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Katherine A. Foss^a

^a School of Journalism, Middle Tennessee State University

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“That’s Not a Beer Bong, It’s a Breast Pump!” Representations of Breastfeeding in Prime-Time Fictional Television

Katherine A. Foss

School of Journalism

Middle Tennessee State University

Breastfeeding has been recognized as one of the key determinant in one’s future health. Yet although most people are aware of the benefits, many women do not breastfeed their babies past the first few months. These low rates can be partially explained by negative cultural attitudes toward breastfeeding, which have been reinforced by media messages. This research explored representations of breastfeeding in entertainment media—an area that has been overlooked. A textual analysis was conducted on 53 fictional television breastfeeding representations, ranging in genre and audience, from *Beavis and Butthead* to *Criminal Minds*. Findings indicate that breastfeeding depictions are generally positive, but limited in scope to educated, older, Caucasian women breastfeeding newborns, with little discussion about how to overcome problems. Extended breastfeeding and nursing in public were conveyed as socially unacceptable, making other characters uncomfortable, often within the same storylines that sexualized breasts. While the frequency of representations in recent years was encouraging, the narrow definition of the “normal” nursing experience excluded many types of women and breastfeeding experiences. And, by failing to address breastfeeding challenges and conveying that extended breastfeeding or nursing in public is abnormal or obscene, these depictions reinforce myths about the ease of breastfeeding and may discourage women from breastfeeding past the newborn phase, and outside the privacy of their homes. These portrayals may help explain why breastfeeding has not been “normalized,” despite an international consensus that it is the best health choice for babies.

Public health advocates have recognized breastfeeding as one of the key actions to improving our national health. By increasing the nation’s breastfeeding rates, the risk of obesity, many types of cancer, allergies, asthma, diabetes, and a number of other chronic (and expensive) health conditions could be dramatically reduced (Caplan et al., 2008; Owen et al., 2006; Palmer, 1998; Pratt, 1984; van Odijk et al., 2003; Villegas et al., 2008; Wright et al., 1998). A 2010 article in *Pediatrics* speculated that \$13 billion in United States health care costs could be saved each year and more than 900 infant deaths could be prevented if 80–90% of women breastfed at least 6 months (Bartick & Reinhold, 2010). And yet, despite the fact that 75% of new mothers attempt to breastfeed, only 33% succeed at exclusively breastfeeding

for the first 3 months (“Breastfeeding Report Card,” 2010). Only 13.3% are still exclusively breastfeeding at 6 months (“Breastfeeding Report Card,” 2010). The low incidence of breastfeeding not only impacts individual children, but also has significant ramifications for the overall health of the American population.

Although breastfeeding is a personal choice, breastfeeding scholars have pointed out that a complex array of historical, institutional, and individual forces influences a woman’s decision to breastfeed and success at breastfeeding (Blum, 1999; Hausman, 2003; Koerber, 2005, 2006; Wolf, 2006). Common justifications for weaning prematurely include latching issues, sore nipples, and a woman’s belief that her milk is insufficient (Lewallen et al., 2006). And yet these individual obstacles are linked to larger issues, such as inadequate assistance with latching, short maternity leaves, and physicians’ lack of breastfeeding knowledge (DiGirolamo, Grummer-Strawn, & Fein, 2003; Freed et al., 1995; Lewallen et al., 2006; Schanler et al., 1999). Even when a woman

Correspondence should be addressed to Katherine A. Foss, Box 64, School of Journalism, Middle Tennessee University, 1301 E. Main Street, Murfreesboro, TN 37132. E-mail: katie.foss@mtsu.edu

intends to breastfeed and has a supportive physician, she may still experience resistance from the health care system (Koerber, 2005). Thus, effective breastfeeding advocacy may need to go beyond persuading individuals to address macro-level barriers. For example, as part of the Baby Friendly initiative, hospitals have been discouraged from distributing formula samples (Stuebe, 2011). Legislation has been passed requiring employers to provide nursing mothers with periodic breaks and a private space for pumping (Rubin, 2010). Other macro-level changes have also been enacted, as part of the breastfeeding initiative of *Healthy People 2010*, which aims to increase national and global breastfeeding rates and duration ("Breastfeeding Report Card," 2010).

Along with policy changes, cultural attitudes toward breastfeeding also impact breastfeeding rates. Attitudes toward breastfeeding can affect women's familiarity and comfort with breastfeeding. The opinions of health professionals, expectant fathers, family, and friends significantly influence whether and how long a woman breastfeeds (DiGirolamo, Grummer-Strawn & Fein, 2003; Freed, Fraley, & Schanler, 1992; Littman, Medendorp & Goldfarb, 1994; Taveras et al., 2004). The extent to which the public supports breastfeeding can also impact a woman's willingness and comfort in nursing her child in public places, like the local restaurant or retail outlet (Avery et al., 1998; Sheeshka et al., 2001). Because of negative attitudes toward breastfeeding, some nursing mothers have reported feeling "vulnerable" when nursing in public (Sheeshka et al., 2001). This finding is not surprising, given that a study of breastfeeding attitudes found that only 43% of people surveyed believed women should have the right to breastfeed in public (Li et al., 2004). Even with laws in 48 states that protect a woman's right to breastfeed in public, nursing mothers continually get harassed for feeding their babies. For example, in August 2009, a restaurant manager at a Florida Chick-fil-A asked a nursing mother to cover up because children were present and then handed the woman a kitchen towel to place on the baby's head (Harris, 2009). News outlets have also reported similar stories of employees criticizing nursing mothers at other popular businesses (i.e., Harding, 2009; Maddux, 2009). These stories reinforce stigma about breastfeeding, conveying the message that, though legal, breastfeeding should be kept private, meaning that women may face public scrutiny if they attempt to nourish their own babies with breast milk. Given that most babies nurse 8–12 times per day, it would be difficult for a woman to successfully breastfeed without nursing in public (Smith, 2001).

