

Milk, Mothers and Myth: Philippine Breastfeeding Campaign Imagery post-RA 10028

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The Cordillera Review: Journal of Philippine Culture and Society 13 (1–2): 146–167
<https://doi.org/10.64743/MSJT3027>

ABSTRACT

The Philippines boasts some of the strongest breastfeeding advocacy policies in Southeast Asia, with RA 10028 (the *Expanded Breastfeeding Promotion Act of 2009*), RA 7600 (the *Rooming-In and Breastfeeding Act of 1992*), and Executive Order 51 (the *Philippine Milk Code of 1986*). Still, Philippine figures for the median duration for breastfeeding and exclusive breastfeeding have floundered below World Health Organization standards. Despite promotion efforts on the side of government and advocacy groups, these rates suggest gaps in addressing—perhaps, even understanding—the challenges faced by breastfeeding parents. I argue that this gap has been partly due to a broad mythification of motherhood in the period following RA 10028 primarily through governmental rhetoric and upper-middle class advocacy. Through a Barthesian semiotic inquiry into the construction of Filipino motherhood and the maternal body as it participates (or does not participate) in the practice of breastfeeding, the discussion reveals ongoing tensions in the construction of maternal identity in the Philippines. The key contribution of this work lies in its critical examination of how breastfeeding’s visual rhetoric navigates the cultural expectations and contemporary demands of motherhood, as well as the complexities of Filipino maternal identity.

Keywords: breastfeeding, semiotics, Filipino motherhood, myth

Introduction

For World Breastfeeding Week in 2021, Filipino actress and television personality Isabelle Daza posted a carousel of photos on [Instagram](#) showing her breastfeeding her baby in a variety of public settings (in a pool, at the beach, outside a flower shop, in a picturesque alley somewhere in her husband’s home country of France). True to the

spirit of the social media platform, the photographs are an aesthetically pleasing and curated mix of posed and casual snaps, the cover photo featuring Daza in soft focus, chest bared and young son latched peacefully at her right breast. In the context of World Breastfeeding Week, the images are only a few of thousands with the selfsame objective of promoting and normalizing breastfeeding on a global scale, all the while blurring boundaries between personal documentation and public advocacy. Daza's accompanying caption is crucial in illustrating maternal subjectivity:

Sometimes breastfeeding feels like you're a prisoner to your baby. But sometimes it also makes you feel like you have a unique connection. ✨ Either way the benefits of breastfeeding your child outweigh the saggy flat pancake boobs you have after. #worldbreastfeedingweek

The sentiment is not new. In fact, it is fascinating how age-old discourses around the push-and-pull of feeding choices echo to the present day, albeit with the addition of emojis and hashtags characteristic of this generation of parents. Intimacy and imprisonment are uttered in a single breath, signaling conflicting emotional registers where bodily obligation and loss of autonomy are softened or negated by the "unique connection" between mother and child. The contradiction is rounded out by the punchline about "saggy flat pancake boobs," concluding that maternal ambivalence is ultimately resolved through bodily sacrifice. This narrative of sacrifice operates not only textually but visually. The body that Daza describes in self-deprecating terms—transformed, depleted, sacrificed—is the same body made visible in the photograph, exposed in ways that carry particular significance on Instagram, a platform with a historically fraught relationship with depictions of (female) nudity (Olszanowski 2014). In contrast to the summary deletion and censorship of breasts and nipples enacted by Instagram in 2015, Daza's World Breastfeeding Week post was met with praise and empathy, with comments boosting the message that breastfeeding—anywhere, anytime—was worth the mother's sacrifice.

This rhetoric is one that has endured. I mention Daza's 2021 post here not just to hold it against Instagram's history of censorship but also as a marker with which to consider breastfeeding initiatives and campaigns in the Philippines post-RA 10028 (or the *Expanded Breastfeeding Promotion Act of 2009*). These include the visual language and campaign materials made and disseminated by government entities like the Department of Health (DOH) and the Philippine Commission on Women (PCW), by private advocacy groups like Beauty, Brains & Breastfeeding and LATCH PH, and through community efforts such as *Hakab Na!* While the messaging and advocacy remain largely the same

across these actors, the visual materials they produced (not to mention the revitalization of key observances such as World Breastfeeding Week, which generate content from celebrities and ordinary folk) lead me to argue that the period following RA 10028 saw a broad mythification of motherhood—one that manifested across governmental rhetoric, private advocacy, and community-level representation. The French philosopher Roland Barthes (1972, 107; 142) conceptualized myth as a higher order of signification attributed to signs (represented by material signifiers such as speech, text, and images, among others) that together create a “system of communication” or “a type of speech” that help sustain relations of power by making these relations appear “natural” and “eternal.”

