

Proposed Typologies for the Dress Needs of Nursing Mothers and Babies and Available Nursing Dress: An Evaluation of the Relationship between Concepts in These Typologies

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In the U.S., the majority of babies are weaned from the breast by the time they are three months old (CDC, 2007) in contrast to the recommendation of “exclusive breastfeeding for about 6 months. . . , with continuation of breastfeeding for 1 year or longer” (Eidelman & Schanler, 2012). Women who feel comfortable feeding in public breastfeed longer than women who are not comfortable (Allen & Pelto, 1985). Practical advice on carrying out life roles while breastfeeding is important and requires consideration of clothing (Mulford 2008). The purposes of this study were to (1) identify and organize (a) dress needs of nursing mothers and babies and (b) available types of nursing dress, and (2) provide practical advice by considering the relationship between currently available dress and needs of nursing mothers and babies.

Part I: Concept analysis of the dress needs of nursing mothers and babies. Sixteen scholarly and consumer publications related to breastfeeding or pregnancy were analyzed for dress needs. The unit of coding was any passage on nursing. Using constant comparison, we identified and organized the following needs around the Functional (F) Expressive (E) Aesthetic (A) Model (Lamb & Kallal, 1992): (a) milk production & transfer (F), (b) fit, comfort, and support (F), (c) easy access (F), (d) normal appearance (F, A), (e) non-communication of breastfeeding (E), (f) style and fashion (E, A), (g) aesthetically pleasing (A), and (h) tactile experience for the baby (A, F). We described each need in-depth with representative quotes. For example, “You’ll want to be sure you can easily unfasten and refasten the bra with one hand, since you’ll need to do so regularly for feedings” (Kutzin & Marchant, 2001, p. 54). The created typology of the needs of nursing mothers and babies will help mothers recognize, prioritize, and meet the needs they face and designers create useful items for this target market.

Part II: Concept analysis of available types of nursing dress. We analyzed the content of 25 online retailers that sold nursing dress using constant comparison, recording descriptions and images of each style found. By discussing the way each style was used or worn, we organized a typology of styles around the framework of undergarment, outer garment, or accessory. Identified styles included: (a) wrap, drop cup, drop flap, pumping bra, and nursing undershirt style *undergarments*; (b) deep v-neck, elasticized neckline, drop front / flap, and double layer (inverted pleat, whole front, or partial front) with various under layer nursing openings (center access, princess seam, pull-down, side, and wrap) style *outer garments*; and (c) nursing cover, nursing pillow, and nursing pad *accessories*. We developed definitions and technical flat drawings of each style. This part of the study may help nursing mothers make quick and informed wardrobe choices while considering their personal priorities, budget, and preferences as they embark on meeting a new set of needs.



Part III: Relationship between dress needs and available types of nursing dress. We analyzed the relationship of each of the types of nursing dress with each of the needs of nursing women and babies and presented it in a color-coded table format. We looked for patterns among the data and drew conclusions about the various categories of nursing dress. This information may be disseminated through lactation consultants, extension publications, magazines, and websites targeting new mothers.

Conclusions and implications. We conclude that an effective strategy for meeting the needs of breastfeeding mothers is a system of dress with (a) a supportive, well-fitting undergarment that allows easy breast access, (b) an outer garment layer that also allows breast access, while meeting aesthetic and expressive needs, and (c) a third cover layer to meet privacy / modesty needs. New mothers selecting their wardrobes and designers focusing on this target market should consider the following:

Undergarments. Drop cup and drop flap undergarments meet most functional needs. The design allows easy breast access coupled with fit and breast support mechanisms.

Outer garments. Garments designed with the drop front/flap are easy access and may provide comfortable support, if a bra is built-in. Non-nursing garments may work as nursing apparel if they have deep-V, wrap, or elasticized necklines and may function similar to a whole-front double-layer nursing top if a tank with built-in bra is worn as the undergarment. Wrap or elasticized garments that require the mother to hold the neckline aside while breastfeeding add difficulty. Fabrics with adequate stretch to stay pulled aside on their own should be used; however, there must be sufficient elasticity for the fabric to return to shape following feeding. Garments which are too long to be pulled up (such as a tunic top) or too full to be easily held up are not suitable for breastfeeding.

Accessories. Most apron-style nursing covers have a support at the neckline so the mother can maintain visual contact with her baby. The design provides modesty; however, it does not provide a normal appearance. Nursing pads meet a functional need of absorbing milk leakage; however, there are no size variations to provide fit and the pads are stiff, resulting in visibility through the garment fabric.

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