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ARTICLE

'Milk Pride': Lactivist Online Constructions of Positive Breastfeeding Value

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Based on six years of participant observation in lactivist spaces, this article traces one of the pathways from knowledge sharing to activism and mobilisation in breastfeeding support spaces online, and considers the ways in which lactivist spaces employ biomedical information and various images to create a sense of 'milk pride'. I want to argue that, although problematic, this is an important aspect of reclaiming biomedical evidence for women's benefit. By looking at images grouped thematically as 'wondrous milk', 'superpower', and 'liquid gold', the article demonstrates how the appropriation of biomedical discourses occurs at the grassroots level of the breastfeeding movement, understood here as the loosely connected networks of support present in online environments. It then moves to consider how these discourses are deployed to empower women to feel entitled to access specific rights and to extend these to the sphere of work within the household, typically invisible to the wage-work oriented economic sphere.

Introduction

In June 2015, US-rapper George Moss posted a picture of himself washing his wife's breast pump backstage after a concert to his Facebook account. He received 'thousands of positive messages' praising him for 'normalising [...] pumping in public places' (Huffington Post 2015). Following over a million views of the post and a furore in news media, Moss followed a week later with an image of his wife breastfeeding, which he captioned with lavish praise for the hard work she does (Huffington Post 2015). These images are symptomatic of a wider trend amongst celebrities of posting pictures in which they, or partners, are breastfeeding or expressing breastmilk for their children – sometimes called 'brelfies'¹ and 'pumpies'. Posting such images is also common practice for many breastfeeding social media users and part of the repertoire of activist online tactics. Lactivism is here used as a positive term, understood – as proposed by Cyndi Stearns (2014) – as a set of various practices of embodied breastfeeding activism carried out by breastfeeding women and enacted *through* breastfeeding. Lactivism can be enacted in both 'terrestrial' and in online settings, through actions such as 'nurse-ins' or occupation protests during which women actively breastfeed, or image flooding online, where a similar effect is achieved by posting breastfeeding selfies (brelfies); it also spans other tactics of contention, such as consumer boycotts and online 'negrating' (negative rating) of entities seen as undermining breastfeeding mothers. However, the bulk of activist activity is focused on mutual support – either through formalised, NGO-led peer-support, or through informal online groups and forums, and creating an environment conducive to individual NIP-ing (nursing-in-public). In their actions, activists evoke a shared understanding of how the meanings culturally attributed to breastfeeding affect social valuations of it, and the connections this has to the gendering of this embodied practice. More specifically, where these valuations are negative, the goal of activism is to challenge and change these.

Sharing of images linked to breastfeeding could therefore be a positive 'strategy to embrace visibility as a way of refusing stigma and shame' on the part of activists,

¹ Inaccurately as they are not exactly 'selfies'; their activist potential is also very different to those of everyday 'bodies' putting themselves on display (Boon & Pentney 2015; Giles 2015).

similar to 'identity-based political movements', states Jung (2015, p. 6). However, she defines lactivism negatively as a project focused on 'compulsory breastfeeding', a 'moral crusade' and a 'means of distinguishing good from bad parents' – and in this way a movement limiting women's rights and choices (7). Jung's criticism is somewhat similar to the one voiced by Faircloth (2013), who sees lactivists as 'militants' (6), a minority group, who find themselves 'pushed [...] away from society' through challenging majority practices, a 'tribe that does it right' and sees others as 'victims in need of education' (221), but also as members of a 'powerful lobby' using their political influence to shape policy (10, 42, 46). Some of these perceptions are based on definitional problems of the organisational continuum (Landzelius 2006) of the wider breastfeeding movement, which encompasses mainstream supranational governmental and NGO organisations – in which women's voices might be underrepresented – to the grassroots lactivists (Kedrowski 2010), who variously align themselves with and separate themselves from advocacy messages. The lactivist activity I focus on here, therefore, is best understood as 'quasi-organised loose networks linked by-and-large via gestures of solidarity and co-identification' (Landzelius 2006, p. 533), whose intention is to create positive understandings of breastfeeding. My focus is particularly on the online expressions of these intentions.

This article considers the ways in which online lactivist spaces employ biomedical information and images to create a sense of 'milk pride'. 'Milk pride' is here understood as a form of positive self-identity for breastfeeders, based on the biomedical and biosocial importance of breastfeeding, metonymised to the ability to produce milk – a substance with very particular qualities (Ballard and Morrow 2013; Victora et al. 2015, Arnardottir et al. 2016), based on the popularisation of biomedical research. Activated by lactivists through deploying the knowledge base, pride can also be seen as an activist way of counteracting the abject status of public, visible breastfeeding, by stressing the importance and value of the practice. At the same time, pride can activate the negative connotations of superiority – in this case of one type of infant feeding and, by extension, mothering – further problematised by the complex connections of breastfeeding to class and race. The aim of this article is to unpack these

meanings of milk pride, using a collection of images gathered over six years of participant observation in online activist breastfeeding support environments.