This is not to say that Filipino mothers and motherhood had not been the subject of mythification prior to RA 10028. Rather, this period is of particular interest because of the increase in visual signs produced to address documented shortfalls in breastfeeding practice in the Philippines. That is, despite already boasting some of the strongest breastfeeding advocacy policies in Southeast Asia with Executive Order 51 (the *Philippine Milk Code of 1986*) and RA 7600 (the *Rooming-In and Breastfeeding Act of 1992*), Philippine figures for the median duration for breastfeeding and exclusive breastfeeding pre-RA 10028 still floundered well below World Health Organization standards. According to the National Demographic and Health Survey of 2008 (National Statistics Office Philippines and ICF Macro 2009), the median duration for any breastfeeding in the country was 14 months (compared to WHO standard of 24 months), while the median duration for exclusive breastfeeding was less than a month (the WHO standard being six months). Formal quantitative assessments for breastfeeding in the country are undertaken and monitored by domestic government agencies such as the Department of Science and Technology Food and Nutrition Research Institute (FNRI-DOST) and the Department of Health, among others, and international organizations such as the WHO, International Labor Organization (ILO), World Breastfeeding Trends Initiative (WBTI), etc., and are beyond this paper’s purview save as a means to provide context. Rather, I seek to momentarily shift focus from questions of policy effectiveness to questions of cultural production: How have different actors constructed motherhood through their representations of breastfeeding post-RA 10028? What particular “forms” of motherhood are naturalized by these actors and representations, and what regulatory effects do they create that go beyond policy intentions? What insights can we gain by approaching breastfeeding and the visual representations of motherhood through a semiotic lens?

Breastfeeding has figured largely in my own identity formation as a parent/mother across the births of my two children. My eldest

child was born in 2008 at a private hospital in Las Piñas City, in the Philippines' National Capital Region. I was 19 years old. I was able to breastfeed for only about three months before needing to return to university to complete my undergraduate studies. My second child followed six years later, in 2014, a few years into a career in university-based research. She was also born in a private hospital, but this time in Baguio City, Cordillera Administrative Region. We were able to breastfeed until a natural stopping point at four to five years. I am quite aware that these experiences somewhat bookend RA 10028 and am conscious of how this may inform my interpretation and approach to constructions of motherhood through media on breastfeeding. Likewise, while living and working in the Cordillera has sharpened my awareness of how Indigenous experience and perspectives are often marginalized in mainstream constructions of identity, I do not claim sufficient understanding to employ Indigenous theoretical frameworks in this analysis—nor does it feel appropriate for me to do so as a non-Indigenous researcher. Nevertheless, this article is offered as a preliminary examination of myth-making and motherhood specifically through depictions of breastfeeding post-RA 10028, focusing on visual campaign materials produced by government, the private sector, and larger online/offline communities.

Methodology

The gap between breastfeeding policy and practice in the Philippines persists despite decades of legislation and public health campaigns. Notwithstanding the assertion by various biomedical studies (Clavano 1982; Vassilopoulou et al. 2021; Camacho-Morales et al. 2021; Miller 2017; Jackson and Nazar 2006; Hanson 1998) that the practice is the best course of action for infant feeding, boosting immunity against infection, researchers have also lamented the stagnant or declining rate of breastfeeding in their respective countries (Shariat, Abedinia, and Hamad 2022). I posit that one way of bridging this gap would be to look beyond compliance metrics and looking more closely at how these campaigns communicate about breastfeeding and maternal bodies. To do this, it is necessary to review prevailing discussions in feminist/maternalist and public policy/health discourses where breastfeeding has received substantial attention before laying out the framework of Barthesian semiotics that has been used to examine the visual materials collected. This framework was chosen because despite the growing scholarly interest on breastfeeding and maternal identity, approaches from the field of cultural studies have remained sporadic, mainly reading the practice in general through the Foucauldian notion of biopower (Carter 1995; Wall 2001; Albuero-Cañete 2014). These studies have provided an important background to this article and to

my research as a scholar interested in how the embodied practice of breastfeeding contributes to the construction of maternal identity in the Philippines.

The visual materials analyzed were gathered from a variety of sources ranging from those released by Philippine government agencies like Department of Health and the Philippine Commission on Women, to campaigns organized by non-governmental support groups (such as LATCH or Lactation, Attachment, Training, Counseling, Help, and Breastfeeding Pinays), from 2010 to 2022. The search turned up some 65 materials including infographics, campaign materials and event promotions (most notably released on World Breastfeeding Month, also known as National Breastfeeding Awareness Month in the Philippines, held every year in August). Of these materials, a majority could be attributed to four distinct information and education campaigns (from the Department of Health, LATCH PH and an older group called Beauty, Brains & Breastfeeding) while the rest were more sporadic releases by the Philippine Commission on Women (PCW). These materials were then catalogued and tagged using the cloud-based platform Airtable for ease of retrieval, tagging, and visual organization into themes. Any text was also extracted and considered in the coding. Images taken and published for Hakab Na! and Global Latch On activities for World Breastfeeding Week were also collected to supplement the initial set and provided an important nuance to the analysis.