Media representations play a significant role in shaping perceptions of breastfeeding, especially for those who lack breastfeeding education from other sources. Media can inform consumers of health information, define what is considered "normal," and enact changes in health behavior (Conrad, 2007; Soumerai, Ross-Degnan & Kahn, 2002). For example, in one survey, bottle-feeding mothers indicated that

they would have been more likely to breastfeed if they had gotten breastfeeding information from magazines, books, or television (Arora et al., 2000). Media representations also influence what is considered socially acceptable. Brown and Peuchaud (2008) reviewed studies on media coverage of breastfeeding, concluding that positive representations were lacking. Similarly, a 2005 American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) statement on breastfeeding argued that media messages that depict bottle-feeding as "normal" have likely hindered breastfeeding rates ("Breastfeeding and the Use of Human Milk," 2005). Furthermore, the AAP recommended that media creators should "portray breastfeeding as positive and normative" ("Breastfeeding and the Use of Human Milk," 2005). Thus, as suggested by the AAP, media should be utilized as a vital tool in promoting breastfeeding. Indeed, past health campaigns on breastfeeding have demonstrated media's impact, improving awareness, increasing initiation rates, and producing positive attitudes toward breastfeeding (Kim, 1998; McDivitt et al., 1993). Furthermore, in 2011, "The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Support Breastfeeding," published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, criticized past and current breastfeeding representations, and recommended media be used effectively to promote breastfeeding ("The Surgeon General's Call to Action," 2011).

As argued by Brown and Peuchaud (2008), media have contributed to lower breastfeeding rates by normalizing bottle feeding and perpetuating the difficulty of breastfeeding. Even more disturbing, Hausman (2003) explained how media messages have framed breastfeeding as harmful, even dangerous, to infants, with stories of "dead babies" saturating media. Research on media representations of breastfeeding has largely focused on quantitative studies of magazine content (Foss & Southwell, 2006; Frerichs et al., 2006; Potter, Sheeshka & Valaitis, 2000; Young, 1990). Foss and Southwell (2006) determined a negative correlation between breastfeeding rates and the number of commercial formula ads in a parenting magazine. Breastfeeding trends in magazines and parenting manuals have suggested that contemporary media depict breastfeeding as positive, but difficult (Frerichs et al., 2006; Potter, Sheeshka & Valaitis, 2000; Young, 1990). In a historical study of infant feeding trends, Foss (2010) found a similar pattern, noting that experts, like health care providers, have historically been used to support both bottle and breastfeeding. Because most health professionals lack knowledge on breastfeeding, the reliance on them for breastfeeding advice can help explain the short breastfeeding duration in the United States (Freed et al., 1995; Schanler et al., 1999).

Few studies have explored television depictions of breastfeeding. Foss (2012) examined infant feeding discourse on The Learning Channel (TLC) and Discovery Health Channel, noting that reality programming presented bottle feeding as "normal" (accompanied by product placement of

formula brands), while minimizing the benefits of breastfeeding. No research broadly studies entertainment programming. While breastfeeding messages in any medium are important, it is assumed that seeing people breastfeeding on television, including fictional characters, could be a positive step toward normalizing breastfeeding, especially given that many people are uncomfortable with seeing breastfeeding in television.

Entertainment programming has increasingly been recognized for its potential in disseminating health messages. For example, in the late 1980s, entertainment television helped introduce people to the concept of having a designated driver—a campaign that was so effective that this term was added to the dictionary within a few years (Winsten, 1994). The effects of unintentional messages have also been heavily documented, particularly with cultivation theory. Gerbner and colleagues (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1981) demonstrated that television is a powerful tool for influencing how people perceive their surroundings. For example, heavier television viewers tend to perceive the world as more violent than light viewers (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Likewise, at a time in which TV portrayed physicians as heroic, heavy viewers held more confidence in the medical profession than light viewers did (Gerbner et al., 1981). Considering that television has been found to disseminate information, normalize behavior, and influence public perception, even outside of formal public health campaigns, it is likely that this medium influences knowledge and cultural attitudes toward breastfeeding as well. According to the 2001 Healthstyles survey, only 27.9% of respondents agreed that “It is appropriate to show a woman breastfeeding her baby on TV programs” (Li et al., 2004). The number of people against television representations of breastfeeding raises the question, how has television portrayed breastfeeding? Examining these messages could give insight into attitudes toward breastfeeding, helping to explain the disparity between initiation and duration, even with abundant evidence that “breast is best” for as long as possible (Breastfeeding Report Card, 2009).

The implications of breastfeeding depictions in television are significant. Television programs can disseminate information of breastfeeding benefits, reinforce the notion that breastfeeding can be challenging, and, even more important, provide solutions for common obstacles (that otherwise may lead to early weaning). By presenting breastfeeding as the normal means of feeding a baby, positive television representations can also help shape cultural attitudes toward breastfeeding, normalizing the practice so that women feel comfortable nursing at home and in public. Furthermore, media stories that connect early weaning to hospital, business, and other institutional policies that inhibit breastfeeding could help garner support for Baby Friendly hospitals, pumping spaces at work, extended maternity leaves, and other macro-level changes that are needed to drastically raise breastfeeding initiation and duration rates.

METHOD

This study analyzed verbal and visual depictions of breastfeeding on fictional television programming, exploring how entertainment television programs portray breastfeeding. To study the messages about breastfeeding, the following questions guided the study:

1. Who breastfeeds or is breastfed in the programs studied?
2. What characterizes the “typical” breastfeeding experience?
3. How does breastfeeding fit into the fictional storyline?
4. What are the overarching messages about breastfeeding in these programs?

The purpose of this research was not to identify the frequency of depictions, but to examine how breastfeeding has been talked about in television, as situated within the American social and political context. For this reason, this study used a qualitative textual analysis, which, as Jensen (1991) explained, allows an exploration into meanings of text and the production of meaning within “wider social and cultural practices” (p. 4). With this method, meanings are not considered fixed, but “rather as an indeterminate field of meaning in which intentions and possible effects intersect (Larsen, 1991, p. 122). Analysis of texts, then, can give insight into dominant ideologies about breastfeeding in society (Larsen, 1991).

This study aimed to examine all available fictional depictions of breastfeeding, including older depictions. Since breastfeeding representations are infrequent, a purposive sample was used. To compile the media messages studied, the researcher searched keywords in popular search engines (“breastfeeding TV,” “breastfeeding portrayals”). Websites with lists of depictions were examined (List of Movies, 2010; Breastfeeding on TV). The researcher also sought input from other people, posting on the “Breastfeeding Support and Advice” board of Babycenter.com and on a public page of Facebook.com. A list of 61 breastfeeding representations was compiled. Many programs contained more than one representation. For example, the program *ER* contained 10 separate breastfeeding depictions. Due to availability of the shows, 53 of these representations were analyzed for this study.

