



Breastfeeding Discourses Through Thai Narratives from 1932 to 2022

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Abstract

This textual analysis examines mother-related narratives published between 1932 and 2022 from education and entertainment-based media as well as from traditional and modern social media platforms, to study the discontinuity and construction of breastfeeding discourses in the media. The results show that the discourses rupture into five eras: (1) Pre-framework era: Buddhist mythologies infuse the signification of breastmilk as the product of a mother's love and blood. The spirit of the mother runs in breastmilk, signifying a wet nurse as a mother-status. (2) Breastmilk is the food from nature: The spirit of the mother runs in the biological mother's breastmilk, no longer from a wet nurse. (3) Breastmilk is inferior to infant formula: The power of advertisements and the knowledge of nutritional science makes infant formula become the dominant choice for middle-class mothers as it symbolizes rich and smart mothers. (4) Breastmilk is best: The knowledge of medical science with the power of authority controlled over all media platforms sees a return to breastfeeding domination, in which signified infant formula is viewed as poison and non-breastfeeding mothers are viewed as impatient and uneducated. (5) Breastmilk is ideal, but negotiable: With the influence of social media that breaks the discourses into several spheres, one group realizes and avoids the use of binary oppositions to depreciate bottle-feeding mothers, while the other objectifies breastmilk as though it is an industrialized product in which every breastmilk has the same property. The researchers found out that the breastfeeding discourses throughout the history of Thai culture represents the interaction between Buddhist mythologies and Western science, the middle-class mothers are influenced by the upper-class in every era, while capitalism and patriarchy find a way to engrave in both infant formula and breastfeeding in the form of advertising and publicity.

Keywords: breastfeeding history, motherhood, narrative media, meaning construction

1. Introduction

1.1. Background, significance, and research questions

As a father and a husband, I witnessed my wife struggle with breastfeeding. She tried very hard to exclusively breastfeed in the first six months of our child's life. This followed the guidance of the WHO and UNICEF which suggested that "*children initiate breastfeeding within the first hour of birth and be exclusively breastfed for the first 6 months of life – meaning no other foods or liquids are provided, including water.*" (WHO, 2024)

Although she woke up every 3 hours to perform this job, got advice from a breastfeeding clinic, took breastmilk booster herbs and changed methods and equipment, her breastmilk did not flow as expected. She rejected infant formula. The more she looked on social media trying to find a way out, the more she saw other mothers showing off their stocked breastmilk and success stories about breastfeeding, which led her to perceive herself as not being a good mother. As a researcher who is interested in Foucault and media studies, I saw a discursive practice that she faced and could not resist. This discursive practice of breastfeeding campaigns influences an individual to consent to both body and soul, to reach the standard that is set by society, and in this case, be a 'good mother.' Surely, she is not alone.

Breastfeeding can be considered as a discourse. There are studies showing that recently there are mothers who feel pressured to breastfeed in order to be considered a good mother (Smyth & Hyde, 2020). Breastfeeding signifies motherhood. Middle-class mothers in Thailand compare themselves to other mothers who represent themselves on social media, especially in terms of the quantity of breastmilk that they produce. The more breastmilk they produce and the longer time they can breastfeed seems to signify how better a mother they are. On the flip side, those who feed a breastmilk substitute seem to be labeled as a failure and not an ideal mother (Chutipanyabut & Taiphapoon, 2021).

The study of Srijaroenwanit (2016) on mothers who intend to breastfeed but whose infants reject shows that those mothers blamed themselves and felt they were not good mothers, even though they tried their best. It corresponds to the studies of Sivichai (2014) and Sridara (2005) on mothers who were not full-time housewives, indicating that they were afraid they would not be able to achieve exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months. As opposed to those with exclusive breastfeeding, they feel proud of being a "perfect mother." These studies reflect that the breastfeeding discourse affects the way people think, feel, and behave through power, knowledge and language (Foucault, 1972).