The research on which this article draws focuses specifically on UK and Polish online groups, enabled by the fact I have physically mothered in these two national contexts. However, many of its findings overlap with global activist actions. In this article I follow the practice of using initials, real or coded, to identify participants, and acronyms, real or coded, to identify groups. Additionally, Polish group conversations have been translated, adding a further layer of anonymisation.² While online ethnography embedded in a specific online community is not without its methodological problems (Kuntsman 2009), it is doubtlessly a source of rich and relevant data. Here I draw particularly on content shared on social media, with a preference for Facebook. In the UK, 38 million people actively use social media, while in Poland the monthly figure stands at 80% of the 24.9 million Polish Internet users (Gemius 2016; GUS 2017; Statista 2016, 2017). In both countries, women account for 51% of social media users, and for many, access is a daily pattern of living in which 'mundane social media rituals' (Maltby and Thornham 2016) are no longer a space 'apart'. The intensity and routine character of women's online participation create a sense of the 'digital mundane' as a mode of living of particular importance to maternal subjects (Wilson and Chivers Yochim 2017).

Research on maternal presence online in the context of health-related issues (Drentea and Moren-Cross 2005; Madge and O'Connor 2006; Barkhuus et al., 2013), and research on parents, particularly mothers, involved in patient groups in online environments (Mickelson 1997; Hardey 1999; Akrich 2010; Schaffer et al., 2008; Niela-Vilen et al. 2014), offers important insights into how online support groups facilitate information sharing and knowledge building, translate biomedical knowledge into usable information, foster social support, and empower their users – often leading to mobilization and activism around the health issue. This article traces one of the pathways from knowledge sharing to activism and mobilisation that occurs in

² Group members agreed to being observed or permission to observe was granted by the administration, conditional on anonymising the participants and in some cases the forum or group itself.

breastfeeding supportive activist spaces online. I want to argue that the formation of milk pride, although problematic, is an important aspect of reclaiming biomedical evidence (Hausman 2003).

Online support for breastfeeding and the science of breastmilk

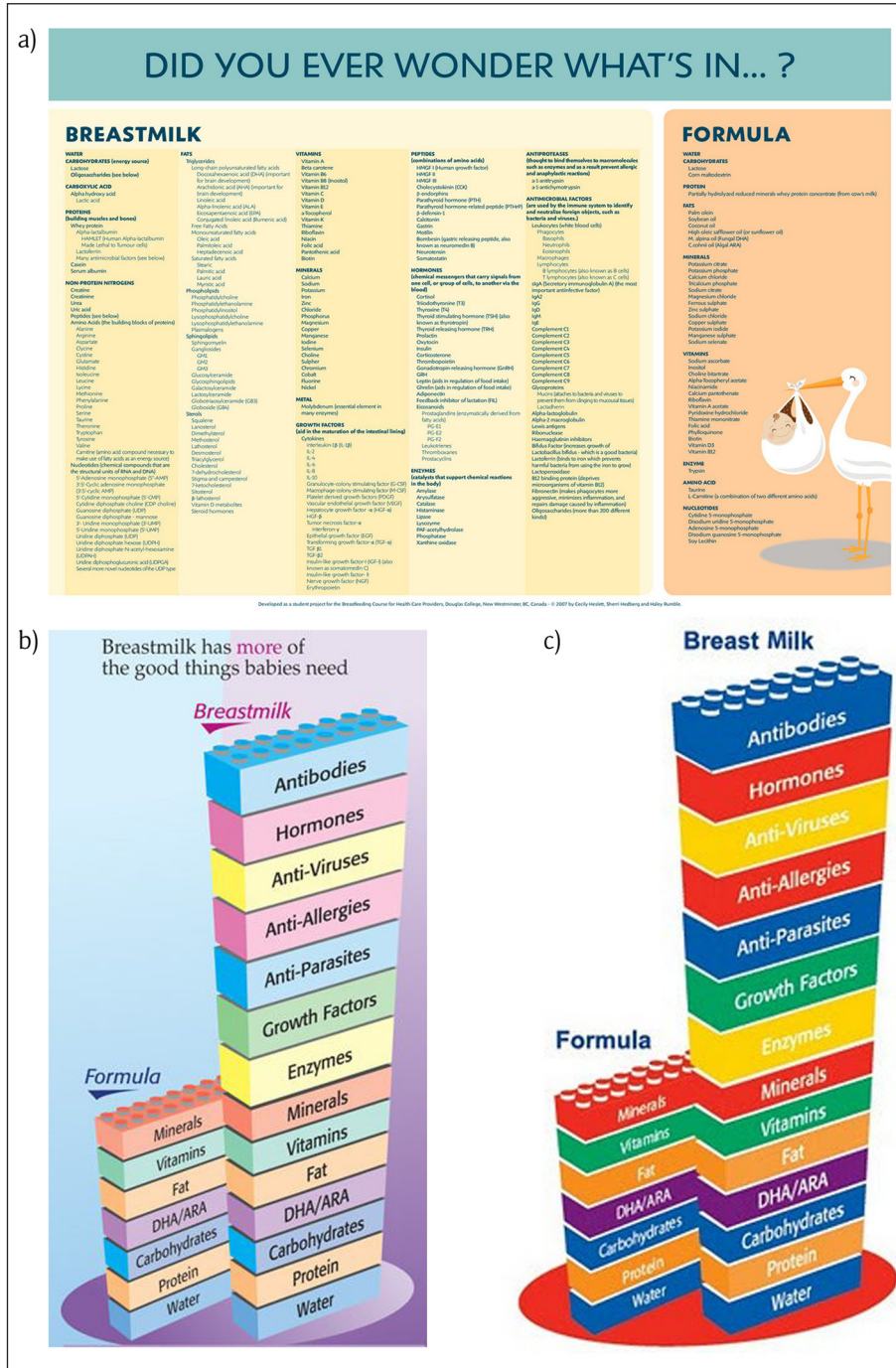
Breastfeeding support environments online are spaces in which experiential knowledge of experienced mothers and biomedical and socio-anthropological 'facts' co-exist (Radkowska-Walkowicz 2009). Like many other parenting or health-issue support spaces, these environments are based on the efforts of volunteers, whose daily contributions form the bulk of the content of these groups or forums (Gold 2016). The growing importance of mediated sociability seems to be changing the ways in which women develop competencies in mothering practices, including breastfeeding (Romano 2007; McDaniel et al. 2012; Huberty et al. 2013; Fredriksen et al. 2016; Leune and Nizard 2012; Radkowska-Walkowicz 2009; Zdrojewska-Zywiecka 2012). Breastfeeding oriented groups may be based on the premise of 'parent to parent help' in breastfeeding problems, where 'support should be aimed at encouraging and supporting a breastfeeding journey' (BAPS/FB). Others describe themselves as 'safe places' for 'people who are passionate about breastfeeding activism', or simply constitute spaces in which the practices of breastfeeding or breastfeeding to term, also known as long-term, or extended breastfeeding (Faircloth 2013; Dowling 2014), are upheld (SAG/FB, KCNU/FB). Most agree that 'breastfeeding is the most natural way of feeding newborns and infants' (KPSm/FB).

