



Does the Clothing Industry Support Breastfeeding Modesty?:
An Examination of Product Availability for Financially Vulnerable Mothers

MinJung Park, Ela Rausch, Jennifer Hoeke, and Hye-Young Kim,
University of Minnesota, USA

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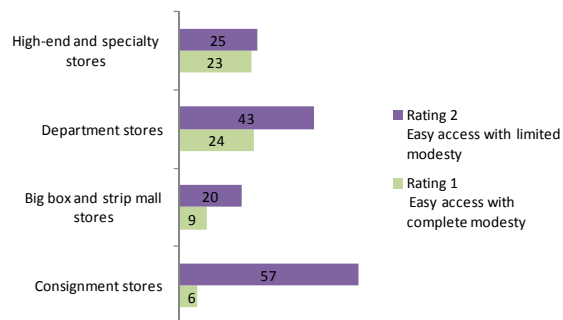
Breastfeeding is the best choice for the health of a mother and her baby. However, what constitutes appropriate breastfeeding behavior varies considerably from one culture to another. In American culture, modesty has been the most frequently cited public education barrier to breastfeeding (Moran, 1999). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2013), many American women feel uncomfortable and immodest when they breastfeed in the presence of others. While breastfeeding modesty is manifested through a mother's clothing behavior (i.e., a mother covers her breast with her clothing to prevent an exposure of the breast) (Moran, 1999), researchers in the field of apparel and textiles have paid little attention to this concept.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (2008), low-income mothers are less likely than high-income mothers to choose breastfeeding as an infant feeding method for the first six months. These low-income mothers may initially choose not to breastfeed or decide early termination due to clothing concerns at work and in other social situations. In other words, the product availability of modest clothing may be a significant factor explaining poor breastfeeding initiation and duration rates among low-income mothers. With that in mind, this study examined the issue of whether the apparel industry adequately supports breastfeeding modesty through its production and distribution systems for financially vulnerable mothers.

Methods: We conducted an observational study in a metropolitan city located in a Midwestern state. A comprehensive online search of retail stores was conducted in order to construct a sampling frame of stores that sell maternity and nursing clothing within a 15-mile radius of the downtown area. The search yielded 105 stores, which were then stratified into four different store types: 1) big box and strip mall retail stores, 2) second hand stores, 3) department stores, and 4) high-end and specialty stores. Sixteen stores representing the actual population of stores were selected using a stratified, random sampling method. In each store, "price" and "number of styles" were examined as proxy measures for product availability. A total of 207 different style choices was compiled. Each clothing style was rated in terms of modesty levels (i.e., does it provide complete or limited modesty while breastfeeding?) and placed into one of six price categories, ranging from "\$15 or less" to "more than \$75 dollars."

Findings: Data were analyzed by clothing style, store type, and price point. Results showed that only 35% of maternity and nursing shirts and 14% of maternity and nursing dresses available

allowed for complete modesty while breastfeeding. The majority of items that allowed for complete modesty while breastfeeding were in the \$15 to \$30 price range, however the number of items available at the price of \$15 or less was extremely limited. Results also showed that department stores and specialty stores provided more clothing styles (typically 10 to 12 choices) that allowed for complete modesty while breastfeeding than did big box and secondhand stores (typically 0 to 2 choices). The average price of a clothing item at a big box store was approximately \$8 compared to the average price of clothing at department and specialty stores, which were more than double that price (see Figure below). It was also found that the number of items available for several store franchises varied by location.



Conclusions: The findings of this study have important implications regarding the availability of maternity and nursing clothes that provide modesty while breastfeeding for financially vulnerable mothers. Although data suggested that there are an ample number of clothing choices in the \$15 to \$30 price range that allow for complete modesty while breastfeeding, most of them were found at high end department or specialty stores. Widely-accessible big box retail stores carried very few or no items that were designed to provide modesty, which illustrates a gap in the market that is currently not filled. Also, the fact that only less than half of the clothing styles examined provided modesty while breastfeeding suggests that there may be a gap in the maternity and nursing clothing market in general, when it comes to the issue of modesty. Increasing the rates of women who breastfeed for the first six to twelve months is an important factor in increasing the overall health of individuals and society. Apparel researchers and practitioners can contribute to this goal by conducting further research on the clothing needs of nursing mothers, by expanding current marketing to reach nontraditional customers, and by finding creative ways to fill existing gaps in the market.

References

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