



Breastfeeding in public: A study of attitudes and perception among Malay undergraduates in Universiti Sains Malaysia

Maria Aloysius, Shariffah Suraya Syed Jamaludin

School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia

Correspondence: Maria Aloysius (email: aloyusmaria0@gmail.com)

Abstract

Breastfeeding in public is a bodily issue that is associated with vulgarity and obscenity across cultures in the world. Literature on breastfeeding in public in Malaysia are scarce and this study wants to provide insight into understanding how the Malaysian youth, specifically Malay undergraduates respond towards breastfeeding in public. This qualitative study examines the attitudes and support (acceptance or rejection) among Malay undergraduate students towards breastfeeding in public using the Fredrickson & Robert's Self Objectification Theory. A sample of 40 Malay undergraduate students, both female and male undergraduates from a Malaysian public university, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) were interviewed face to face to determine their attitudes and support towards breastfeeding in public. Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis were used to develop themes from the data collected from the Malay undergraduates. Seven themes which are discretion, public perception, social taboo, emotions, and hypersexualization of breasts, male gazing and voice of change towards breastfeeding in public were identified. Both Malay female and male undergraduates partially accept breastfeeding in public with discretion. Malay male undergraduates are concerned with the Malaysian public perception towards breastfeeding in public and Malay female undergraduates perceive breasts are sexual objects in comparison to Malay male undergraduates who acknowledge the 'male gaze'. The support towards breastfeeding in public is more evident among Malay male undergraduates compared to Malay female undergraduates. Breastfeeding in public is perceived as social taboo but Malay undergraduates express the need for better education and exposure on breastfeeding in public.

Keywords: acceptance, attitudes, breastfeeding in public, Malay male and female undergraduates, Malaysian youth, self-objectifying

Introduction

Breastfeeding is proven internationally to be the best method to feed infants with benefits to both the mother and the infant (Eidelman, 2012). Wolf (2008) states breastfeeding in public as lewd behaviour, obscene and vulgar, distasteful and a disgust. Ann Landers cites Dettwyler (1995) idea on breastfeeding in public which should be done in private with discretion in areas such as restrooms or baby rooms. Cultures worldwide have been known to accept or reject breastfeeding in public fully or partially. Many developed countries have shown their support towards breastfeeding in public and in many circumstances have established legislative laws

were drawn up and in an Asian context, breastfeeding in public has various acceptance and comfort levels based on cultures and religious backgrounds (Williamson, 1989). Attitudes towards breastfeeding can be differentiated as each Asian country is represented by many cultural and religious models. Breastfeeding in public in Asian countries can be accepted if done privately and with discretion. In the Philippines, mothers are encouraged to breastfeed in public with discretion so that their actions will not be perceived as unethical. The culture of breastfeeding in public is accepted in public in China, Thailand and Malaysia but in different areas, factors such various economic and education structures play important roles in determining the degree of acceptance (Kaneko et al., 2006).

There are many strategies to promote breastfeeding in many areas of research; however breastfeeding promotion and intervention should be focused more on the youth in terms of young adults and adolescents in schools and higher learning institutions. This paper presents unique discoveries on how Malaysians specifically, Malay male and female undergraduates view breasts and breastfeeding in public using the self-objectifying framework which has never been explored in a Malaysian context.

Youth's reactions towards breastfeeding in public

Breastfeeding in public is a public performance that requires a mother and an infant and the prying eyes of the public. Stearns (1999) discusses that 'the biggest accomplishment that you could make (was) if no one even knew you were breastfeeding'. Hence, breastfeeding in public can be successful if it is done in public, in secret without the public realizing it. Mothers are advised or pressured to made to feel that they must breastfeed with "constant vigilance to location, situation and observer" where she pulls off a "tricky public performance" with an appeal of not to offend the male gaze. Male gazing is the art of defining and viewing women from a masculine perspective or representing women as sexual objects, pleasure or desire (Mulvey, 1975).