For breastfeeding women, being part of such groups facilitates access to information and makes learning about practical and highly specific aspects of the physiology of breastfeeding relatively easy. This is because a wealth of written and pictorial information, covering diverse aspects of breastfeeding at varying levels of complexity, gets circulated in these groups. Increasingly, it seems, women choose online support groups as their main source of information on child-rearing practices (Fredriksen et al., 2016). This trend is linked to a loss of support systems and a loss of collective knowledge and experience of breastfeeding within women's primary contact groups,

as part of a wider loss of traditional networks of support for mothering (Kitzinger 1992; Oakley 1992; Carter 1995; Wolf 2001; Hill Collins 2000). When women discuss mothering generally and breastfeeding specifically in online environments, the lack of support they experience in their immediate contexts becomes visible (Drentea and Moren-Cross 2005; Radkowska Walkowicz 2009). Sharing breastfeeding specific knowledge is one of the main functions of online breastfeeding support groups, aimed at overcoming the deficits of medical provisions and loss of communities in immediate environments. Of importance are also elements of practical knowledge of breastfeeding shared in these environments; informed by medical discourses and not easily separable from them, these are usable recommendations for dealing with an issue at hand (Pols 2013). This experiential aspect is important from the point of view of other users: a recent study carried out in Norway on women's health literacy and online pregnancy forums found that 'information provided online by other women in the same situation was valued more highly than advice from health professionals' (Fredriksen, et al. 2016, p. 1), and that the information gained from online forums facilitated women's interactions with healthcare practitioners.

In activist online spaces, biomedical information on the properties of breastmilk is often represented in pictorial form – as an 'infographic' or a 'meme'. Visual representations of contents or properties of breastmilk may be held within group repositories ('docs'), or shared by members in response to specific requests. Such visuals add to the group's informational resources and may be used as artefacts in a form of validation-through-science, shown or forwarded to family or friends who might declare that breastfeeding is not 'that important'. Women seek such information, particularly when they need to defend breastfeeding or to counter pro-formula arguments. Biomedical knowledge shared in this way serves practical applications, which translate into the support function of online support groups – in this instance, the provision of 'practical assistance' and information means 'instrumental' and 'informational' support are combined (Lin and Bhattacharjee 2009).

The use of scientific argumentation to support breastfeeding is one of the accountability strategies described by Faircloth (2013) as 'science knows best'. In pictorial comparisons of breastmilk and its substitutes, science becomes proof that 'natural'



breastmilk is better than the 'artificial', 'industrial' product. One such instance is a list of breastmilk and formula 'ingredients', which circulates in several graphic forms (**Figure 1**). The common feature is the complexity and length of the list of ingredients of breastmilk, and the short list of substitute ingredients. Canadian midwifery students (Heslett et al. 2007) are believed to be its originators, although creator credits are often cropped out. Another form that comparisons take is an image of stacked LEGO-like bricks, with the breastmilk tower reaching higher than the formula one. Unlike the list, which is saturated with biomedical information, the bricks list pop-scientific 'antibodies' alongside 'anti-allergies' and 'anti-parasites'. The image and its different incarnations are most likely a reworking of a US WIC scheme poster,³ although again this is not entirely clear. The superiority of breastmilk implied in these comparisons serves to establish it as a unique substance, a 'liquid gold' (Palmquist 2015).

But this focus on milk-as-product, which establishes it as a superior commodity, may lead, in the logic of a culture permeated by consumption codes, to suggesting that those who use it are 'superior' mothers who provide 'the best' for their children. At the same time, it is important to note that 'breast is best' was a marketing slogan coined in 1923 by Gerber, a formula company, to promote its products, so it could be argued that the problems associated with re-assertions of breastmilk's 'superiority' are at least in part the result of formula marketing (Palmer 2009; Wiessinger 1996; Sethi 1994). This, together with other connotations of superiority and pride – including the class and racial connotations in specific contexts – is problematic, and could explain some women's hesitation to express pride in feeding a child.

Wondrous milk

Milk pride is directly based on the ease with which biomedical knowledge about the properties of breastmilk is shared and circulated across online lactivist spaces in the form of memes and photographic/infographic content. Their widespread use in

³ The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides Federal grants to States for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to infants and children up to age five who are found to be at nutritional risk (USDA 2017).