The act of breastfeeding (regardless of a character’s sex or biological link to the child), comments about breastfeeding, and other indicators that characters were breastfeeding were all included in the study. For example, visual or verbal references to a new mother’s leaking breasts, the use of a Boppy pillow or a breast pump, or complaints of latching issues or sore nipples were included in the study. Bottle-feeding was only analyzed if characters specifically identified the liquid in the bottle as breast milk. Breastfeeding representations were classified as separate incidents if they

appeared in different episodes or with different characters. Multiple breastfeeding portrayals in the same episode were considered a continuation of the same representation. For example, throughout the *Nip/Tuck* episode “Shari Noble,” Julia attempts to breastfeed. Each attempt is part of the same storyline and therefore these are considered one incident.

The following questions guided the analysis of breastfeeding depictions: Who is the breastfeeding character? The race, approximate age, occupation and other information about the breastfeeding character were noted, along with the age of the breastfeeding child. Second, any information about the act of breastfeeding was recorded, including the location, whether or not the mother used a cover, and whether anyone assisted the mother in breastfeeding. Next, the breastfeeding reference was examined in the context of the storyline and program. What was the purpose of the breastfeeding reference (i.e., a humorous device or a prosocial message about breastfeeding?). Finally, the representations were explored as a whole to ascertain how breastfeeding is talked about in entertainment programming.

Prime-time television programming was selected for this study for numerous reasons. Entertainment television generally receives more viewers than news programs. For example, the CBS program *Two and a Half Men* averaged about 14 million viewers for the 2009–2010 season (Andreeva, 2010). The most popular news program of that season, *Nightly News with Brian Williams*, only received about 8.5 million viewers (Ariens, 2010). And although news stories are usually brief, fictional programming can address an issue over an entire episode or multiple episodes (Schwitzer, 2004). Unlike women’s health magazines or breastfeeding literature, these programs target a mass audience, meaning that the messages reach a larger population than just pregnant women or nursing mothers, so people are more likely to be exposed to representations in prime-time television, even if they find such depictions “inappropriate” (Li et al., 2004).

FINDINGS

Fifty-three breastfeeding representations were analyzed in fictional programming from 1974 through 2012. Of these 53, 37 were verbal references to breastfeeding or pumping. In 14 depictions, characters talked about breastfeeding as it was shown (usually covered up). The use of a breast pump or supplemental nursing system appeared in three representations. Consistent with real-life breastfeeding rates, in recent years, breastfeeding representations in fictional shows have become more common—48 of the identified portrayals appeared after 1998 (“Breastfeeding Report Card,” 2010). Multiple breastfeeding depictions were identified in several popular shows. For example, the program *ER* contained 10 portrayals. *Friends*, *Two and a Half Men*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and *The Office* also included multiple breastfeeding representations. Overall, the representations

studied presented breastfeeding as mostly positive, but limited, as exemplified by the “typical” breastfeeding woman and breastfeeding experience, contrasted with the “atypical” or “deviant” breastfeeding act.

The Breastfeeding Woman

The breastfeeding woman in fictional television is professional, affluent, well educated, and usually Caucasian. Similar to real-life statistics, in which 75% of this group attempt to breastfeed, it is assumed that female characters who fit this type will breastfeed (“Breastfeeding Report Card,” 2010). For example, when Rachel is pregnant in *Friends*, she receives a breast pump as a baby shower gift. Upon receipt of the gift, she says, “Is that a beer bong for a baby?” Despite her lack of knowledge, Rachel goes on to successfully nurse Emma. In “Bad in Bed” of *The New Girl*, in an attempt to ascend the corporate ladder, the character Schmidt wants to buy his boss a breast pump for her baby shower. Likewise, in *The Office*, manager Michael Scott remarks to a pregnant Karen, “Do you need to go pump?” She replies, “Not going to have to do that until after I have the baby.” Michael’s assumption (although incorrect), paired with Karen’s response, suggests that both equate infant feeding with breastfeeding. In another episode of *The Office*, even childless women were considered future breastfeeders. In “Hot Girl,” Dwight Schrute comments on the characteristics he finds attractive in a purse saleswoman, stating, “The purse girl hits everything on my checklist: creamy skin, straight teeth, curly hair, amazing breasts—not for me, for my children. The Schrutes produce very thirsty babies.”

Characters who breastfeed are usually older, educated, professional women, as exemplified by the doctors in *ER*, Pam of *The Office*, Miranda in *Sex and the City*, and others. These women are also typically Caucasian,¹ with the exception of Dr. Jing-Mei Chen in *ER* (who then gives her baby up for adoption) and Carla Espinosa on *Scrubs*. No African American, Native American, or women of other ethnicities are shown breastfeeding. The representations are also narrow in that all breastfeeding characters are able-bodied and heterosexual, even when the programs contain characters with children outside this group.

In the few portrayals that do not exemplify this type of woman, breastfeeding is presented as less likely and is not actually shown. The detectives in *Bones* are surprised to discover that a victim, a poor, single mother, breastfed her baby. And in *Secret Life of the American Teenager*, Amy, a 15-year-old with a newborn, only breastfeeds when her own mother forces her to try (which is not shown). Finally, a Hispanic woman transmits drugs through her breastmilk in the *ER* episode “Under Control,” accidentally causing her

¹Karen, in *The Office*, played by Rashida Jones, has a multiethnic background. However, she does not appear in the show after she has her baby.

baby's death. None of these depictions include visuals of the mother breastfeeding, nor are they positive representations.