Mapping My Terrain: Milk, Mothers and Myth

Being concerned with functions of a 'female' body, feminist discourse might be an obvious first port of call for a critical inquiry on breastfeeding and maternal representation. However, Van Esterik (1994) remarks that "Although breastfeeding is recognized as a women's issue, it is seldom framed as a feminist issue. In fact, it is most often ignored by feminist theorists" (42). This is typically echoed in the way that motherhood itself is beset by contradictions in feminist ideology: honored and revered by some, criticized and taken to task by others (Van Esterik 1994). Wall (2001) posits that this silence in feminist writing about breastfeeding has partly been due to the perceived need to champion the empowering aspects of the practice as part of a strategy to resist the hegemony of infant formula companies, which have tended to target and impact women in developing countries. In 2004, this silence was still palpable, as Hausman (2004) urged that "The feminist politics of breastfeeding must be produced [...] as they are not self-evident in the current global conversations about lactation, which often position women as the problematic intermediary between a child and its nourishment" (283).

It is interesting to note here Hausman's phrasing, i.e., that the feminist politics of breastfeeding are not self-evident, not that they were

non-existent. Central to these conversations, for example, were concerns regarding the construction of “good” maternal identity (Marshall, Godfrey, and Renfrew 2007; Mahon-Daly and Andrews 2002; Schmied and Lupton 2001; Shaw 2004; Muers 2010), the rhetoric of choice in infant-feeding (Hausman 2008), breastfeeding as labor (Dykes 2005; Bartlett 2005), and breastfeeding and gender relations (Johnson et al. 2009).

In the 1990s, Blum (1993) explored the ways that the practice exposed tensions, fissures and shifts in the ideological and practical construction of motherhood in late-stage-capitalist America. Anchored to “a socialist feminist perspective and a woman-centered stance” (292), Blum pointed out the disruptive nature of breastfeeding vis-a-vis the “equality approach” of second-wave feminist movements which “demand[ed] women’s entrance into public spheres without questioning the implicit male-centered organization of public life” (293). This is perhaps most starkly illustrated in how the controversial act of breastfeeding *in public* exposes how women’s increased participation in that sphere is predicated through “regulating mothers into norms of the male body”: breast-less, non-lactating, and physically separated from their children (Hausman 2004, 276).

Yet, despite these tensions, feminist thought remains a useful frame with which to analyze the visual construction of motherhood through breastfeeding, especially when viewed through an intersectional and critical lens. In the Philippines, Albuero-Cañete (2014) is one of few who have interrogated the narrative of “breast is best” by asking “best for whom?” (116) when popular discourse has tended to de-center mothers’ needs in favor of children’s needs. At the same time, it is also important to note the growth in discourse away from debates of breast versus bottle (Van Esterik 1989)—although feminist critique of the medicalization of breastfeeding remains significant, both in quantity and quality (Wolf 2006; Bartlett 2002; B. Hausman 2004; Mahon-Daly and Andrews 2002; Schmied and Lupton 2001; Van Esterik 1994; Wall 2001)—and toward how conversations about “unwaged and low-waged caregiving—*beginning with breastfeeding*—opens the way for more choices for women, and fewer penalties for the biological burdens which fall to us” (Francis et al. 2002, 15; emphasis supplied).

While feminist scholarship foregrounds maternal experience and the tensions of infant feeding decisions, public health and policy provide the institutional context within which these critiques unfold. The salient points of the country’s breastfeeding laws articulate the State’s commitment to the practice, outlining the extent of institutional lactation support provided to parents. RA 7600 provided incentives to government and private institutions for the support of breastfeeding and rooming-in practices in 1992. RA 10028 built on this by specifying provisions for lactation stations in public and private establishments,

lactation breaks for breastfeeding employees, and the incorporation of breastfeeding in school curricula where relevant. Even before these laws, however, the Philippine government had already enacted Executive Order 51 (EO 51) or the *Philippine Milk Code of 1986* (revised in 2006), which imposed strict guidelines regarding the marketing of infant formula milk in the country. These guidelines included an absolute ban on visual advertisements and/or promotional materials for breastmilk substitutes in all health and nutrition facilities—public or private—and on the involvement or incursion of milk companies in breastfeeding activities. This aligns with RA 10028’s emphasis on the practice’s consequence to national development, specifically that “the practice of breastfeeding could save the country valuable foreign exchange that may otherwise be used for milk importation” (Government of the Philippines 2009), considering the widespread promotion of infant formula through advertisements and media (World Health Organization and UNICEF 2022; Lisi, Freitas, and Barros 2021; Ching et al. 2021; Hastings et al. 2020). The Department of Health also implements several Administrative Orders in support of the practice such as AO 2009-0025 or “Adopting New Policies and Protocol on Newborn Care,” from which emanates the rationale for the *Unang Yakap* Protocol, and AO 2007-0026 or the “Revitalization of the Mother-Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative (MBFHI) in Health Facilities with Maternity and Newborn Care Services.”