Youth, young men and women (either young or future parents) have expressed their opinions and ideas on the matter of breastfeeding in public worldwide. Acker (2009) studied the responses towards breastfeeding in public among college adults who reacted pictures of people doing things in public and in private, including pictures of identical women breastfeeding publicly and privately. Based on these pictures, the responses of the youth were categorized into positive evaluations, negative feelings and normalcy. Three main explanations elaborating negative views of breastfeeding in public that were discussed by Acker includes: (a) unfamiliarity of this action, sexist attitudes and hypersexualization of breasts in society. Acker identifies breastfeeding in public as a social stigma and acknowledges that it needs to be normalized so that mothers who breastfeed in public are not discriminated.

A study was done among American undergraduate women by Johnston-Robledo et al. (2007) to understand their future goals in determining feeding plans for their babies, attitudes towards breastfeeding, breastfeeding concerns and self-objectification. This study plays a significant role in understanding relationships between youth and their perception towards breastfeeding in public. These American female undergraduates view breastfeeding in public as an internalized cultural taboo where women self-objectify themselves. Moreover, freedom and self-consciousness for women can be obtained when the society changes its restrictive and sexist cultural norms. The discussion on self-objectification and hypersexualization of breasts by society are consistent with Boyer's (2012) research of interviewing 46 people on parenting and women's experiences with breastfeeding in public. The main findings discuss mothers

bringing forth negative comments and glares from breastfeeding in public and mother suffer self-shame.

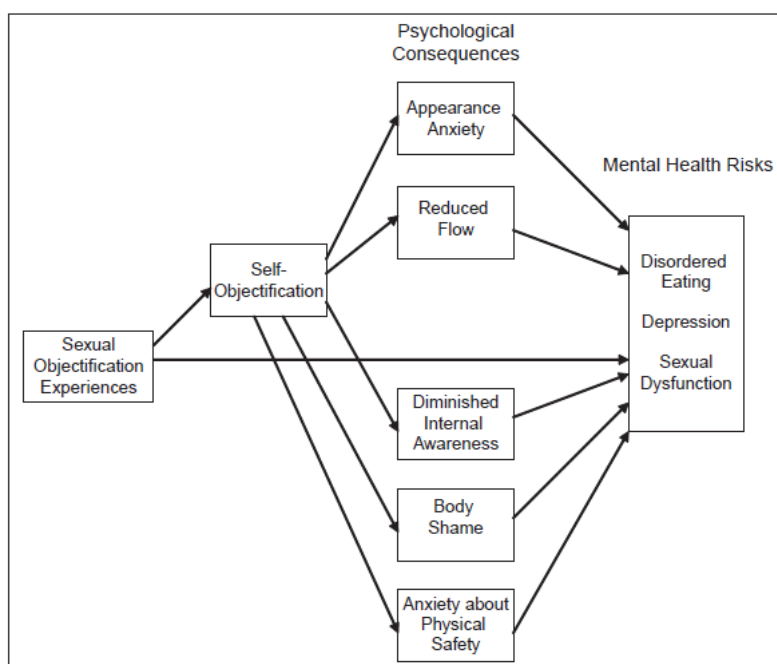
Men view breasts as sexual objects in private and public spheres and terminologies such as ‘sticking out’, ‘tits’, ‘boobs’, ‘exploding out’ and ‘flopping it out’ are used by men to explain how they feel about a women publicly breastfeeding (Spurles & Babineau, 2011). These men have acknowledge ‘male gazing’ as the act of men gazing at women who breastfeeds in public. Further terminologies used by men to identify other men looking sexually at breastfeeding in public are such as ‘pervert’ or ‘creepers’.