Learning to Breastfeed

The image of the new (Caucasian, educated, and professional) mother learning to breastfeed was presented as the natural step after an infant was born and appeared most frequently. A short time after birth, the characters were depicted wearing hospital gowns, closely holding their infants. They often express uncertainty about how to breastfeed. For example, in the *ER* episode "Sailing Away," as Dr. Elizabeth Corday attempts to latch baby Ella to the breast, she says to her husband, "Mark, I don't think I can do this." At this point, a support person or expert guides the mother. In *ER*, Mark (also a physician) gently kisses his wife, reassuring her, "It just takes patience." In another *ER* episode, Nurse Abby Lockhart helps Nurse Carol Hathaway on how to nurse, stating, "Wait until she opens her mouth really wide." Carol adjusts her breast over her gown and Abby says, "That's it. Yeah, make sure her mouth covers the whole areola. Yes, see her little jaw moving." The *Friends* episode "The One Where No One Proposes" includes a similar scene, in which a nurse helps a tearful Rachel latch baby Emma to the breast. In *Scrubs*, Turk takes his wife to see a team of lactation specialists. The lactation expert also appears in other programs.

A 2010 episode of *The Office* adds a twist on the "typical" breastfeeding expert. In "The Delivery," the character Pam has her baby and then wants to learn to breastfeed. To her husband Jim's surprise, the lactation consultant, Clark, is male. Although Pam is comfortable with Clark touching her breasts as he positions the baby, Jim clearly feels awkward about the situation. Clark helps Pam overcome her latch issues and, after practicing by accidentally feeding the wrong newborn, she succeeds in breastfeeding CeCe by the end of the episode. The appearance of lactation experts primarily in the hospital suggests that problems with nursing end after the initial breastfeeding session, despite the ongoing struggles that most women face.

The Benefits of Breastfeeding

Although it is assumed that pregnant characters will breastfeed, they seldom explain why they choose to breastfeed—likely because they fit the "typical" breastfeeding women. When benefits are mentioned, it is in retrospect or to justify "deviant" breastfeeding behavior. In the *Bones* episode "The Baby and the Bough," the characters David Booth and Temperance Brennan allude to the health benefits when Brennan asks her partner if he was breastfed and then adds that she was. Likewise, in "The Bad Fish Paradigm" of *The Big Bang Theory*, the physics genius, Dr. Sheldon Cooper, mentions that he remembers the last time he was breastfed. Other episodes refer to Sheldon's genius friends Leonard

and Howard also having been breastfed. Since all of these characters are known for their extraordinary brilliance, such references could reinforce the message that breastfeeding has been correlated with a higher IQ. Characters in *ER* and *Desperate Housewives* commented on the weight loss benefits for the breastfeeding mother. *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* conveyed that breastfeeding increases breast size. Finally, in the episode "Paternity" of *House, M.D.*, Dr. House briefly mentions that breastfeeding provides what he says is temporary protection against disease, in a lecture on the importance of immunization.

Other health benefits of breastfeeding are only used as justification for women outside the "norm" wanting to breastfeed—a baby about to be adopted, a baby needing surgery for extreme birth defects, and nursing a much older child. In the *ER* episode "The Greatest Gifts," Dr. Chen breastfeeds her son before giving him to the adoptive parents so that he can get the nourishment of colostrum, "which boosts their immune system." Also, in *Nip/Tuck*, Sean McNamara encourages Julia to breastfeed, stating, "We need to think about his surgeries, honey. His first one's in three months and breastfeeding helps him gain the weight he needs so that his immune system will be strong. Skin on skin contacts also make him secure so that he can handle the stress." And, in *The Desperate Housewives* episode, Veronica lists the benefits of extending breastfeeding, including immunity and IQ-boosting properties of breast milk. Storylines did not address other health benefits of breastfeeding for children, nor did they convey the impact of breastfeeding duration on health benefits. Long-term health benefits, such as reduced risks of breast cancer and osteoporosis, were absent from the representations studied.

Breastfeeding Obstacles

The obstacles of breastfeeding were limited in these representations to initial problems with nursing and focused on individual problems. In the hospital and shortly after, characters faced latch issues with their babies, which were easily resolved with a little coaching from a nurse, partner or lactation consultant. In the early days of breastfeeding, characters also complained of sore nipples. For example, in *Friends*, Rachel returns to work and finds her replacement, Gavin at her desk. He says, "Well, while you were on your baby vacation, I was doing your job." Rachel responds, "A vacation? My idea of a vacation does not involve something sucking on my nipples until they are raw." Gavin retorts, "Clearly you've never been to Sandals Paradise Island." In *Friends*, Carol (Ross's ex-wife) also states that breastfeeding hurt at first. And in *ER*, the character Chuck (using a supplemental nursing system) tells Dr. Carter about the pain of nursing. No remedies, other than time and practice, were recommended to help with the pain.

Characters also became emotional and upset because of nursing. In *ER*, baby Ella wakes up Corday and Mark,

who then complains says that he has a shift in three hours. Elizabeth shouts, “What do you think I’ll be doing in three hours? I’m the feeding trough!” Mark declares that he would nurse if he could. Elizabeth yells, “You take it! Take it all! The sore nipples, the rashes, the hemorrhoids, the leaking in your trauma gown, the public humiliation, the sleep deprivation, the incontinence, for goodness sake. Just take it. It’s all yours!” Likewise, Carla, in *Scrubs*, weeps uncontrollably throughout the episode, even after her baby finally latches. In the *Nip/Tuck* episode “Shari Noble,” the character Julia becomes emotional when she struggles to get her milk to let down. A lactation consultant attempts to help her, causing Julia more frustration. The woman advises her to drink a beer. Julia tells her she does not want beer, orders the woman to leave, and pumps her milk. Several more times, Julia attempts to nurse, but fails. In desperation, Julia contemplates using antidepressants so that she has to switch to formula. Finally, with the help of the male nanny and some informal counseling, Julia admits her guilt over her son’s birth defect. Julia’s admission, combined with a warm washcloth on her breasts, produces a milk let-down and her son is able to nurse. This storyline highlights the connection between emotion and lactation, along with offering some practical advice on helping let-downs, at the same time suggesting that Julia’s one milk let-down resolves all of her breastfeeding issues. These episodes conveyed that feeling emotional was part of breastfeeding and not necessarily indicative of postpartum depression.

Aside from the few obstacles mentioned, absent from the representations were other common physical obstacles faced by nursing mothers. No storylines addressed breastfeeding a premature, jaundiced, or tongue-tied newborn, mastitis, thrush, clogged milk ducts, inverted nipples, or other issues that can impede breastfeeding success. And since these issues were not part of the storylines, remedies for these obstacles were also missing.