Despite their differing vantage points, the “feminist politics of breastfeeding” (Hausman 2004, 283) and policy efforts converge around the goals and explicit messaging of breastfeeding promotions. What remains underexamined is how the visual rhetoric employed to advance these goals can simultaneously reinforce the cultural anxieties and gendered norms that complicate breastfeeding in practice—a gap that Barthesian analysis of visual myth has the potential to address.

Now, perhaps more than ever, we observe what Mirzoeff (2009, 6) noted as “the new urgency of the visual [that] cannot be fully considered in the established visual disciplines” not only because of changes in those disciplines’ means for distribution (the internet providing for a faster and more widespread consumption) but also in the players of its production (digital media allowing for the creation of more and more amateur content in the visual sphere, not needing expert intervention). Yet, this interest in the study of visual culture draws heavily on linguistic and semiotic theories. Foundational to this is Ferdinand de Saussure’s structuralist approach to language, which posits that meaning arises from the relationships between signs rather than from any inherent properties of the signs themselves. In Saussure’s (1983, 18) articulation of semiology, “a language is a system of signs expressing ideas” where signs are “not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern” (76). This formulation, while symptomatic of

the initial phonocentrism of structuralist thought, nevertheless marks a pivotal moment in linguistic theory, where words (and other such signifiers) are understood to be arbitrary and subject to concepts (what is signified) contingent upon human meaning-making.

Saussure's concept of the sign as composed of a signifier (the form) and signified (the concept) can be extended to visual elements and visual media, with the work of Roland Barthes being particularly influential. In his work on mythology and myth-making in popular culture, Barthes defined mythology as a "system of communication" or "a type of speech" that operates on two levels of signification (1972, 107). That is, while Saussure's semiological system presented the sign as a whole, composed of signifier and signified, Barthes (1972) expanded it to posit that humans, in fact, imbue these whole signs with even higher order meanings which later develop into mythologies or myths.

For the sake of our current discussion, we may consider that 'mother' is a sign in which the written letters or the spoken phonemes make up a word which signifies "the female parent of a human being" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). However, 'mother' has also come to signify a variety of meanings—from traditional roles of caregiver/homemaker and the Filipino concept of *ilaw ng tahanan* (light of the home), to the 'Mothers' in queer culture, who do not necessarily identify as female and who are not typically the biological parents of their 'children.' Thus, the notion of being a 'mother' is something that is constructed and, as I argue, mythologized through the actions and appearances that signify it (such as breastfeeding). In the following section, I present an analysis of the collected visual materials.

Mythifying Motherhood

Post-RA 10028 saw an upswing in images related to breastfeeding, most of which came from the Philippine government itself. Posters, flyers, brochures and other information and educational materials on the practice's benefits and advantages are ubiquitous in hospitals, health clinics, and on social media and the internet. One of these initiatives was the Department of Health's (DOH) *Breastfeeding TSEK* (Tama, Sapat, Eksklusibo) program launched in February 2011. Aimed at "new and expectant mothers in urban areas," the program evoked strong brand recall from at least 75% of mothers surveyed by the World Health Organization (2015, 20), especially through the long-term use of its logo. *Breastfeeding TSEK* was conceptualized as a communication for behavioral impact (COMBI) by the government, and generated information and education materials featuring facts and advice on successful breastfeeding. The campaign's logo (Figure 1) features a nursing mother and baby positioned in the middle of a pink 'check' symbol (*tsek* is the Filipino phonetic spelling of the English 'check'). The

mother has fair skin and long, black hair, with a healthy pink blush on her cheeks. In one of the baby’s hands is a heart (ostensibly, the mother’s heart). They hold each other’s gaze, and are enclosed in a purple, pink and yellow circle, surrounded by the words “BREASTFEEDING: Tama. Sapat. EKklusibo!”



Figure 1. Breastfeeding TSEK logo

The campaign is preceded in only a few years by more regular national observances of Breastfeeding Awareness Month in the Philippines, held every August. Table 1 provides an overview of the themes or slogans that have accompanied World Breastfeeding Week (first week of August) internationally since 1993, showing how slogans in the Philippines were put together only in 2009, at first only directly copying the international theme. The year 2011 saw the country’s first unique theme as it launched *Breastfeeding TSEK!* Most of the materials that I collected for this research were from these campaigns in August, including a series of testimonials about breastfeeding released by the Philippine Commission on Women in 2016.