This research aims to study **what the breastfeeding discourses in Thai society were between 1932 and 2022, and how they were constructed in a narrative media.**

1.2. Scope of analysis

This research paper focuses on middle-class women under the assumption that they have access to mainstream media. The research framework covers a timeframe from the year 1932, which marked the Siamese Revolution from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy, until the year 2022. The narrative texts are scoped to all sources found in the National Library of Thailand database. However, in the analysis, the researcher also considered the context prior to 1932 because many narratives reproduced in various platforms after 1932 were firstly published long before that.

All interviews and research methods were conducted under a certificate of research approval number 285/2564, by the Research Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human

Subjects: The Second Allied Academic Group in Social Sciences, Humanities and Fine and Applied Arts at Chulalongkorn University. All interviewees applied to participants with their consent.

1.3. Review of Literature

1.3.1. Woman on being a mother and a wife

Feminists the likes of Marilyn Yalom and Londa Schiebinger propose that the biological term “Mammalia” coined by Carl Linnaeus connects women with the duty of breastfeeding. Yet, this duty can be viewed as two sides of the coin. Campbell (1984) says that breastfeeding is a symbol of power that gives prominence to women as those who produce civilians for society. Van Esterik (1994) supports that breastfeeding and the prominent stance of being a mother encourages more legislation that support women’s rights. Nevertheless, she observes that it reproduces the meaning that a mother is a labor force, which is under a biological determinism episteme, and would expand the gap between men and women. Likewise, Lee Comer (1972) questions if motherhood is a myth that reproduces a status of slavery in patriarchy because a mother’s duty is to serve her children and society with her consent.

Motherhood can be seen as a myth that frames a woman to be and to do certain things. The study of Rahayu (2020) by using Barthes semiotics’ analysis of women in the media shows that women are represented as weak, dependent on men, and born to serve the husband. Phonpradapphet (2018) studies mother care handbooks and found that to be a perfect mother in modern era, she must be: (1) able to take care of herself physically and mentally, (2) be good-looking, (3) be stylish, wealthy, and well-educated, (4) do housekeeping work and have a career outside the home, (5) stay with her husband and not be a single mom, and (6) take care of her children well, with the perception that being a mother is the supreme goal of being a woman. This corresponds to Soythongdee (2009) and Chaisen and Hinviman (2018) with one more trait; (7) be an appropriate age. All these traits have been represented in narratives in the media through the role of protagonists, whereas the antagonist or characters that represent bad mothers usually are: (1) overly controlling over their children, (2) hot-tempered, (3) arrogant, (4) selfish or self-centered, (5) vindictive, (6) disdainful of lowerclass people, and (7) rude, which are all opposing characteristics used to represent good mothers (Pakdeemauchon & Rattanasimakul, 2019). This reflects the discursive practices of the meaning and perception that control people’s thoughts and behaviors, especially in being a perfect mother. It demonstrates how the identity of mothers is constructed by power and knowledge. Meaning is not merely a definition; it can connote a second level of meaning that constructs culture to appear natural (Barthes, 1991). Just like breastfeeding, it could be viewed as a significance of motherhood.

1.3.2. Infant feeding through the ages

There has not been a study of the archeology of infant feeding in Thai culture. However, in the recent studies approved by the American Academy of Pediatrics and WHO, it shows that breastfeeding can reduce the risk of diarrhea, lower respiratory infection, otitis media, bacteremia, bacterial meningitis, botulism, urinary tract infection, necrotizing enterocolitis, etc.

However, there was a period when breastfeeding was not the first option for mothers, not to mention the changing knowledge and perception of breastfeeding over time.

The studies of immunology in breastmilk were just conducted and confirmed in late 19th century, yet it was challenged by BoVahlquist in 1958 who believed that immunity in breastmilk is a fraud. However, Lars Hanson’s, and Lator and Woolgar’s study in 1960s-1970s

confirmed immunity in breastmilk as proven in laboratory and clinical research (Koerber, 2006).

