comparison with factual information. Participants were also recruited from psychology classes at Eastern Oregon University that offered participants an opportunity to receive extra credit for participation. Lastly, participants were also recruited from local flyers and handouts. The presented purpose of the study was to disguise the actual purpose of the study in order to get results that would not be biased by the participants knowledge of the actual purpose of the study. There was no compensation and participants had varying levels of knowledge about breastfeeding.

Materials

The experiment was conducted exclusively on electronic devices with internet capabilities (e.g. computers, cell phones, or tablets). Participants informed about the study through Facebook posts included a brief explanation and a link to the survey through Google Documents. The comments section was turned off to make sure that the researchers were not able to pick and choose who participated in the study. Participants were instructed to read a short paragraph before beginning the survey. A link to the neutral article was posted on Villalobos Facebook account and the link to the experimental article was posted on Maxwell's Facebook account. The paragraphs were brief, with the experimental article of a length of 474 words and the neutral article of 381 words.. The positive paragraph promoted breastfeeding in public, the neutral one offered no preference between bottle or breastfeeding. The paragraphs and survey were created by the researcher's (see Appendix A for the survey, Appendix B for the positive article, and Appendix C for the neutral article). The survey consisted of fifteen questions, with a total of three questions geared to measure attitudes about breastfeeding in public, and the other 12 questions geared to disguise the purpose of the experiment. Participants could respond to a question by indicating the degree to which they agree with a statement on a scale of 1 to 7. An example of one of the questions was as follows, "You are sitting at a table in a coffee shop. A woman walks in and sits at the table next to you and begins breastfeeding an infant. This makes you feel uncomfortable." If their response to a question is a number four that indicates that their feelings towards the question were neutral (e.g. they neither agree nor disagree), a response of one indicated that the person disagreed that breastfeeding should not occur in public, and a response of seven indicated that the person agreed that breastfeeding should not occur in public. The survey had no time limit. At the end of the survey

participants received thanks for their participation and were also debriefed of the actual purpose of the study.

Procedure

Once participants were directed to the survey, they were assigned to either read the neutral statement about breastfeeding in general, or the manipulative statement that promoted breastfeeding depending on which researcher's link they were recruited from. Once participants read the short paragraph they were instructed to read the fifteen statements and choose the response that came closest to represent their opinions. Participants were not asked to put any identifiable information in the survey, other than age, gender and geographic location, so that responses would be anonymous. This was a between subject design. 52 participants read the positive article, 32 read the neutral article. Of the 52 participants who read the positive article, 6 did not read the article so those responses were not included in the analysis.

Results

For this experiment an independent t-test was used to analyze the results. From the analysis, results showed that there was no significant difference between the groups who read the positive or neutral article, $t(76) = .175$, $p = .8611$. To compare if there was a difference between age groups (18-25, 26-35, or older than 35), a two way between-subjects ANOVA was performed, results showed there was no significant difference between age groups and the article read, $F(2, 66) = 17.66$, $p = .232$.