Year	World Breastfeeding Week Theme	Philippine National Breastfeeding Awareness Month Theme
1993	Women, work and breastfeeding: Everybody Benefits	
1994	Making the Code Work	
1995	Breastfeeding: Empowering Women	
1996	Breastfeeding: A Community Responsibility	
1997	Breastfeeding: Nature’s Way	

1998	Breastfeeding: The Best Investment	
1999	Breastfeeding: Education for Life	
2000	Breastfeeding is Your Right: We Protect, Promote and Support Your Right to Breastfeed	
2001	Breastfeeding in the Information Age	
2002	Breastfeeding: Healthy Mothers and Healthy Babies	
2003	Breastfeeding in a Globalised World	
2004	Exclusive Breastfeeding: The Gold Standard, Safe, Sound, and Sustainable	
2005	Breastfeeding and Family Foods: Loving & Healthy	
2006	Code Watch: 25 Years of Protecting Breastfeeding	
2007	Breastfeeding: the First Hour: Early Initiation and Exclusive Breastfeeding for Six Months can Save More than One Million Babies	
2008	Mother Support: Going for the Gold	
2009	Breastfeeding: A Vital Emergency Response	Breastfeeding — a vital emergency response
2010	Breastfeeding: Just 10 Steps! The Baby-friendly Way	Breastfeeding: Just 10 Steps. The Baby-Friendly Way
2011	Talk to me! Breastfeeding: A 30 experience?	Isulong ang Breastfeeding: Tama, Sapat at EKsklusibo! (Promote Breastfeeding: Correct, Sufficient and Exclusive!)
2012	Understanding the Past, Planning for the Future	Protect Breastfeeding: Understanding the past, planning the future

2013	Breastfeeding Support: Close to Mothers	Breastfeeding Support: Close to Mothers
2014	Breastfeeding: A Winning Goal for Life	Gatas ng Ina: Tama, Sapat, Eksklusibo, Siguradong Panalo! (Mother's Milk: Correct, Sufficient, Exclusive, a Sure Win!)
2015	Breastfeeding at Work: Let's Make it Work!	Tama, Sapat at Eksklusibo ang Pagpapasuso kahit nasa Trabaho (Breastfeeding is Correct, Sufficient and Exclusive, even at Work)
2016	Breastfeeding: A Key to Sustainable Development	Breastfeeding and Family Planning: Keys to Sustainable Development
2017	Sustaining Breastfeeding Together	Ugnayan (Connection): One Community Protecting, Promoting, and Supporting Breastfeeding
2018	Breastfeeding: Foundation of Life	Pagpapasuso'y Pundasyon Para sa Malusog at Mahabang Buhay ng Ina at Sanggol (Breastfeeding is a Foundation for a Healthy and Long Life for Mother and Baby)
2019	Empower Parents, Enable Breastfeeding	Lakas ng Magulang, Sigla ng Pagpapasuso – Kalusugan, Nutrisyon ng Kabataan para sa Kinabukasan (Parents' Strength, Breastfeeding's Vigor: The Youth's Health and Nutrition for the Future)
2020	Support Breastfeeding for a Healthier Planet	I-BIDA ang Pagpapasuso Tungo sa Wais at Malusog na Pamayanan (BIDA Breastfeeding toward a Wise and Healthy Community)
2021	Protect Breastfeeding: A Shared Responsibility	Tulong-tulong sa Pagpapasuso sa First 1000 Days (Working Together for Breastfeeding in the First 1000 Days)

2022	Step Up for Breastfeeding: Educate and Support	Sama-samang Itaguyod Tamang Kaalaman at Kalinga sa Pagpapasuso (Collectively Promote Proper Knowledge and Care in Breastfeeding)
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Table 1. World Breastfeeding Week themes (1993–2022) vis-a-vis Philippine National Breastfeeding Awareness Month Themes (2009–2022)

Table 1 also illustrates how *Breastfeeding TSEK* has been a consistent campaign with promotional materials widely shared not only on social media in ten years, but also as educational materials by the Department's program implementors. One particular album on the [DOH's Facebook page](#) in 2014 begins with information on the campaign, spelling out the three key components of the acronym TSEK and explaining the meaning for each descriptive word. It is then followed by slides as well as lengthy captions on the practice's benefits to mothers, broadly categorized into physiological, psychological and financial. Benefits for the baby are mentioned in the next pictures, which include protection from allergies, infections and illnesses, as well as a few passages on how breastmilk boosts intelligence by supporting cognitive development. In contrast to Wall's (2001) observation of the absence of breasts in breastfeeding campaign materials in her study of Canadian health education materials, the Philippine materials had more explicit depictions of breasts in the interest of instruction—for instance, how to make a baby latch properly onto the breast to feed. However, illustrations were more often utilized, while photographic depictions typically employed some creative methods to conceal breasts when showing mothers breastfeeding their babies. The DOH materials also included several slides on what families/communities, industry/manufacturers, schools and workplaces can do to support breastfeeding mothers in accordance with the legal provisions of RA 10028, EO 51 (Milk Code), and RA 7600. All these are rounded off by information on complementary feeding (i.e., what and how to introduce solids and other foods after six months) and a banner for National Breastfeeding Awareness Month with the theme, "Gatas ng Ina: Tama, Sapat, Eksklusibo, Siguradong Panalo!"