Figure 2: 'Biomedical' memes. (Source: **A:** UKBAPS/LJWhite; **B:** author unknown; **C:** bravely; **D:** the alternative mom (fb); **E:** BFMT; **F:** unknown; **G:** Lactation Connection).

online forms of breastfeeding activism – in groups and forums, pages and blogs, and even by commercial entities – attests to a synergy between content and its digital format. 'Biomedical' memes (**Figure 2**) are typically formatted to be easy to read. An individual 'meme' – a term I use here loosely, following its use amongst lactivists rather than theoretical considerations on the form – can present knowledge gathered across several sources in short, snappy copy (**Figure 2A**), or it can present one 'fact' in an accessible, visually enhanced and memorable form. These 'facts' are often based on simplifications of biomedical research findings, and as such are not without fault (Jung 2015; Wolf 2011; Brown 2016; Hausman 2003; Faircloth 2013), but their importance in translating the results of such research into a lactivist tool is undeniable.

With the use of accessible online software, any image can be manipulated or captioned to create a different linguistic version – replicated, duplicated, redone, reassembled, copied, forwarded and accessed without extensive technical knowledge. Ease of access increasingly means access on mobile hand-held devices, which means it can be 'found' by or shared with a woman who is immobilised by feeding a child, instantly forwarded to others, or saved for future reference. These memes are easily remembered, and because they are widely shared, can be found (or requested, as is the practice in many environments) online in time of need and shared again. Someone in a group is bound to have one handy at any time and can provide and make many more such images. In this sense, these memes are knowledge visualised in an accessible way, shared between women not only as information and instruction, but also as reassurance that what they do has a 'value', attested by the special properties of the miraculous substance involved (**Figure 2B, C, F and G**), as well as by the functions of the embodied contact that is part of the practice (**Figure 2A, D and E**).

However, in her work with LLL (La Leche League) groups in the South of England, Faircloth (2013) noted that women were selective in what biomedical advice they heeded. The tendency was not so much to demedicalise infant feeding as to dispute what is labelled mainstream medicine. This features in some online breastfeeding

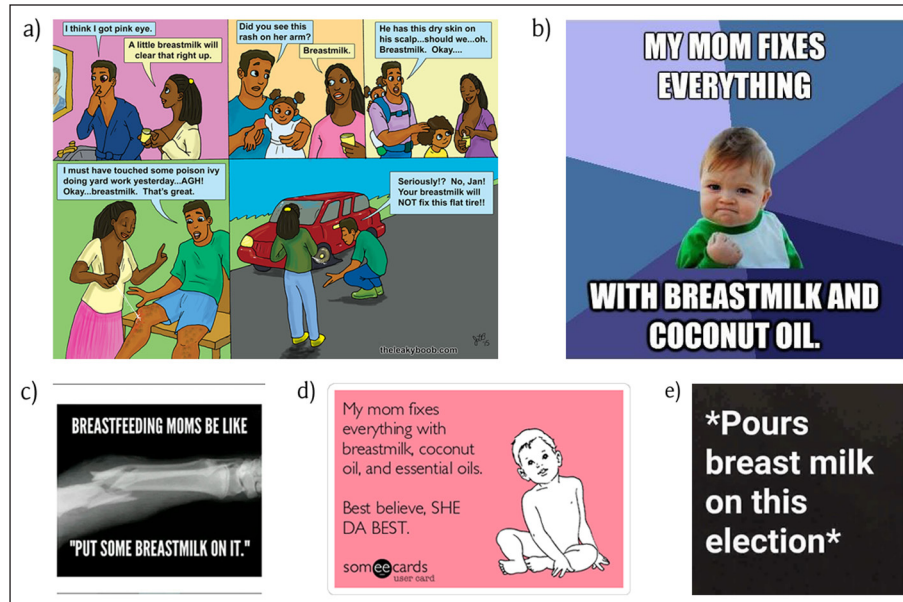


Figure 3: Spoofing breastmilk as a cure-all.

spaces – though not all – where traditional and homemade remedies, and alternative or natural treatments like acupuncture, cranial osteopathy, and homeopathy, are presented as a therapeutically beneficial course of action for breastfeeding problems and for other ailments in the breastfeeding dyad. Underlying this is also the belief in special and healing properties of breastmilk, which is suggested as a ‘cure all’ over and above alternative treatments. This attitude is reflexively spoofed in some lactivist memes and cartoons (**Figure 3B** and **D**). The hyperbole of the idea that breastmilk can be used to treat minor skin and digestive problems, coupled with ideas such as the presence of stem cells (**Figure 2B**),⁴ widely circulated as memes, is also comically exploited. From jokes about overzealous application of breastmilk to cure fractures (3C) and fix flat tyres (A), to political jokes about ‘making better’ the pain of the elections (E), there seems to be a good degree of recognition in the

⁴ Or the ‘cancer curing’ HAMLET (human alpha-lactalbumin made lethal to tumor cells) complex (Svanborg et al., 2003).

lactivist community of the ways in which we are 'milking' breast milk's wondrous properties. But even in comical hyperbole, there is a subtle hint of just how special breastmilk is.