In a Malaysian context et al. (2006) suggests 10 articles of breastfeeding published in Malaysia from 1994 to 2004, all of which use Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) as its main theoretical framework or modify the theory to suit their research. The only recent literature on breastfeeding in public in Malaysia was Mohamad’s (2011) work focusing on the role of the media and how mothers are cultivated to publicly breastfeed their children. There is a huge emphasis on Malaysians ‘correcting their culture and perception’ on breasts and giving their support towards breastfeeding in public. Themes such as respect and shame are discussed. Themes such as respect and self-shame emerged from her study. Mohamad states breastfeeding in public must be seen as natural act, where Malaysians respects women for doing so. Breastfeeding in public should not be viewed as shameful as the act itself helps to correct the Malaysian culture on breasts being sexual objects. She stresses that it is important to keep mothers motivated and informing them about the right techniques and emotional support that is available to them.

Since there is a scarcity in the study on breastfeeding in public particularly in Malaysia, this study focuses on two major concerns which are (a) Malay female and male undergraduates who have the probability of becoming future parents and (b) decisions concerning breastfeeding are often made early in life during adolescence (Saunders-Goldson, 2004). The two main objectives of the paper are (1) to identify how Malay male and female undergraduates perceive breastfeeding in public and (2) to investigate the support in terms of (accepting, partially accepting or rejecting the idea of breastfeeding in public. Self-objectification theory by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) is utilized for this study as it links the attitudes and perceptions of support of Malay undergraduates towards breastfeeding in public.

Theoretical framework: Self Objectifying Theory

Breastfeeding in public can be dissected with this framework that postulates that many women being sexually objectified and their bodies treated as an object by others. Both Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) claims self-objectification can increase a woman’s anxiety about physical appearance where she is constantly fearful of how her body is looked at and evaluated. Due to the evaluation of a woman’s body, body shame (the emotion that results in measuring oneself against a cultural standard of how beautiful or sexy she must be and particularly, increases women anxiety about their physical safety (fears about being raped or sexually assaulted) which leads to eating disorders, depression and sexual dysfunction that was discussed earlier (Figure 1).



Source: Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997

Figure 1. Self-Objectification Theory

The above mentioned figure exhibits how women bodies are stared at, looked at, evaluated and objectified. Self-objectification by both women and men towards women's bodies and appearances turn into sexualization, which saturates many cultures. Women tend to objectify and sexualize themselves through body shame and men objectify women through the 'male gaze'. It is the social sanction right of all males to sexualize females regardless of age or status (Schur, 1983; Westcott, 1986). The male gaze, which is an extension of self-objectification is referred to as "ogling," "leering at", "checking out" or 'girl watching' (Henley, 1977). The male gaze is identified within 5 main elements which are (a) men direct more non reciprocated gaze towards women than vice versa, particularly in public places (Fromme & Beam, 1974; Henley, 1977; Cary, 1978), (b) women are gazed at more than men (Hall, 1984), (c) women are more likely to be looked at in interpersonal encounters (Argyle & Williams, 1969), (d) vocabulary that points out men's language when staring at women's bodies include 'ogle' and 'leer' or 'girl watching' and (e) men's gazing is often accompanied by sexually evaluative commentary (Gardner, 1980) which at times are in intentionally aimed at women of colour (Allen, 1984).

Through self-objectification, body shame and the male gaze, Malay female and male undergraduates have the advantage of expressing how they perceive and view breastfeeding in public. Both men and women experience the male gaze and have different accounts of narratives where men are always caught in the act of looking at a woman's breasts or chest area and women are constantly telling off men to stop 'leering' at their breasts and to focus on their faces through responses and reactions such as 'my eyes are up here' (Kozee, 2007).

Methods

Design and sample

This study is a designed as a qualitative study with a convenience sample of 40 Malay undergraduate students which consist of 20 Malay female and 20 Malay male students from

different categories of age, fields of study, types of families and economic backgrounds from Universiti Sains Malaysia. The researcher wants to study Malay undergraduates as they represent the majority of students in USM and addressing the fact that the variable of ethnicity has an impact on one's actions. Ethnicity, supported by other variables has a great impact on a person's thinking and behaviour (Zulkifley, 2014; Zulkifley & Hayyete, 2015). They were interviewed face to face using an open-ended interview guide to determine their attitudes and support for breastfeeding in public. Azzwan and Azhar (2017) states both local and international students show interest in learning and adapting culture in a renowned Malaysian public university, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). Similarly, the research in this study wants to understand the perception of youth by making the main selection to be undergraduates who would become future parents and supporters of their future spouses.