In addition to *Breastfeeding TSEK* and related infographics that promote breastfeeding through education, independent groups such as LATCH (Lactation, Attachment, Training, Counseling, Help) and Beauty, Brains & Breastfeeding (BBB) have also kicked off far-reaching media campaigns, followed by support groups on social media such as Breastfeeding Pinays (BFP) on Facebook. During the course of data collection, the materials produced by these groups proved to be of particular interest, owing to the distinct rhetorical framing of these

materials and initiatives as emanating from mothers themselves rather than from government directives. LATCH, for instance, is a network of mothers who serve as trained volunteer counselors and lactation educators, while BFP is more of an online community composed of mothers and fathers, as well as trained breastfeeding peer counselors and health specialists. BBB, established in 2006, explicitly states on its Facebook page that it is “founded by a mom, for moms” (2014).

In 2011, both LATCH and Beauty, Brains & Breastfeeding launched campaigns that would figure prominently in the media. LATCH’s “Give Life. Live Life. Breastfeed!” was released in August 2011 through the popular *Working Mom* magazine, featuring mother-baby portraits taken by photographer Karen H. Ilagan. The campaign consisted of seven photographs, each having a different mother-baby pair as subject, ostensibly nursing in public, where “there are various taboos and spatial rituals associated with breastfeeding” (Mahon-Daly and Andrews 2002, 70). As expected from professionally taken photographs meant for publication in a magazine, the women in the pictures appear well-dressed and in makeup, breastfeeding their children while doing activities such as eating outside, shopping, hosting parties, attending mass in church, shopping, lounging poolside, etc. Each photograph has a short phrase accompanying it such as “a good deal on the best choice” (nursing while shopping), “busy feeding the mind” (nursing while reading in a library/bookstore), “still the life of the party” (nursing while hosting guests), and “nourishment from a higher power” (nursing in church), etc. BBB’s campaign, on the other hand, was supported by UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund) and was launched via five billboards placed across Metro Manila in October 2011. These billboards featured three women: the sportscaster and TV host, Patricia Hizon, TV host, model and UNICEF Special Ambassador Daphne Oseña-Paez, and BBB founder Iza G. Abeja in a line, dressed smartly and in heels, standing with poise and elegance with the words “Smart. Glamorous. Hard Working. Women Breastfeed” written beside them. Although the women are photographed with their children in a separate publication material, it is noteworthy that the act of breastfeeding is not actually shown in any of the pictures in this campaign. BBB founder Abeja, in an interview given during the campaign’s launch and published in the *Philippine Star* remarked that “When you make a campaign like this, breastfeeding becomes aspirational” (Subido and Alindahao 2011).

In a similar vein, LATCH followed their 2011 campaign with another in 2015, this time focused on the impact of community support for breastfeeding. Dubbed as “United in Support for Breastfeeding” or #latchusb, the organization released a series of portrait-style photos featuring breastfeeding advocates, from mothers themselves to fathers, physicians, entrepreneurs, celebrities, etc. Like the BBB campaign, none of the 2015 LATCH photographs show women breastfeeding, though

some photos did feature mothers with their babies, children or families. Despite the noticeable absence of actual breastfeeding in these large-scale campaigns, it should be noted that visual materials showing the act of breastfeeding may be viewed on these organizations' websites and social media pages.

Certainly, the advance of technology and digital platforms since the enactment of RA 10028 has made the creation and dissemination of breastfeeding images even more widespread (even engaging celebrities like Daza). Community-organized events like *Hakab Na!*, spearheaded locally in the Philippines by the Facebook group Breastfeeding Pinays (BFP), have begun to drive a movement toward the normalization of breastfeeding through user-generated and often candid accounts of the breastfeeding journey. With some 360,000 members, BFP initiated the local conduct of the event (initially called *Hakab Na! A Breastfeeding Mob*, *hakab* being the Filipino word for 'latch') in 2013 across four Philippine cities (Manila, Bacolod, Cagayan de Oro and Davao City). In consonance with the "Global Big Latch On" (sometimes referred to as The Big Latch On), an international event where mothers, babies and their support communities gather to simultaneously breastfeed and promote the practice worldwide, *Hakab Na!* has reached thousands of mother-baby dyads nationwide and has been held every year since 2013, shifting to online venues during the pandemic.¹ These nationwide, simultaneous latch-on events have generated vast public interest, resulting in photographs and other multimedia content on both traditional and social media, providing valuable materials for this study.