Most institutional and other macro-level barriers were not addressed in the shows. However, breastfeeding presents some challenges for the fictional working mothers. While breastfeeding a newborn in the hospital is conveyed as natural and fairly easy, it becomes restrictive and unprofessional once the women return to work. For example, in *Friends*, while on maternity leave, Rachel visits her work, discovering her replacement. Fearing that she will lose her status in the company, Rachel wants to end her maternity leave early. Since she presumably has no pumped milk in reserve, though, Rachel heads home with Ross and Emma. Breastfeeding poses issues for *ER*’s Dr. Elizabeth Corday when her breasts leak during surgery, forcing her to pump. In *The Office* episode “The Merger,” a woman uses a double-breast pump at her desk. All of the other employees stop working and stare at her—to the point to which she asks if one would like to take a picture. In both cases, the reactions of the other employees suggested that breastfeeding and pumping not only interfered with the nursing mother’s

work, but also hindered the productivity of those around her. And yet, while the individual women seemed embarrassed by the need to pump, having a place to pump or concerns about job security were not an issue, likely again because these women were in professional positions, not part of an assembly line.

Breastfeeding—A Private Activity

Most breastfeeding representations consisted of a mother calmly nursing her newborn, at home or in the hospital, covered by a blanket or clothing. No visual depictions of breastfeeding (even covered up) appeared until a 1994 episode of *ER*. The two representations before this time period are verbal references: In *Little House on the Prairie*, Dr. Baker advises Caroline to stop breastfeeding, which is not shown. And in *St. Elsewhere*, a nurse asks a new mother if she will breastfeed. She does not and ultimately abandons the baby at the hospital.

Few representations actually show breastfeeding uncovered. In the *Sex and the City* episode “Anchors Away,” Miranda’s baby is visibly latched on, as he suckles her breast in her apartment. It should be noted that the naked breasts of two other characters, Samantha and Charlotte, also appear in this episode. *Two and a Half Men* also contains a less covered-up image of breastfeeding, when Alan’s date nurses during dinner. And the animated *Family Guy* shows several breastfeeding sessions between Stewie and Lois.

Even with a cover, breastfeeding made other characters visibly uncomfortable. In *Friends*, when Carol nurses Ben, Joey and Chandler become uncomfortable and walk over to the kitchen. Ross follows them, saying, “Look, will you guys grow up? This is the most natural, beautiful thing in the world.” Joey replies, “Yeah, we know. But there’s a baby sucking on it.” Ross then explains, “This is my son having lunch, okay? It’s gonna happen a lot so get used to it. Now if you have a problem with it, if you’re uncomfortable, just ask questions. Carol’s fine with it. C’mon.” They return to the living room and began asking Carol bizarre questions, such as, “If he blows into one, does the other one get bigger?” At this point, Ross pushes them back into the kitchen. In *The O.C.*, characters Seth and Ryan also quickly leave when they learn Kristen is about to nurse. In *Gilmore Girls*, Lorelai complains about her friend Sookie breastfeeding at the dinner table, arguing that she and Luke should make Sookie and her husband as uncomfortable as they were. And Carrie, of *Sex and the City*, becomes noticeably uneasy when Miranda unlatches her nursing bra in preparation to nurse.

In the six portrayals in which women nurse in public, their actions are heavily criticized and conveyed as inappropriate. In the *Gilmore Girls* episode “Eight O’Clock at the Oasis,” Luke complains to Lorelai and Rory about a woman nursing in his diner, “Why? Why do they do this? It’s a public place, people are eating here.” Luke becomes very uncomfortable and continues, “When did that become acceptable? In the

old days, a woman would never consider doing that in public. They'd go find a barn or a cave or something. I mean, it's indecent. This is a diner, not a peepshow." At this point, Luke asks Lorelai to get rid of them. She refuses, although she does not defend the nursing mother. In *Two and a Half Men*, Alan dates a single mom. As they are having dinner, she begins to breastfeed her baby. He is surprised and then has trouble eating.

Two programs use debates about breastfeeding in public as the main storyline. The *Charmed* episode "The Bare Witch Project" begins with two of the main characters, Piper and Phoebe Halliwell, sitting at a café, while Piper nurses her son under an oversized blanket. Other customers snicker, prompting the manager to ask Piper to leave. Throughout the episode, public breastfeeding becomes a symbol for female progress, as the sisters help a conjured Lady Godiva return to her historic time. At the end of the episode, inspired by Lady Godiva, Phoebe rides naked on horseback to the café, where she publicly declares that the manager believes women "should be ashamed of breastfeeding, the most natural thing in the world. Well, shame on him. I'm not ashamed and neither should you be. It's a shame women have to take off their clothes to be heard. We shouldn't have to be exploited like this. Right?" At this point, Phoebe's speech convinces the manager to take down the "right to refuse service" sign. Despite the declaration about nursing in public, after the initial scene, no images of breastfeeding appear.

In "Business Sucks" and "Business Still Sucks" of *Married with Children*, the character Al becomes so uncomfortable with a woman breastfeeding in his women's shoe store that he asks her to leave. She returns the following day as part of a group of militant breastfeeding women. Al's neighbor, Marcie, leads the women, using a whistle to command their marching. Later, Marcie challenges Al's refusal to allow the woman to nurse, declaring, "How dare you deny her her God-given right to nurse her baby whenever mother nature calls! Breastfeeding is a natural, biological function." Al responds, "So's peeing, but you don't see me doing that in public." The studio audience cheers as Marcie says, "Well, the last time I looked, the side of my garage was in public." Although Al eventually allows breastfeeding in his store to please his boss, his initial refusal, backed by the studio audience's groans, laughs, and applause, frames public breastfeeding as absurd and obscene—even in a show that aims to be obscene.