Superpower

Milk pride has two further interlinked representational incarnations: pride in the ability to *produce* milk, and pride in one's 'output'. Suggestions of the first are closely linked to embodied representations of breastfeeding, and can be seen throughout such forms as brefies (Giles 2015; Boon and Pentney 2015) and milestone celebra-



Figure 4: Milk-making Superpower (Source: LLL, unknown, l-shop, unknown; circulated online 2011–2017).

tions. However, its most popular form is the lactivist slogan 'I make milk. What's your superpower?', along with associated visuals such as the breastfeeding Wonder Woman cartoon, an LLL 'superwoman' poster, and countless commodities from pin badges to t-shirts that carry it (**Figure 4**). This representational strand could be read as both an affirmation of the power and value of the female body, and a boastful self-categorisation as being somehow 'better than'; in this sense, it has an irresolvable ambiguity to it. It can also be read as an attempt to present oneself as a 'good mother', and to seek validation for a specific maternal performance. Publishing images of one's children, images of self and women as mothers, and other forms of 'role modelling', are ways of 'doing motherhood' socially *online* through displaying 'care, pride, and nurturance for [one's] children' to others, thus cultivating 'an online presence consistent with cultural gender norms' of motherhood (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2016).

While it is used on social media as affirmation of one's identity as a breastfeeding mother and an empowering statement about one's own bodily capability to nourish and sustain life, it can also be read, as it was put to me in a private comment, as 'promoting an ideology that sees women as nothing but milk cows'. Paige Hall Smith (2013) traces the root of this misunderstanding to a false dichotomy of biology as constraint versus resource, and points to the central fallacy that sees breastfeeding, among other reproductive functions, as only biological and not social. As she argues:

Women's biological ability to lactate would not lead to an inevitable social role for women, and this biological sex difference is not responsible for the arrangement of socially determined economic, political, and social expectations, rewards, and opportunities that construct gender inequalities. (2013, p. 379)

Given this, using the superwoman/superpower trope may be a way of countering negative notions of motherhood as drudgery, a low status characteristic (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004).

A slightly different attempt at changing the status of breastfeeding was the 2008–12 *Be a Star* campaign, a photo series of young mothers who breastfeed in

LOOK AT MY DAUGHTER. SHE'S A STAR

Because she's breastfeeding, my granddaughter is getting all the goodness she needs, straight from her mum. And because I know breastfeeding isn't always easy, I'm just so proud of her for giving it a go.

My daughter might not be a film star or famous singer, but look at her breastfeeding... she's a star.

Starring Vicky and Baby Sian from Carlisle

 **breast feed
be a star**

National Breastfeeding Helpline
0300 100 0212 9.30am - 9.30pm



**VISIT VICKY ONLINE AT...
beastar.org.uk**
FIND OUT WHY VICKY THINKS BREASTFEEDING IS BEST FOR BABY SIAN

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Figure 5: *Be a Star* campaign poster (NHS Cumbria).

stylised poses (**Figure 5**), portraying them as celebrities (Be a Star, 2008). While there are many possible criticisms of the images, it is important to note that the idea came from consultation with young women, and was positively received by the target group (Reese and Clack 2014). Many similar projects that represent breastfeeding within the 'beauty' paradigm have been taken up by groups and photographers around the world, most notably by Ivette Ivens in the US (Giles 2015). By achieving a certain aesthetic refinement in terms of composition and image quality, such photographic projects seek to achieve respectability for breastfeeding.

In many such glamourised breastfeeding pictures, any nudity is captured 'tastefully', in an attempt to stay within the bounds of the culturally acceptable representations of maternal beauty. Rhetorically, these images aim to counter the charges of 'obscenity' and reactions of 'disgust' against breastfeeding. Things 'referred to as obscene' are also 'read as a threat to cultural order', which is often applied to breastfeeding:

Obscene is the abject, that which crosses the boundary, which contradicts the integrity of the subject, that is, inter alia, the corporeal matter flowing from the body – blood, urine, tears, saliva, sperm, but also milk. (Kowalczyk 2010)

But set in a reproductive context, this imagery also invites a reading of the kind of 'maternal femininity' it professes (Tyler 2011). Reading the figure of the 'pregnant beauty', a sexualised image of the pregnant female body contextualised by neoliberal social and economic conditions, Tyler sees it as a combination of 'consumption, choice, agency and futurity in a powerful and seductive post-feminist cultural ideal' (2011, p. 23). This is certainly the case for the *Be a Star* series, which presents the young women as desirable in their youthfulness, and just a touch sexy. Both the 'celebrity' ('star') and 'superhero(ine)' (superhuman?) tropes are problematic in their own ways. And for all such representational tactics, despite some powerful connotations that counter the negative understanding of breastmilk, breastfeeding, and maternity, there remains a danger of slippage into essentialising based on a near-fetishisation



Figure 6: Breastmilk as output. The themes raised by each picture's accompanying text (left to right): Success in relactation; strange colour and texture; harvesting colostrum for a child likely to be in NICU; stash storage safety (Source: Facebook breastfeeding support group members).

of milk production. Given their popularity, however, their deployment as a lactivist tactic does resonate with many breastfeeding women, and seems to be read as empowering and a counter-narrative to negativity encountered in their daily lives.