Data collection and analysis

The researcher collects the data through qualitative interviewing and records the interview using an audio tape for transcription. All the collected data was analyzed through Braun & Clarke (2006) thematic analysis. Saturation of data is obtained when there is repetitive data with no interpretive worth. The researcher has obtained prior information through a pilot interview involving 20 Malaysian men and women from the ages of 20 to 40 years regarding their attitudes and reactions towards breastfeeding in public using questionnaires based on the Attitude towards Breastfeeding questionnaire (Aloysius & Aloysius, 2017). The pilot study that was suggested in the study serves the function of providing a clearer picture of the situation of breastfeeding in public among various cultures in Malaysia. This pilot study has helped the researchers to structure their interview guide for the Malay undergraduates.

Results and discussion

Support towards breastfeeding in public

The support towards breastfeeding includes three types: full acceptance, partial acceptance and rejection towards breastfeeding in public. Full acceptance is the act of accepting breastfeeding in public as a normal or natural act, with no discrimination as well as full support to mothers who do it. Partial acceptance is the act of partially accepting breastfeeding in public, where discretion is required. Discretion in this context highlights secrecy or privacy, where mothers are expected to use special baby rooms, restrooms or shield the act of breastfeeding in public with a cover, blanket or nursing bras. Rejection is the act of rejecting the act of breastfeeding in public as it is seen as a social taboo, where it perceives as being a negative act and evokes negative responses from the public.

Based on Figure 2 and Figure 3, 45% of Malay female undergraduates and 50% of Malay male undergraduates partially accept breastfeeding in public. In rejecting breastfeeding in public, 35% of Malay female undergraduates and 15% of Malay male undergraduates view it to be a negative act done in public and finally, only 20% of Malay female undergraduates and 35% of Malay male undergraduates fully accept breastfeeding in public. This study has discovered that Malay female students rather opt for partial acceptance of breastfeeding in public, followed by total rejection of breastfeeding in public and only a small number of them fully accept breastfeeding in public. In a surprising twist, Malay male undergraduates seem to fully accept breastfeeding in public a little more compared to rejecting it altogether in line with Kavanagh et al. (2012) findings that men are more likely to support breastfeeding in public compared to women even

though they do not possess much breastfeeding knowledge and Li et al. (2004) results of men being more open and accepting towards the concept of breastfeeding in public.

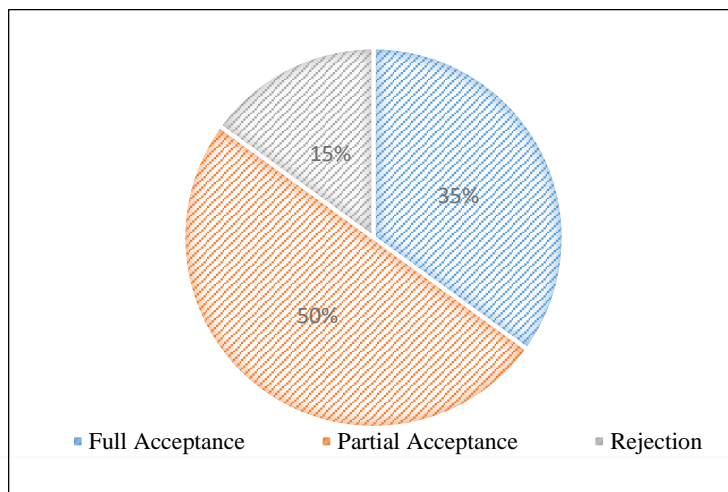


Figure 2. Support towards breastfeeding in public among Malay male undergraduates