Showing masses of mothers (from tens to thousands) with their children—singles and multiples alike—in the act of breastfeeding, the most striking element of these events is the visual impact of seeing throngs of mothers and babies from all walks of life sitting together on the floor and nursing. Some photographs show mothers with one hand raised to facilitate the global count, and some show participants holding placards of all sizes with their own slogans such as "New Generation Moms Love Breastfeeding" (such as the photograph by [Nino Jesus Orbeta for the Philippine Daily Inquirer](#) in 2016) or "Breastfeeding Saves Me Money" (as in a photograph published by [World Vision](#) in 2019). Some women make efforts to cover their breasts, but a noticeable number of women appear to have no qualms about breast exposure.²

Making Sense of Visual Absence and the Consequence of Mass Optics

This analysis brings us back to the contradictions brought into the open by social media posts made by mothers such as Isabelle Daza: breastfeeding as both connection and constraint, benefit and burden. Certainly, the campaigns discussed above attempted to navigate these

tensions in favor of promoting breastfeeding as a ‘best practice’ yet the visual strategies employed often deepened rather than resolved them. To begin with, we look at the Philippine government’s *Breastfeeding TSEK* campaign and its distinctive logo. The choice of imagery here, the ‘kind’ of mother depicted—one who is feminine, fit, light-skinned (and therefore not engaged in labor that involves being under the sun or else being born fair-skinned), focused on only one child at a time—is telling. The myth of Filipino motherhood is built upon the stones of prevailing beauty standards, to the exception of all others, and this is reinforced by the chosen text (i.e., the word ‘tsek’ or ‘check’) which surrounds the image.

‘TSEK/Check’ calls to mind two related but distinct meanings: *correctness* and *accomplishment* or *achievement*, both a description and a prescription of breastfeeding in alignment to discourses engendered by “the scientific and medical colonization of reproduction and child rearing” (Wall 2001, 593). On one hand, ‘TSEK/check’ infers ‘correctness’ (that is, it is not an ‘x’ to signify incorrectness), recalling the structuralist notion of signs deriving their meaning through their relationships and contrasts with other signs, rather than on fixed, inherent meanings. At the same time, ‘TSEK/check’ also connotes ‘accomplishment’ or ‘achievement’ such as on a checklist or a set of moral responsibilities. Thus, the DOH campaign functions accordingly as a medical/scientific/government apparatus that reinforces the idea of breastfeeding as not only the ‘right’ choice but also the ‘best’ choice for infant feeding. *Tama* (‘correct’ or ‘right’), the first component of the TSEK acronym, underpins and confirms this messaging, as does the frequent mention in government promotional materials of breastfeeding’s benefits for mother and child. Albuero-Cañete (2014) writes extensively on the discourse fostered by this campaign in the Philippines, linking it to the more globally recognizable rhetoric of “breast is best,” which has fostered the idea of breastfeeding as part of women’s ‘nature’ and ‘moral responsibility.’ In the end, she asserts that there is a danger to these perceptions, foremost would be how these discourses cause “women’s specific circumstances, needs, and views disappear into the background and [...] disregarded as minor, trivial, and secondary” (133). In this sense, breastfeeding can be seen as taking on the “depoliticized language” of myth as Barthes (1972) posits:

myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves. (142)

While it is equally arguable that the DOH campaign intended to empower women by telling them that they are making the correct choice by breastfeeding and that “practically all mothers can breastfeed” (DOH 2014, *What are the Facts about Breastfeeding? Part 1*), it is also important to critically consider how these notions have turned into myths that can serve to alienate women and “empty” motherhood of its meaning as it becomes increasingly dependent on expert supervision (B. L. Hausman 2013). That is, as feminist scholars have observed time and again (Bartlett 2002; Mahon-Daly and Andrews 2002; B. L. Hausman 2013; Wall 2001), the impingement of medical and scientific discourse into the practice of breastfeeding has brought previously private (or at least for some societies, communal) maternal practices under the regulatory gaze of medical, scientific and—at least in the case of the *Breastfeeding TSEK* campaign—government authorities.