Liquid gold

Another way in which milk pride is visualised in lactivist online spaces and beyond represents milk as 'output'. This can have various permutations: photographs of breastmilk in various containers such as bags, bottles, pumps, nipple shields, syringes with harvested colostrum, or photographs of fridge-freezers filled with a 'stash' of expressed breastmilk (**Figure 6**), and photographs of children with a container

or containers of expressed milk. The focus is primarily on the valuable substance depicted. Sometimes these are also pictures of women in the act of pumping or holding up a container filled with milk, conveying pride in the ability to produce milk. The 'freshly pumped' milk is usually framed as a personal success. This is particularly visible in images captioned '*Some people pump iron, I pump gold*', a phrase that plays on the effort of expressing, likening it to weightlifting (pumping iron), and emphasising both the reward for the effort ('getting' gold), and the preciousness of the substance. It could be argued that such photographs also serve to fetishise breastmilk – a substance so precious that the work of extracting it becomes *rewarding*. During the day, when a woman posts an image of recently expressed milk, it might be a sign of working a double shift – as a wage worker and a mother – and the picture of 'output' created during work hours attests to her 'productivity' in both (Boyer 2014; Boswell-Penc and Boyer 2007). Pumping at work rarely problematises this narrative of productivity, rather suggesting a seamless integration of women's reproductive capacities with waged work. The woman becomes the 'breastfeeding-wage-earning Supermom' (Blum 1999, p. 183).

Critical voices note that pumping as a practice mechanises breastfeeding, removes the importance of embodied beings from view, and reifies breastmilk as a product (Katz-Rothman 1992; Van Esterik 1989; Blum 1999; Dykes 2005; Avishai 2004; Johnson et al. 2012). The narrative about the work of producing this 'liquid gold' contained in the photographs risks slipping into one about women able to offer a highly coveted consumable (Pollack 2015) to their child, especially in images of 'stash' shared as a confirmation of time and energy spent on pumping and amassing the precious substance, and by extension of an investment in 'class enhancing motherhood' (Blum 1999, p. 183).

But images of milk itself, or of a child among bottles of expressed breastmilk, invite other readings too. For women who, for various reasons, feed expressed milk as a sole or dominant way of feeding, output and stash pictures can carry narratives of victory and sadness: of not being able to breastfeed directly and of managing to satisfy the child's needs only by pumping. Pumping may also be described as a time

and resource consuming practice and physical labour, hence not necessarily conveying 'class enhancement'. Photographs of milk may also be shared to enquire about its physical qualities: an unusual colour, taste, or fat content. The accompanying posts may talk about a sense of bodily urgency – a need for pumping to experience physical or emotional relief. In this sense, they do not erase the body that produced it, since highlighting the sensory aspect brings the body back into focus. The caption might convey the crushing emotions which followed the pumping as the milk was spilled soon after the photo was taken, offering accounts of labour expenditure and body or bodies in motion. Shared in online groups, such photographs may convey a sense of immediacy and portray the urgent and embodied nature of breastfeeding: they make the breastfeeding body present without displaying it, using milk in a metonymic way.

Milk donors, and parents reliant on donor milk, also use such images to show the 'milk of human kindness' that can sustain infants. Stash photographs accompany offers of milk-sharing and hence stash, in these pictures, is an aspect of social connection. Milk sharing is a gift relation and produces child nurturing as a collaborative effort (Palmquist 2015). Milk donors also express their pride in their output, but they use such photographs not to claim superiority in their own parenting, but as a way to demonstrate a social contribution. Stash pictures in milk exchange groups are often messages of gratitude for the kindness of strangers who helped in the effort of nurturing a child, and online groups like Human Milk for Human Babies (HM4HB) function on a strict gift code: no money is to be paid or asked for in return for the milk, except reimbursement of costs such as storage bags or postage where applicable. Recipients of donor milk include women with various conditions which prevent them feeding, women with low supply who prefer to feed their child donor milk over formula, and adoptive parents, transparents, and biological male gay parents who are keen to breastfeed/chest feed using a supplemental nursing system (McDonald 2012; Palmquist 2015). If their efforts to source breastmilk are based on a belief in the biomedical arguments in favour of breastfeeding, it would be difficult to read the sharing of 'stash' photographs simply as a wish to express 'status' by using human milk over substitutes. It is through these contexts that pumping and stash pictures have multiple and complex readings when shared within lactivist spaces.

From pride to empowerment

Milk pride is important in the effects of the circulation of images based on biomedical information and the fostering of a positive self-identity of a woman who produces milk. The use and accessibility of biomedical models within the space of groups is an important way of empowering women through providing them with specific information about their particular embodiment of a health conundrum – the dyadic nature of breastfeeding – and by providing argumentation related to breastfeeding, which can be used to their advantage in a wider politico-cultural environment which recognises individual responsibility for health. Similar to findings made regarding pregnancy forums by Fredriksen, Harris and Moland (2016), women's exchanges online lead not only to sharing of information pertinent to their health situation, but also to a growth in awareness of their social rights, such as workplace adjustments, leave entitlements, or access to services. Some women clearly access breastfeeding support groups to 'arm' themselves with 'evidence based' arguments and to gain an awareness of their rights; competing pressures on women to be both good mothers and model workers can be seen in exchanges between women online (Radkowska-Walkowicz 2009; Gatrell 2011). Such considerations are not limited to women in waged employment – lactivist spaces abound in entries marked as a need to 'vent'/'wygadac sie' on the topic of negotiations of housework loads of a breastfeeding woman and her 'OH'/other half – husband/maz or partner/'niemaz' – and sometimes mother, 'MiL' mother in law/tesciowa, or 'in-laws'/'tesciowie' or 'tescie'. Framed as a need to create a strong negotiating position against older kin or someone who 'brings in the money' from waged employment, it is in these discussions that the importance of fostering milk pride becomes evident: answers to such 'rants' frame breastfeeding *as work*, the performance of which is a viable reason to expect other members of the household to 'pull their weight'. While the milk pride tropes that figure breastfeeding as a 'heroic' endeavour of producing a 'wondrous' or 'supernatural' product are here downsized to more mundane aspects of the value of breastfeeding as labour and production, paradoxically the commoditisation of milk may actually support the arguments made by lactivists. The sense of breastfeeding's importance for the health and wellbeing of