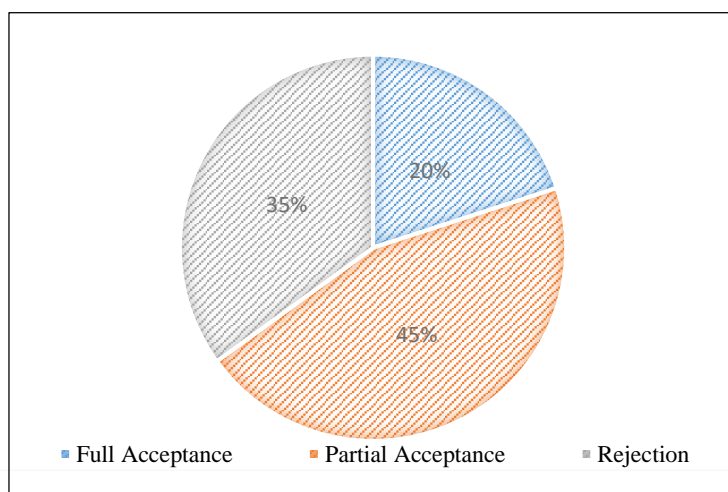


Figure 3. Support towards breastfeeding in public among Malay female undergraduates

Themes surrounding breastfeeding in public

A number of seven major themes originate from this study based on deliberate coding and recoding of the interview data from the female and male Malay undergraduates. Figure 4.2.1 shows the seven themes in discussion as well as gender indicators (either male or female) that can be associated with a certain theme.

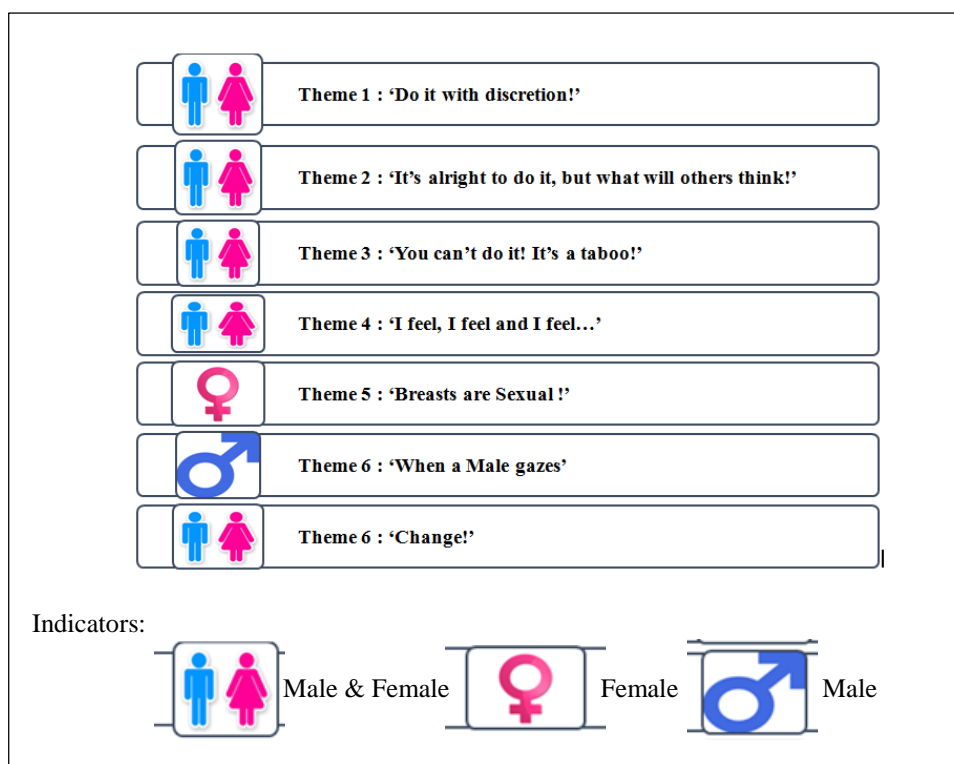


Figure 4. Themes surrounding breastfeeding in public among Malay male and female undergraduates

Theme 1: 'Do it with discretion!'