Sexualizing the Breast

One justification for concealing breastfeeding is that breasts are sexual objects, not meant to be publicly displayed. Many of the breastfeeding representations sexualize breasts, especially in programs geared toward men. In the *Married with Children* episodes, Al's disgust at the breastfeeding woman is then contrasted to his attraction to women's breasts. After he orders the nursing woman out of the store, he comments

to his (male) associate, "What is happening to this country when a woman of the opposite sex can just waddle into your place of business, your holy sanctuary, and bare her breasts. It's disgusting." The other employee replies, "It's repulsive." They reach down and pick up magazines with the titles *Big 'Uns* and *Black Big 'Uns*. They turn their magazines sideways, then look at each other's magazines and switch. The *Charmed* episode with public breastfeeding ends with Phoebe riding naked on a horse to protest the ban, equating her nudity with breastfeeding. In *Sex and the City*, the image of Miranda breastfeeding appears in a storyline about breasts, in which Carrie accidentally sees Samantha and Charlotte flash their breasts to men at a party. Likewise, in *Friends*, Joey and Chandler mention feeling uncomfortable with breastfeeding because they are used to viewing breasts as sexual. In *Two and a Half Men*, Charlie struggles with intimacy with Lisa after he sees her breastfeed. Charlie says to Lisa, "I'm looking at the sexiest woman in the world and all I see is a thermos," implying that breastfeeding makes her less attractive to him. In another episode of this program, "It Never Rains in Hooterville," Charlie asks his brother to rewind a tape of home movies so that he can see Alan's ex-wife breastfeeding. And in a *Family Guy* episode about weaning, the hypersexualized Quagmire realizes his marriage is a mistake when he becomes aroused by Lois's engorged breasts. In another *Family Guy* episode, Peter is ordered to attend a Women's Sensitivity retreat after he makes sexist comments at the workplace. Peter returns, ultrafeminine. This experience prompts him to breastfeed Stewie. In the next scene, Lois tries to arouse Peter, shaking her breasts. Breastfeeding is also sexualized in the *Beavis and Butthead* episode "Holy Cornholio." While at the hospital, Beavis and Butthead walk past a delivery room. Butthead tries to peer in and asks if the new mom is going to take out her "boob." He chuckles as she screams at him to leave. In all of these representations, the juxtaposition of breastfeeding with attraction reinforces the myth that breasts are sexual objects, and therefore do not belong in the public eye.

Breastfeeding as Deviant, Socially Unacceptable, or Harmful

The sample studied clearly suggested what were considered "normal" and "abnormal" breastfeeding activities. When mothers breastfed their new babies covered up in their homes, it was presented as beautiful and natural. As exemplified with Ross's encounter with Joey and Chandler, statements about breastfeeding reinforced this message, often accompanied by soft music and the peaceful faces of the nursing mothers. Characters criticized others who were uncomfortable.

On the other hand, storylines consistently portrayed other breastfeeding activities as unacceptable or deviant, as indicated by the other characters' responses. No programs visually portrayed women nursing more than one baby, even

though Carol Hathaway gave birth to twins and breastfed. In the *Friends* episode “The One Where Rachel Has a Baby,” the character Joey enters Rachel’s hospital room and announces, “Hey, I just saw a woman breastfeeding both of her twins at the same time. It is like a freak show up here.” In *7th Heaven*, the character Annie asks her daughter, Ruthie, for help in getting ready to breastfeed her twins. Ruthie expresses disgust and quickly leaves the room. The babies’ feeding is not shown.

Only one storyline presented alternative means of breastfeeding a baby. The *ER* episode “Try Carter” involved the use of a supplemental nursing system, in which Dr. John Carter sees the character Chuck breastfeed his son using a Lact-Aid. Chuck has his shirt pushed aside, one nipple exposed with the system hooked up and baby Cosmo in the cradle position. At this point, Carter does a double take, then says: “Chuck, what are you doing?” Chuck responds, “Oh, it’s a supplemental nursing device. What? You’ve never seen a father breastfeed his kid before?” Chuck pulls out the bottle attachment to show Carter and says, “These things are amazing. You know, it allows the father to bond with the child the same way that the mother does if you can get past the sore nipples. You want to give it a shot?” Carter looks puzzled and says firmly, “No,” as he leaves the room. The absurdity of Chuck wearing the system, reinforced by Carter’s reaction, emphasized that this “abnormal” situation served as comic relief for the medical drama.

The programs also presented extended breastfeeding as deviant. Older babies or toddlers were not shown breastfeeding. Instead, extended breastfeeding involved much older children and was presented as strange, inappropriate, and distracting. For example, in *Desperate Housewives*, employees discover a coworker, Veronica, breastfeeding her five-year-old in a conference room. Her co-workers agree that it is too “bizarre” and “distracting” for her to continue nursing, even if she breastfeeds in private. They insist that the only other female employee, Lynette, request that Veronica stops and then forces weaning by offering the child chocolate milk. An episode of *30 Rock* also paints extended breastfeeding as deviant when a strange and awkward man, named Donny, announces that he cannot be seduced by another woman’s breasts because he was “breastfed until he was eleven.”

Three representations conveyed that breastfeeding could be dangerous or even deadly. In the 1974 *Little House on the Prairie* episodes “The Lord Is My Shepherd,” parts one and two, Caroline Ingalls gives birth to a son, Charles Jr. Within a few days, he becomes sickly and lethargic. The town physician, Dr. Baker, tells Caroline that his low weight gain may be attributed to the quality of her breast milk, stating that it may not have the right “chemistry” for his body. Baker recommends cow’s milk for the baby. Unfortunately, Charles Jr. continues to become sicker until he passes away. This storyline suggested that had Caroline not given the baby breast milk, thus initiating his weakened state, he may have

survived.² As previously mentioned, the *ER* episode “Under Control” conveys the dire consequences of drugs in breastmilk. In this storyline, a baby is rushed to the Emergency Room in cardiac arrest. The medical team desperately tries to revive the baby, but cannot save her. They determine that baby died from amphetamines and question the mother. Dr. Greene and Nurse Hathaway question the mother about the drugs.

Mother: I work two jobs. Sometimes I get so tired, I take something to stay awake but I never bring drugs home.

Hathaway: Are you nursing the baby?

[The woman nods.]

Greene: The drugs are in the breast milk.

Mother (cries): I love my baby. I would never hurt her. I didn’t know. Really, I didn’t know.