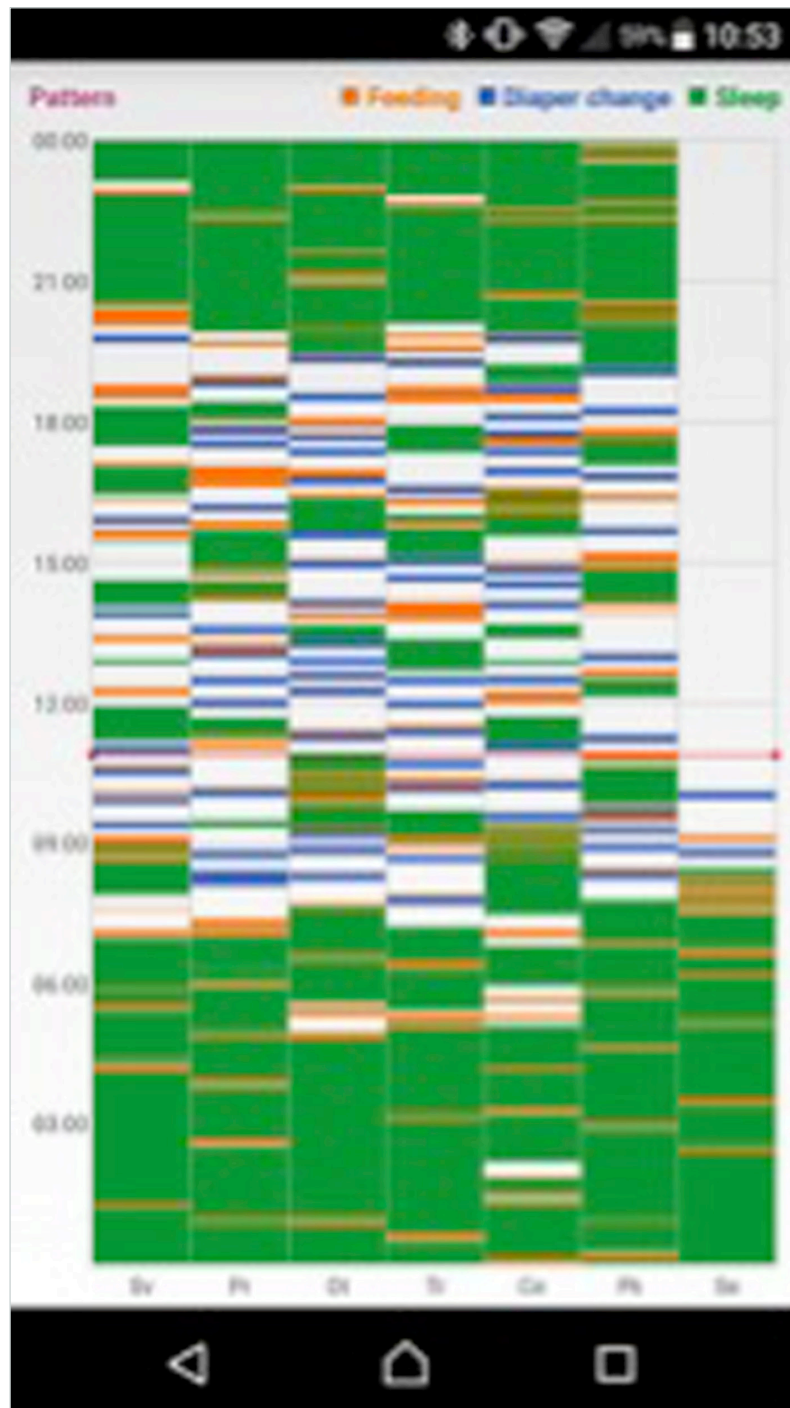


Figure 7: Maternal workload pattern.

a child, and the importance of its unique embodiment, which are at the base of the milk pride representations, seem to offer a specific negotiating position.

This can be illustrated by the breakdown of maternal workload pattern discussed by a member of one of the UK-based groups I followed. In her post, this woman speaks about being 'fed up' with her husband's lack of input into domestic chores despite her making him aware of how busy she is by dropping him 'a screenshot of how [her] week looks'. Her evidencing takes the form of a timesheet patterned calendar (based on a commercial app for child pattern trailing – see **Figure 7**) in which activities such as feeding, diaper changes and sleep are marked. To members responding, it is clear that feeding is frequent, and while not time-intensive, it creates a considerable burden for the woman, so they suggest she 'stop cooking for him and doing his washing' (CR) and 'just think off u an the baby [sic]' (LS). Women also attempt to quantify the financial contribution of breastfeeding and housework provided by the person who 'rants,' or offer examples of what they believe their own contributions are relative to cost of formula, but also nanny care, cleaning services and so on.⁵