The most popular theme of this study is the theme of breastfeeding in public with discretion. Majority of Malay undergraduates comprising of 45% of female undergraduates and 50% of male undergraduate partially accept breastfeeding in public. They opt for breastfeeding in public to be done with discretion from the mother. In these circumstances, discretion can be in the form of a cover, blanket, scarf or clothing which is used to cover the exposed area of the breasts (the nipple) when breastfeeding. Malay male undergraduate students have proposed that mothers wear appropriate attire which covers up their modesty and their infants while breastfeeding in public. Malay female undergraduate students connected common sense to breastfeeding in public where a mother should study her surroundings before she does so. This theme echoes Spear's (2007) survey of South-eastern university students with nearly 78% of them preferring breastfeeding in public to be done in private, with discretion. In this study, Malay male undergraduates suggest creating special baby rooms in government buildings, airports, shopping malls or mosques to help facilitate mothers when they want to breastfeed their infant. This notion on the behalf of Malay male undergraduates explains how men direct more non reciprocated gaze which is where Malay male undergraduates want to decrease those gazes in a public place and offer solutions towards breastfeeding in public. As Kozee (2007) states women are aware of the fact that men 'ogle', 'leer' and 'look' at their breasts and order them to look at their faces, Malay female undergraduates stress the same discomfort when they identify males reacting or looking at women who breastfeed in public.

"A mother should not expose herself in public. It should be alright if she uses a scarf" (Female, 21 years).

"You can use common sense when you breastfeed. Men look at breasts and not the mother herself" (Female, 22 years).

“Mothers should wear proper attire and cover up when breastfeeding” (Male, 20 years).

“Mothers may use a blanket to breastfeed in public” (Male, 21 years).

“Government should make more places for mother to breastfeed” (Male, 20 years).

“A mother can breastfeed in a mosque, or ‘surau’ or a government building that has special rooms” (Male, 23 years).

Theme 2: ‘It’s alright to do it, but what will others think!’

Only 20% of female undergraduates and 35% male Malay undergraduate students exhibit their full acceptance towards breastfeeding in public but are concerned with the perception of the public towards it. Although a low percentage of Malay female and male undergraduates exhibit an open mind about breastfeeding in public in terms of viewing it as being natural or a right or an act of normalcy, they are well aware of how the public perceives it. Malay female undergraduate students are more prone to being open with breastfeeding in public if they are supported by family members or their husbands and if the mother of the infant has no other alternative than to breastfeed in public. This theme focuses on Malaysian public perception towards breastfeeding in public, the main concern of the Malay youth. This theme touches the core of Fredrickson & Roberts (1997)’s self-objectification theory, where both Malay male and female undergraduates are heavily concerned or fear how the public will react towards breastfeeding in public. The common denominator of this theme is the concern of how the Malaysian public perceives breastfeeding in public even if the Malay youth accepts breastfeeding in public to be a right, or normal or natural act.

“It is a woman’s right to breastfeed in public” (Female, 20 years).

“I think breastfeeding in public is alright for me. My family members and husband would encourage it” (Female, 22 years).

“Breastfeeding in public seems to be ordinary for me as the baby needs to eat when hungry” (Female, 20 years).

“I am okay with it but I am worried what other people think of the mother and baby” (Male, 23 years).

Theme 3: ‘You can’t do it! It’s a taboo!’