In this storyline, breastfeeding leads to the infant’s unintentional death. Finally, in a disturbing *Criminal Minds* storyline, a woman breastfeeds her victims, believing each five-year-old boy is her infant son. In the context of this show, breastfeeding is an act of torture, as the victims are forced to drink and slowly starve to death on breast milk. The image of the serial killer attempting to nurse this large boy that is not hers, as the SWAT team prepares to surround her home, emphasizes the extreme psychosis of the woman and the deviance of breastfeeding. No positive representations of extended breastfeeding were identified in the study, despite the known benefits of this practice (Gillman et al., 2007; Von Kries et al., 1999).

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

Overall, the representations varied in genre and target audience. Crime and medical dramas, sitcoms, and animated programs included breastfeeding references. Even with these differences, the representations studied consistently conveyed that for a certain group of women, in a private place, for a newborn, breastfeeding is natural, beautiful, and easy. However, outside this narrow definition of “normal,” breastfeeding is presented as absurd, unnecessary, socially unacceptable, or deviant. The benefits and obstacles of breastfeeding largely focused on individual women, rather than many of the macro-level issues that influence breastfeeding (i.e., hospital practices that interfere with breastfeeding). These findings were consistent with previous literature that suggests that contemporary media tend to present breastfeeding positively, but as a difficult endeavor for the individual woman (Foss, 2010, 2012; Frerichs et al., 2006; Potter, Sheeshka & Valaitis, 2000).

Little diversity existed among the type of women shown breastfeeding, despite real-life comparisons. Statistically,

²In real life, the Ingalls family lost an infant son. However, most of this storyline was fictionalized for the show.

educated affluent Caucasian women are more likely to breastfeed than those who are younger, less educated, and of a lower socioeconomic class (Bolton et al., 2008; Ryan et al., 2002). Furthermore, Hispanic and Caucasian women are more likely to breastfeed than African American women (Forste, Weiss, & Lippincott, 2001; Ryan et al., 2002). Although breastfeeding rates are highest with this type of person, the absence of other representations could discourage other women from nursing by failing to present them as the “normal” women who nurse, particularly if the macro-level reasons for the racial disparity in breastfeeding were addressed. Hausman (2003) outlined how media stories about breastfeeding women have differed greatly, depending on the woman’s ethnicity, and that women of color are much more likely to be blamed for an infant’s failure to thrive. Blum (1999) also stressed the importance of race and class, discussing how many African American women choose not to breastfeed because of the history of hypersexualization and its connection to “animality” of these women in public discourse (p. 193). As she argued, to persuade more women from this cultural group to breastfeed, advocates must do more than preach about its benefits, but also address African American women’s history in American culture (Blum, 1999).

While it is encouraging that contemporary television programs typically address breastfeeding in a positive, albeit limited, approach, many opportunities to promote breastfeeding are missed. Most domestic comedies include a “new baby” storyline at one point. And yet, until the 1990s, breastfeeding was usually not mentioned. Even programs that begin a “new baby” storyline with the “learning to breastfeed” experience rarely refer to breastfeeding once the baby is home from the hospital. It would be easy to expand breastfeeding representations to include twins or premature babies, or nursing toddlers, and to insert positive breastfeeding storylines for diverse characters. In *ER*, which contains many breastfeeding portrayals, several women of color birth babies, and yet their breastfeeding experiences are not addressed. African American Dr. Peter Benton’s ex-girlfriend gives birth to a premature baby. This storyline would have been an excellent opportunity to showcase an African American woman breastfeeding, as well as the challenges of pumping and feeding a preemie—a common event in real life, despite little coverage in entertainment television.³ Such representations could help improve breastfeeding rates and help to normalize breastfeeding for the types of women usually excluded.

Breastfeeding benefits were not typically addressed, especially the specific health benefits for children and

mothers. Educating people on the numerous health benefits of breast milk could help people realize that breastfeeding is a key determinant in future health and would save Americans money on health care if more women breastfed (Breastfeeding, Newborn Screening, and Service Systems 2000). Furthermore, programs could outline the lesser known health benefits for nursing mothers, such as lower risks of breast cancer and hip fractures (Cumming & Klineberg, 1993; Enger et al., 1997). Knowledge about breastfeeding has been strongly correlated with a mother’s confidence in breastfeeding (Chezem, Friesen, & Boettcher, 2006). And beyond the individual benefits, if media representations conveyed the positive impacts of breastfeeding on society, more people might be supportive of breastfeeding—for example, the productivity of nursing mothers in the workplace (because they take fewer sick days) or the billions of dollars saved in health care costs if the majority of the population breastfed (Bartick & Reinhold, 2010).

While characters mentioned certain challenges repeatedly, namely, latching issues and sore nipples, other common obstacles, such as engorgement, mastitis, thrush, and fear of a low supply, were never addressed. Research has shown that women’s concerns about lactation issues and the baby’s nourishment are given as the most frequent reasons for weaning (Li et al., 2008). These programs could help allay these fears, thus extending duration, by counteracting myths about “insufficient milk” and offering solutions to typical problems. Furthermore, such depictions could reassure viewers these issues are normal and therefore not a reason to wean. Solutions could include dried breast milk for sore nipples, medication for mastitis and thrush, and pumping to boost supply. In addition to individual challenges, cultural obstacles could also be fictionalized in entertainment media to raise awareness, such as hospital practices that hinder breastfeeding, legislation or lack of public support, and other sites of resistance for the breastfeeding woman (Koerber, 2005, 2006; Wolf, 2006).

Breastfeeding was presented as inconvenient and restrictive for working women. It was suggested that time away from work because of nursing could hinder one’s career. No solutions were presented, even though in real life, numerous societal changes could improve breastfeeding success for working women. These programs could address strategies to help working women breastfeed, including on-site child care, flexible working arrangements, sufficient pumping breaks, and extended maternity leave (Fein, Mandal & Roe, 2008; Wolf, 2006). Such representations could alert potential employers to the need of working mothers and garner public support for policies to protect them. Improving working conditions for breastfeeding is especially important given that working full-time has been shown to decrease breastfeeding duration by an average of 8.6 weeks (Fein & Roe, 1998).