At the same time, breastfeeding is framed as a work-saving mechanism in the context of housework: the ease of breastfeeding for the mother is juxtaposed with time-consuming alternatives such as formula, which are seen to require additional work and time expenditure (*'think of all the sterilising'*). In negotiations with relatives, this may be followed by suggestions that it could be up to them to perform this additional work, preferably at night. Things might get trickier when the other negotiating party is suggesting they are willing to take on the feeding and are not formula- or bottle-averse, either because of having experiences of using it, or deeming it as a way to 'bond' with the child – hence the importance of 'wondrous milk' properties awareness. The memes on the importance of *breastfeeding* should also be highlighted here, as expressing may be suggested by relatives, adding time to pump to the time demands on the woman. While milk pride is important to establish

⁵ While it is a 'high-frequency, high intensity' task (Van Esterik 1989, p. 56), breastfeeding may also allow for simultaneity of other engagements (Smith and Elwood 2011; Smith and Forrester 2013; Gatrell 2011; Carter 1995), including socialising in online environments – an aspect also praised by women.

the health and cultural value of breastmilk and breastfeeding, the material value of breastfeeding in the household budget is usually quantified as a 'saving' on substitutes. Some responses might also suggest calculations that take into account the price of teats, bottles, sterilising equipment, electricity to boil kettles, water and sewage, and waste. Should these be deemed insufficient, there is the option of once again subtly linking to the comparisons between substances (**Figure 1**).

Lactivist tactics more broadly aim to uphold the sense of pride in being able to produce milk and open up possibilities of estimating the value of the work performed through breastfeeding. In May 2015, many Polish spaces discussed an online calculator that estimates the amount of breastmilk produced and 'gifted' to one's child. The assumption behind the calculator, write the authors, is that while women 'know all the benefits of breast milk', and 'the difference between day and night milk', or may have heard about 'the molecules that have the ability to destroy cancer' in breastmilk, they certainly 'have no idea' how much of 'this precious substance' they have given their child (Mataja 2015). The authors wanted to change this, so that women would know 'the astounding power' of their bodies (Mataja 2015). By taking the start and end date of feeding, the calculator estimates how much milk has been produced. For serial feeders, separate calculations need to be made to get the total. Women are also encouraged to share a picture 'on FB/Instagram/own blog' with the caption 'my body has gifted <quantity> ml' or a tag #MojeCiałoPodarowało [my body has gifted] (Mataja 2015).

Women in Polish lactivist spaces universally praised the calculator. There was some confusion as to how to calculate tandem nursing or feeding multiples, but overall, the calculator created a celebratory mood. The tallying and publication of results happened several times in various groups over the space of the previous two years and the publication of results is certainly a version of pride in milk output. Notably, in one of the early tallies (5.12.2015) in one of the groups, a way to calculate the financial value of this output in relation to formula was proposed. One of the members had asked her sister to help create the formula: 'taking into account that "if you love your baby you give [brand name]"'(JK). Thus, she says 'base data: one scoop of 5.2g per 30ml, average price is 30PLN per 350g. In my case that is a saving of 10

170PLN!' Other women were surprised and pleased to find they had 'saved' enough for, as they pointed out, 'a lot of shoes', a family holiday or a second hand car. It was swiftly noted that apart from helping women to feel proud, this calculation could be shown to 'all those who say we 'sit' at home with the kids!' (KN). This can be seen as an inspiring moment, allowing for parallels to be drawn with such feminist socialist ideas as the 1970s 'wages against housework' campaign (Federici 1975), which are regaining currency amongst women activists in Poland (Desperak 2012; Janikowska and Lupa 2012), and are paralleled by the creation of a feminist movement for mothers who work at home in the UK (Olorenshaw 2016). This activist move resonates with research carried out by J.P. Smith on the value of breastmilk and the possibility of its inclusion in economic statistics (2013). As Smith argues, the 'non-measurement of human milk production devalues and makes invisible the quantitatively significant economic contribution by women' (2013, p. 544). To Smith, the devaluing of breastfeeding and human milk-making means these activities face unequal competition from 'women's other paid and unpaid work activities, and with commercially marketed baby food products, for maternal time and money resources' (544). This also acutely reveals how breastfeeding remains an area of unpaid women's work that includes both the actual work of breastfeeding, which UNICEF UK estimates to be generating savings of £40 million a year to the NHS alone (Renfrew et al. 2012), and the work of the women who create and maintain grassroots knowledge resources and provide others with emotional support.

Conclusions

Lactivist activities, and in particular the support and knowledge sharing functions of groups, extend beyond combating stigma and withstanding liminality (Dowling 2014). Memisation of biomedical knowledge ensures rapid spreading and absorption of ideas. The specific importance of images and notions of 'liquid gold', 'superpower' and 'wondrous milk' circulating in online spaces dedicated to breastfeeding lies in their usability for deployment in empowering women. By fostering a sense of making an important contribution of a social kind, these affect primarily members' own understandings of breastfeeding, creating a base from which to argue for and sustain

the practice of breastfeeding in accordance with women's wishes – milk pride. Their other function is to allow women to feel entitled to access specific rights. As demonstrated by the examples of work patterning and calculators, broadly understood, milk pride also serves to extend this sense of empowerment and rights to the sphere of work within the household, typically invisible to the wage-work oriented economy. Group interactions informed by the freely circulating biomedical arguments on milk properties and the milk pride that is fostered in group environments reveal the rising awareness that women who 'stay at home' are not economically 'passive', but making a quantifiable contribution, albeit through a mechanism recognised primarily as a generation of 'savings'. By fusing biomedical knowledge with positive representations, these forms are a grassroots response to Hausman's (2003) injunction to 'reclaim' biomedical evidence as a way to foster women's political demands regarding breastfeeding and equitable gender politics.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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