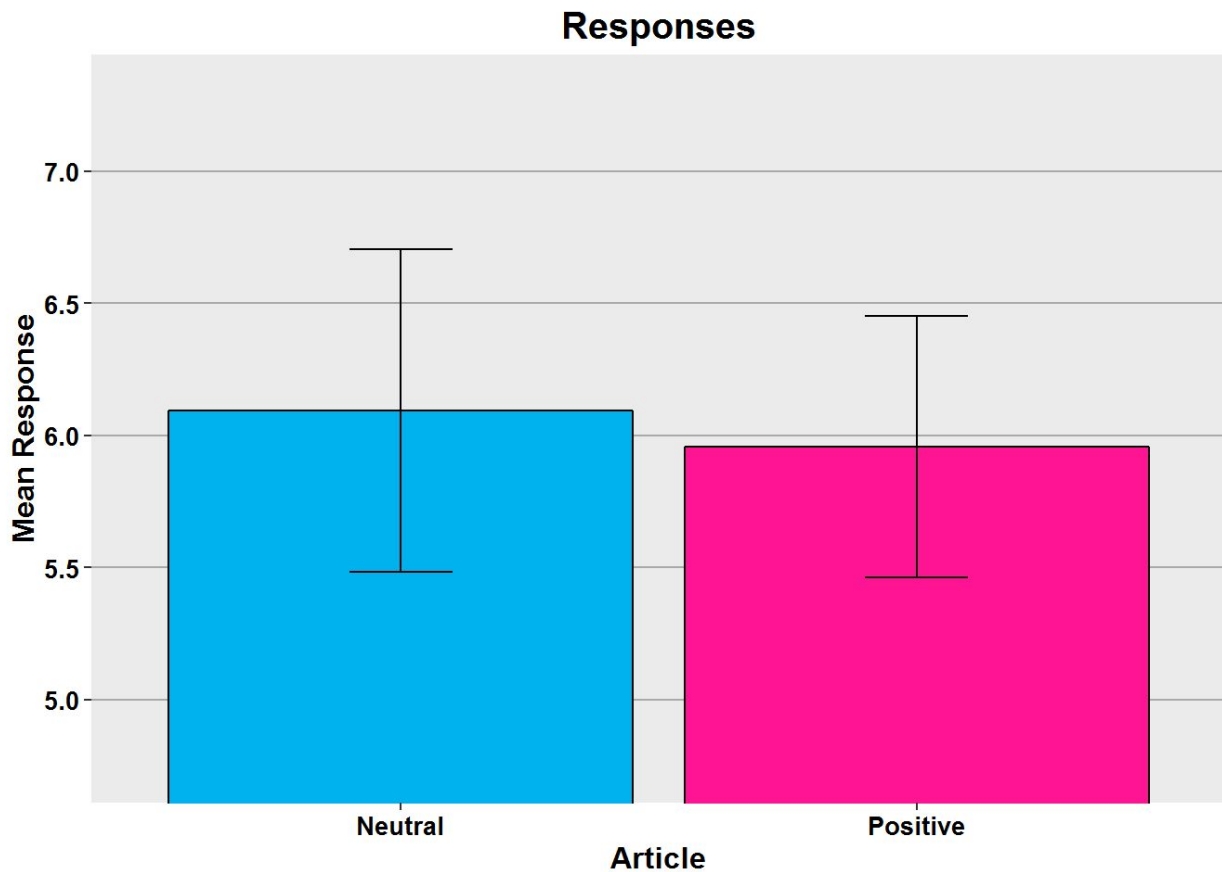


Figure 1: *There was no significant difference between the means of the experimental or the neutral group.*

Discussion

It has been thought that the media may impact a person's attitude towards breastfeeding in public. This study shows that this may not be the case, and that people's attitudes towards breastfeeding may not be easily changed. Because the results indicated no significant differences between groups this shows that people may not be as uncomfortable with a mother breastfeeding in public as once thought. Also in contradiction with other studies such as Meng et al. that have been conducted, our results showed that there were no significant difference between the age of the participants and the article read. This means that unlike other studies,

the age of the participant did not influence their attitude towards breastfeeding in public. In line with one of Meng et al. study, our study supported that people approve of breastfeeding in public. The results should be interpreted with caution because there were a few weaknesses in the methods of this study. One weakness is that participants were assigned to the articles based off of which researcher they were friends with on Facebook; this confounds the results because the two groups of participants could have been very different. Another weakness to consider is that the experimental article may not have been manipulative enough to persuade the participants that breastfeeding in public is acceptable. A weakness that was discovered during the analysis of the surveys was that 6 of the participants responded that they had not read the assigned article. Perhaps if there would have been a compensation offered at the end of their participation the participants would have felt more inclined to read through the material. Given the weaknesses of this study, further research should explore if the media impacts attitudes towards breastfeeding in public with a more diverse and larger sample of participants, as well as a stronger experimental article.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to measure whether or not the media has an influence on the opinion that people have on breastfeeding in public. It has been hypothesized that the manner in which breastfeeding is perceived by an individual, is directly related to the societal perception of breastfeeding Scott et al. (2015). Media influences were tested with the help of an online survey that was administered to participants. The participants were either manipulated by being exposed to an article that discreetly promoted breastfeeding in public, or were presented with a neutral article that did not manipulate them in any way. After being subjected to their articles participants took part in a survey. The results of the survey showed no significant

difference between the control group and the positively manipulated group. This demonstrated that the media had no impact on the participant's attitude towards breastfeeding in public. The findings of the study do not support the hypotheses.

Appendix A

Survey

General Questionnaire

Did you read the short article?

Yes

No

What is your gender?

Female

Male

What city and state do you reside?

How old are you?

Between 18-25

Between 26-35

Older than 35

Instructions:

Please circle the number that reflects how much you agree with the statement. The scale goes from lowest to highest; the number one indicates you strongly disagree with the statement, the number ten indicates you strongly agree with the statement, and the number four indicates you neither agree or disagree.

1. Breast milk supplies quality nutrients to an infant.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

2. Colostrum is a more concentrated form of breast milk with lots of immunological

properties.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

3. Breastfeeding is something that is encouraged in my community.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

4. When an infant is breastfed it is difficult to tell how much milk is consumed.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

5. Breastfeeding helps a women lose weight that was gained during pregnancy.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

6. Mothers should cover their breasts from public view when breastfeeding in public places.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

7. Breast milk is composed of low fat and low protein.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

8. Breastfeeding is something that should primarily be done at home.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

9. A mother's milk supply does not actually come in until about 1-3 days after birth.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

10. You are sitting at a table in a coffee shop. A woman walks in and sits at the table next to you and begins breastfeeding an infant. This makes you feel uncomfortable.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

11. Breastfeeding is correlated with a lowered risk of breast and ovarian cancer for the mother.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

12. Most people in my community bottle feed their infants.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

13. Breastfeeding is a cheap food source in comparison to formula.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

14. Formula is created to have nutritional value for infants, because of this breastfeeding is no longer necessary.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