In the programs, breastfeeding often made other characters uncomfortable, even when the mother was covered

³In 2009, Michelle Duggar (the mother in *19 Kids and Counting*, a reality show on The Learning Channel), breastfed her micro-preemie, Josie, until it was determined that Josie could not digest Michelle’s breastmilk. An episode centered on the very ill Josie becoming much healthier after she is given formula.

up, reinforcing the idea that some consider breastfeeding to be indecent or obscene. Breastfeeding was only shown in *Sex and the City*, *Two and a Half Men*, and animated in *Family Guy*. These programs also all contained storylines that sexualized breasts. Because viewers also see the non-breastfeeding breasts of the other characters Charlotte and Samantha in this episode, Miranda breastfeeding may do little to change perceptions that breastfeeding differs from public nudity or indecent exposure. While it may be difficult for actors to mimic breastfeeding or for the act of breastfeeding to be aired in television, doing so would be a significant step toward normalizing breastfeeding. This step is especially important given that mainstream media as a whole rarely include images of real breastfeeding. Hausman (2003) argued that images of women breastfeeding (without covers) are much more likely to depict women in developing countries than “typical” American women (i.e., Caucasian and middle-upper class).

Nursing in public was presented as negative and embarrassing. The few depictions of nursing in public conveyed that, while it is permitted by law, the nursing mother will likely be the target of disapproving looks and may be asked to leave—not very encouraging for a new mother who would like to venture out in public. A nursing mother would have a difficult time breastfeeding past a few months if she fears breastfeeding outside of her home. While the *Charmed* and *Married with Children* episodes involved a protest of breastfeeding criticism, the storylines offered no practical advice on how to address concerns about nursing in public, such as support for lactation rooms or other facilities for nursing mothers (Li et al., 2004). Positive depictions of public breastfeeding could help women become comfortable with the notion prior to trying themselves, similar to the “safe” spaces that La Leche League provides for nursing mothers (Koerber, 2006). Repeated positive depictions could normalize public breastfeeding so that it no longer seems threatening to new mothers or offends onlookers.

Breastfeeding more than one child and the use of supplemental nursing systems were presented as deviant. The use of milk banks and using supplemental nursing systems to relactate or nourish adopted children were not seriously explored. These tools could be viable options for women who adopt or have difficulty breastfeeding, especially if their babies are premature or suffer from chronic illness (Newman, 2003).

The television representations portrayed extended breastfeeding as deviant, an alarming finding considering that the health benefits for mother and child dramatically increase with duration (Cumming & Klineberg, 1993; Enger et al., 1997; Gillman et al., 2007; Von Kries et al., 1999). Instead of highlighting the abnormality of nursing an elementary school-aged child, programming could include more portrayals of breastfeeding older babies and toddlers, thus reinforcing breastfeeding recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the American Academy

of Pediatrics (Breastfeeding, 2010; Breastfeeding and the Use of Human Milk, 2005). The “deviant” storylines, which framed breastfeeding as dangerous, perpetuate what Hausman (2003) called the “Dead Babies” media discourse. As breastfeeding promotion has become more prevalent, media backlash has highlighted extreme consequences of the “breast is best” message, with news stories of babies starving because their mothers refused to provide formula (Hausman, 2003). Media stories, including fictional ones, that present breastfeeding as normal could help counter these sensationalized cases, especially images of women breastfeeding healthy babies.

This study used textual analysis to ascertain what messages about breastfeeding have been conveyed in entertainment television. Further research in this area could explore how these depictions influence audience perception and behavior, as well as the extent to which people gather information about breastfeeding from entertainment television.

CONCLUSION

The key to increasing breastfeeding rates in America is shifting overall public perceptions of breastfeeding—at the individual, interpersonal, and societal levels. Koerber (2006) argued that breastfeeding women often sought “competing alternatives” to the medical discourse that lacked breastfeeding information. Media, then, can help provide the missing information—which plays an important role in women’s decision to breastfeed (Arora et al. 2000). Since the opinions of family and friends also influence breastfeeding success, normalizing breastfeeding on TV, while conveying the benefits of breastfeeding, may help people become more supportive of breastfeeding (DiGirolamo, Grummer-Strawn & Fein, 2003; Freed, Fraley, & Schanler, 1992; Littman, Medendorp & Goldfarb, 1994; Taveras et al., 2004). Restaurant managers may be less likely to scold nursing mothers if they believe that breastfeeding is the normal means of feeding a baby. Employers might be more willing to grant pumping time to working mothers if they realize that breastfed babies experience less illness, resulting in fewer absences for the mothers. Overall, general support for breastfeeding would mean that more women would feel comfortable nursing, regardless of who may be watching.

Similar to the health campaigns promoting designated driving, immunizations, and contraception, fictional television could be used to promote breastfeeding (Brodie et al., 2001; Glik et al., 1998; Winsten, 1994). Such campaigns could introduce breastfeeding terminology, such as Nursing in Public (NIP), engorgement, nursing strike, and exclusive or extended breastfeeding, into mainstream public discourse. Programs could also correct misconceptions about breastfeeding—for example, what conditions do and do not prevent women from breastfeeding. These shows could also teach women helpful remedies for common

problems, like techniques to deal with biting during breastfeeding. Furthermore, since fictional programs (unlike news stories) can provide in-depth stories about breastfeeding, these shows could highlight many of the underlying macro-level issues that discourage breastfeeding, including maternal guilt about insufficient milk, the hypersexualization of breasts entrenched in culture, and the need for resistance for breastfeeding mothers (Blum, 1999; Hausman, 2003; Koerber, 2005, 2006). Storylines could also address the shifts in society that have transformed women's roles and encouraged a dependency on experts, thus hindering women's abilities to rely on other women for breastfeeding advice (Foss, 2010; Hausman, 2003; Wolf, 2006).

It has been established that television helps to define normative behavior. Cultivation studies have established that television dramatically impacts how people perceive the world (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1981). While the numerous positive representations of nursing after birth indicate progress toward normalizing breastfeeding, the representations are limited in scope. By presenting extended breastfeeding, public breastfeeding, and other "deviant" behaviors as normal, media representations can help change attitudes toward breastfeeding, helping women to feel comfortable breastfeeding when and wherever their babies demand, without a fear of public scrutiny or police intervention. It is only when nearly all babies are breastfed in the United States that we can honestly claim that we are doing our best to protect our nation's health.

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