But what of images and initiatives driven by mothers themselves? The BBB and LATCH campaigns illustrate the intersectional nuance of advocacy, particularly in Philippine class society. I recall Barthes’ notion of myth as “depoliticized speech” focusing on “the function of myth [...] to empty reality” in order to fill it back up again with its own agenda (1972, 142) as I view the campaign’s chosen photographs as purposeful and coordinated campaigns propelled by mass media. The agenda here is clear enough: breastfeeding belongs in the public sphere, just as women do. Yet this public face of breastfeeding is one that is carefully curated and remains bound by conditions imposed by society at large. The nursing breast is put aside in favor of happy, healthy and fulfilled women and their families, a signifier emptied to hold a mythified experience of motherhood, an aspirational lodestar for the campaigns’ target audience. As Barthes (1972, 120) has argued, “myth hides nothing,” electing to distort reality than to make it disappear so that myth finds survival in the truth/nature that it has created.

At this juncture, it is worth noting that the current discussion is not an attempt to parse the ‘true intentions’ of these campaigns, as doing so would be futile and immaterial. It is, rather, an illustration of how even signs rooted in a context of marginalization, reflecting women’s broader struggles for visibility in the public sphere and resistance against exclusion, may still function to uphold certain power structures and cultural narratives about motherhood. This is especially true in the case of the BBB campaign, where the visual rhetoric of glamorous, accomplished women able to seamlessly integrate breastfeeding into public life (without *actually* depicting breastfeeding) offers a dissonant solution to the problem of women’s participation in public life. Hausman (2013, 282) has raised the limitations of such an approach (i.e., that non-male bodies are “allowed into the public sphere only on the condition that they be like male bodies”), asserting that “Simply reinserting women and maternity into those contexts will not change

life as we know it....” Yet, critically examining the dissonance that these images reveal engages what Barthes (1972, 134) posited as “the best weapon against myth” which is “to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an *artificial myth*” (emphasis in the original). The mythic narratives of women’s place in society are exposed for their constructed and artificial qualities, even as the spaces between maternalism and feminism continue to be negotiated, contested, and ultimately transformed.

In contrast to frameworks of state policy or social acceptance, the *Hakab Na!* photographs are more democratic and active in their depiction of motherhood as a communal experience shared by a diverse group of people. The multitude of participants visible in each event photograph enables viewers to locate themselves within the diverse array of breastfeeding experiences represented, absent a narrow prescription of how these experiences should look like (exposed, unexposed or somewhere only within the comfort of parent and child). This, too, may be understood as an ‘artificial myth’ which exposes the limitations of previous myths (i.e., breastfeeding is natural and instinctive, requiring no structural support; breastfeeding and breastfeeding women can be successful members of public life only if they keep their breasts and the act of breastfeeding hidden, etc.). After all, as Hausman (2013, 5) points out: “Clearly breastfeeding is not just a matter of learning, as it is neither just a matter of biological function. Women’s unpredictable experiences of breastfeeding verify this.”

Conclusion

More than 30 years ago, Blum (1993) remarked that “breastfeeding provides a wonderful lens magnifying the cracks and fractures in our construction of the late-twentieth-century mother” as an embodied practice representing “both the cultural and ‘natural’ mother; that is, the socially constructed and the biological [...] inextricably intertwined” (291). The range of visual materials produced for the mass communication of motherhood through breastfeeding discussed here provides a productive corpus through which we have examined how these identities and practices have been socially constructed, represented and mythified.

The DOH’s *Breastfeeding TSEK* campaign, while successful in raising awareness, reinforces a regulatory gaze over maternal practices, underpinning long-held perceptions about the practice as mothers’ moral imperative toward their children (Wall 2001). On the other hand, private sector campaigns mythify motherhood through campaigns aimed at normalizing breastfeeding via narratives of public acceptance and support, as well as through the curated presentation of upper middle-class women successfully navigating their roles in society along with motherhood. While we cannot argue with regard to intentions, we have

also analyzed how these efforts have perpetuated restrictive ideas about 'good' maternal identity, which in turn create hierarchies that end up being counterproductive in actual breastfeeding advocacy. In contrast, *Hakab Na!* presents a shift towards more democratic, community-led advocacy. This trajectory suggests that while institutional efforts to promote breastfeeding have contributed to important policy changes and increased awareness, perhaps mothers themselves are the key to the most transformative representations of maternal identity.

The foregoing discussion illuminates ongoing tensions in the construction of myths surrounding motherhood. Future research might explore how these competing narratives continue to evolve, and how an awareness of visual representations can aid in the creation of more effective initiatives to recognize women's diverse experiences beyond the convenience of myth.

Acknowledgment

This work was supported in part by the Cordillera Studies Center through its CSC Research Grant. The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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Notes

1. The researcher was able to participate in this annual event from 2015 to 2019, where they engaged with the local breastfeeding communities in Baguio City and nearby towns by participating in the event's organization and promotion.
2. Upon registration to the event, mothers are asked to sign consent forms or waivers regarding the possibility that they might be captured in the photographs that may be included and used in the event's promotion.

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