35% of Malay female undergraduates and 15% of Malay male undergraduates reject breastfeeding in public and believe that it is against norms and culture. They consider Malaysians to be a conservative nation that holds breastfeeding in public as a social taboo, a practice against culture and religious norms. This theme symbolizes the negative responses and attitudes evoked from Malay male and female undergraduates towards breastfeeding in public as Acker’s (2009) findings which prove reject breastfeeding in public to be a social stigma and calls for normalizing this act in public so that mothers are not discriminated. This theme demonstrates how Malay male and female undergraduates go further to elaborate their negative responses by stating that this act of breastfeeding in public can harm the culture and the nation’s

image. The Malay youth do not offer any solutions as they view breastfeeding in public to be a taboo and call out Malaysians for having a mentality that does not accept breastfeeding in public.

“Breastfeeding in public is against cultural norms” (Female, 26 years).

“It’s a taboo!” (Male, 25years).

“Malaysia is a closed nation and it is important to take care of the Malaysian image. It goes against culture and religion to breastfeed in public” (Female, 23 years).

“You know how Malaysian mentality is!” (Male, 21 years).

Theme 4: ‘I feel, I feel and I feel...’

Both Malay male and female undergraduate students have successfully expressed their attitudes and acceptance of breastfeeding in public in the form emotions or using emotive language. The most popular emotions named are shyness, shame, embarrassment, nervousness, awkwardness and in some cases, fear and timidity when faced while watching someone breastfeed in public in line with Boyer’s (2012) study on how embarrassment and shame are main concerns when a mother publicly breastfeeds. Malay female undergraduate students have named the concept of ‘aurat’ where the Malay women have to protect their body image to avoid indecency with the opposite sex. Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) argues body shame is the main consequence that occurs when women are being objectified. Similarly, this theme explores how both Malay female and male projects embarrassment and body shame unto themselves as they begin to put themselves into a situation when a mother breastfeeds her child publicly.

“I feel so shy when I see a woman breastfeed in public” (Female: 23 years).

“I feel embarrassed as I have to keep my ‘aurat’, feeling shy in front of men” (Female, 24 years).

“It makes me shy, I don’t know why!” (Male, 25 years).

“I am ashamed, makes me nervous” (Male, 21 years).

Theme 5: ‘Breasts are sexual!’

This theme is common among Malay female undergraduates and supports Johnston- Robledo et al. (2007) discovery that young women breastfeeding in public as an internalized cultural taboo that women who breastfeed in public are objectifying themselves. Respecting a woman’s body part (her breast) is crucial for Malay female undergraduates. Acker’s (2009) element of hypersexualization of the breast in society explains the perception of Malay female undergraduates of expressing that breasts have to be ‘covered up’ and exposed in public. As breasts have been sexualized as a result of self-objectification, is it clear that Malay male and female undergraduates acknowledge breasts to be sexual objects and draws the attention of males regardless of a woman’s age or status when she is breastfeeding in public.

“Breasts should not be exposed” (Female, 23 years).

“Breasts are sexual. Public breastfeeding is acceptable but it is appropriate that people cover up that area to compromise” (Female, 25 years).

“Breasts are sexual part of the body. They should be covered up” (Male, 22 years).

“We should respect women and their body parts” (Male, 20 years).

Theme 6: ‘When a Male gazes’

Majority of Malay male undergraduates acknowledge the existence of the male gaze when they or other males observe a woman breastfeeding in public. Malay male students have expressed that it breastfeeding in public can be sexually disturbing as it can attract unwanted attention. As Henley (1977) describes male gazing includes ‘looking at’ or ‘leering at’, Malay male undergraduates point out or call out their own sex, men for looking at woman with a sexualized gaze. Malay male undergraduate students have stated the influence of the Islam into the issue of breastfeeding in public. They also point out concern over sexual harassment that may be a result of breastfeeding in public.

“Men will be sexually attracted. Some men are ‘pervert’ and dirty minded” (Male, 20 years).

“If can it can be avoided, men see it as being something bad” (Male, 25 years).

“It is sexually disturbing. It’s a woman’s body part” (Male, 24 years).