15. Expecting future mothers to breastfeed places unnecessary stress on them since not all women are able to produce enough milk.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Appendix B

Positive Article

Breastfeeding is the oldest way that the human species have provided food for their infants. In hunter gatherer societies who resemble our ancestors, babies are breastfed wherever they are hungry and have constant access to their mother's breasts. In one of the last hunter gatherer societies on earth, the !Kung San, infants are breastfed on average every 13 minutes. Because the lifestyle of the !Kung San resembles that of our ancestors we can assume that this is similar to the chosen interval for breastfeeding along the course of our human evolutionary history. The continuous availability of the mother's breast milk at any time allowed the infant to have the nutrition needed to grow without interruption. Without the availability of continuous feeds in any location where the mother was present there could have been negative consequences. The infant who was not allowed breast milk whenever and where ever hungry may have died from dehydration induced by diarrhea caused from dysentery, an illness caused from drinking dirty water. The infant could have also suffered and died from malnutrition, especially if the infant was not able to eat other types of solid food. This method of short intervals between feeding might have allowed the human species to survive into the modern humans we are today. Without the mother allowing the act of breastfeeding to occur in any location, private or public, the human species might not exist. This is why it is important for breastfeeding to continue in our modern world. Not only does breastfeeding need to continue, it also needs to occur at the time and place that the infant is hungry.

There are lots of other cool things that breastfeeding can do, such as prevent and treat eye infections of a newborn. During a woman's first breastfeeding session, a thicker milk called colostrum is created. Colostrum contains a substantial amount of protein and antibodies that protect the infant against disease. The composition of breast milk also adapts to the infant's

needs, and allows the infant to sample food in the mother's diet. Because breast milk allows the infant to sample food from the mother's diet it has been argued that breastfed babies have a broader range of foods that they like. Studies have shown that infants who are breastfed have a reduced risk of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome). Studies have also shown that infants who are breastfed get sick less often. More specifically, they suffer less from respiratory infections and ear infections. Breastfeeding is a natural phenomenon that occurs within the female's body in order to provide nutrition for her infant, it is one of the largest factors that make the human species a mammal. Because it is something that occurs in all mammals, including humans that have survived into our modern times we can see how valuable breast milk is for infant nutrition.

Appendix C

Neutral Article

During the first six months of an infant's life it is recommended that all nutrition come from either breastfeeding, formula, or a combination of both. Now day's pumps have made breastfeeding easier by giving women more freedom. Formula has also provided a way for parents to feed their infants and also lead an independent lifestyle. There are many trade offs that a parent must contemplate in the decision whether to bottle feed or breastfeed their infant because there are benefits and costs to both. Every situation is different, and this important decision is based on how well the type of feeding method will fit the needs of the family.

While breastfeeding an infant is primarily the responsibility of the mother, pumps now allow this responsibility to be shared with the father or other relatives and friends. Bottle feeding a child can be done by either parent. Because of the opportunity to bond with the infant some fathers might prefer the idea of bottle feeding. Another thing that people should take into consideration is that breastfeeding is free, with the exception of any supplements that the mother might need, while most other options are less cost effective. There are times when breast milk may be the better option, there are times when regular formula might be a better option, and there are times when other alternatives may need to be found. If a child is born with an allergy to the most commonly used milks there are other options such as lactose free formula, formula for sensitive stomachs, soy based formulas, and milk from other animals. If the mother chooses to breastfeed, it is suggested by La Leche League (an organization that gives information on breastfeeding), that she refrain from consuming things that would travel through her bloodstream, and into her milk. The most commonly used substances that are mentioned as being of concern are drugs, alcohol, and caffeine. Both alcohol and caffeine are listed as being okay to consume in moderation. While this may not make a difference to some people, others

could find it challenging to keep the ingestion of these items to a minimum. There is no right or wrong decision between formula or breast milk, only the decision to choose what works best for the family's individual situation.

References

- Acker, M. (2009). Breast is best...but not everywhere: Ambivalent sexism and attitudes toward private and public breastfeeding. *Sex Roles*, 61, 476–490.
doi:10.1007/s11199-009-9655-z
- Meng, X., Daly, A., Pollard, C. M., & Binns, C. W. (2013). Community attitudes toward breastfeeding in public places among Western Australia adults, 1995-2009. *Journal of Human Lactation*, 29, 183–189. doi:10.1177/0890334413478835
- Scott, J. A., Kwok, Y. Y., Synnott, K., Bogue, J., Amarri, S., Norin, E., ... Gil, A. (2015). A comparison of maternal attitudes to breastfeeding in public and the association with breastfeeding duration in four European countries: Results of a cohort study. *BIRTH*, 42, 78-85.
- Smith, J. L., Hawkinson, K., & Paull, K. (2011). Spoiled milk: An experimental examination of bias against mothers who breastfeed. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 37, 867–878. doi:10.1177/0146167211401629