“I don’t want to see breastfeeding in public because it can cause sexual harassment” (Male, 23 years).

This theme founded in this study shows that Malay male undergraduates use terminologies such as ‘pervert’ and ‘dirty minded men’ as in Spurles and Babineau’s (2011) study where men use terms as pervert’ or ‘creepers’ to identify other men looking sexually at women who breastfeeds in public. However, terminologies to describe the breast itself were not common among Malay male undergraduates. Malay male undergraduates used the term ‘woman’s body part or breast’ rather than Spurles and Babineau’s (2011) terms such as ‘tits’ or ‘boobs’. Moreover, Malay male undergraduates recognizes that the male gaze includes sexual comments as well as vocabulary (Gardner, 1980) and this ‘sexually disturbing’ comments and terms made can cause harm to the women who publicly breastfeed. Malay male undergraduates name sexual harassment as a cause that may result from breastfeeding public. Thus, Malay male undergraduates are concerned for the safety of women as discussed in Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) self-objectification theory where women have anxiety about their physical safety (fears about being raped or sexually assaulted) when they are objectified.

Theme 7: ‘Change!’

Malay female undergraduates feel there is a need for legislation or laws for breastfeeding in public in Malaysia so that women’s rights are upheld. Malay male undergraduates expressed laws regarding public breastfeeding should not be implemented, but rather important laws such as child malnutrition. Both Malay male and female undergraduates find breastfeeding in public

on magazines and television to be not harmful as they can act as educational tools for the Malaysian public. However, Malay female undergraduates do not show their support for a mother who posts breastfeeding selfies on social media.

“There should be no laws for breastfeeding in public. There should be laws for malnutrition” (Male, 21 years).

“I hope there are breastfeeding in public laws in Malaysia soon” (Female, 20 years).

“Watching a woman breastfeed on the television is our own choice” (Male, 21 years).

“It’s just an image or a photo. What can it do?” (Female, 23 years).

“Watching it on TV is a norm and it not sexual” (Male, 28 years).

“They are just ads. I feel nothing looking at them. It’s just a picture of a woman breastfeeding, it ain’t moving” (Male, 25 years).

“Breastfeeding in public must be shown in magazines for educational purposes” (Female, 23 years).

“I feel uncomfy if a mom posts a picture of her breastfeeding on social media. It violates culture and religion” (Female, 22 years).

Malay undergraduates have expressed that there should be change in the attitudes and perception towards breastfeeding in public especially among the Malaysian public. This theme depicts that Malay youth want to be agent of change as Mohamad (2011) states that Malaysian ought to ‘correct their culture and perception on breasts’. The main discovery in this themes is that the Malay undergraduates try to seek solutions and offer logical explanations as to encourage other to not look at breasts as being sexual if a mother breastfeeds in public. Efforts to desexualize breastfeeding in public is clearly seen in this theme. Similarly, Malay male undergraduates voice out that that men should learn and be expose to breastfeeding in public and to be more supportive of this act.

Conclusion

This study is unique as it tackles the issue of breastfeeding in public using the self-objectification theory among the Malay male and female undergraduates. The attitudes and perceptions of the Malay youth towards breastfeeding in public can be specifically understood from the viewpoint of sexualization and male gazing towards breasts. It is an unwritten norm that Malaysia deals with the ‘demands of patriarchal structures’ which perceives breastfeeding in public to be a social taboo. However, this study offers a reflective discovery that Malay male undergraduates do show their support towards breastfeeding in public in the mildest but very uplifting form. Malay male undergraduates recognize male gazing and tend to question how other men look at breastfeeding in public which is enlightening. The process of deconstructing perceptions of breastfeeding in public can help Malay male undergraduates to understand their masculinity further. Female Malay undergraduates are more body conscious and address

breasts as sexual entities in society. Religion does not play a key indicator but rather culture and gender as well as public perception shapes how female and male Malay undergraduates fully or partially accept or reject breastfeeding in public altogether.

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