Breastfeeding has virtually been a dominant feeding method, however in some societies, the use of a wet nurse was done as a substitution to mother's breastfeeding. Indeed, from 950 BC to the mid 20th century, wet nurses became the preferred method for upper-class families. A wet nurse was once a profession that gained high income. The demand of using a wet nurse increased in the 14th to 17th century and peaked in the 18th century. Elite-class ladies in Europe did not prefer to breastfeed because they worried about their body shape and the duty that they had to stay with their husband in socialization (Stevens, Patrick, & Pickler, 2009).

In the 18th century, brunettes were selected to be wet nurses rather than the blondes or red-hair women because of the belief that the brunettes could produce better breastmilk with higher nutrition and a purer soul (Schuman, 2003). This reflects that breastmilk was perceived more than just food, it also contained the spirit of who produced it. The use of a wet nurse declined in the 19th century when infant formula was invented.

Chemist Justus von Liebig successfully developed a breastmilk-substitute formula from cowmilk under the brand Liebig's Soluble Food for Babies and distributed it in Germany before expanding to the USA in the 1860s (Radbill, 1981). Not long after, Henri Nestlé from Switzerland developed an infant formula and sold it in the USA and 16 other countries worldwide in 1873 (Greer & Apple, 1991, p. 283). Infant formula has achieved commercial success with advertisements and publicity ever since then. It became the dominant method in the USA as statistics showed that only 25 percent of mothers breastfed newborns in the 1970s (Schuman, 2003). This phenomenon happened elsewhere around the world, including Thailand (Cetthkrikul et al., 2016). Then, a breastfeeding campaign was promoted by the World Health Assembly in 1974. This led to the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitution from the WHO (World Health Organization, 1981) that forbid all forms of marketing communication of infant formula product via the media and personnel.

Hence, in Western culture, knowledge, preference, and behavior of breastfeeding and its substitutes have changed through time.

1.4. Methodology

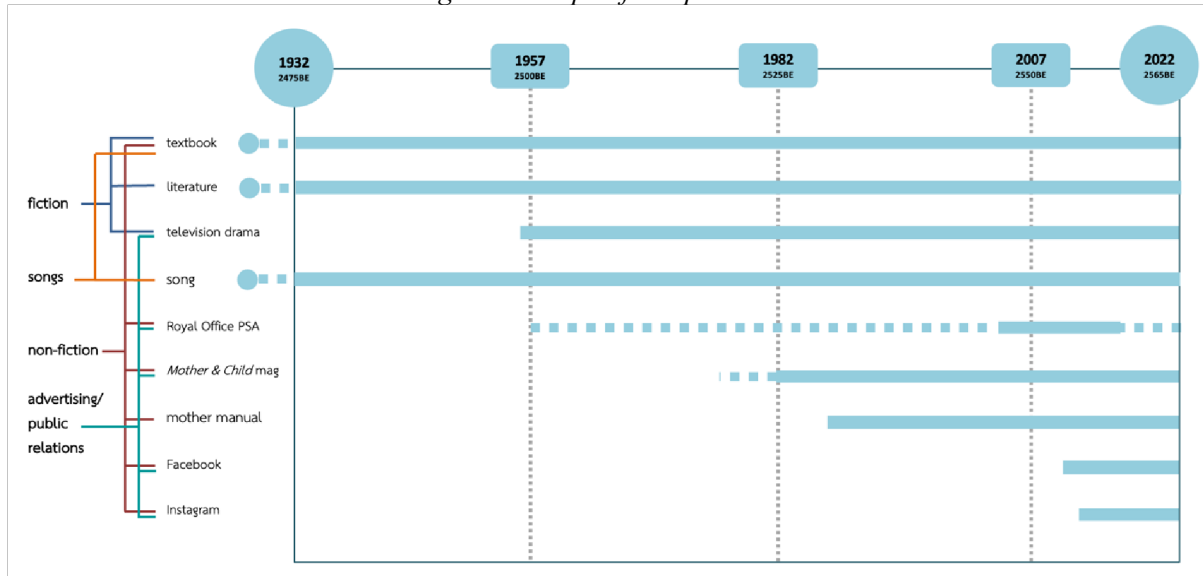
This is qualitative research involving textual and narrative analysis. The first step is textual analysis, conducted under the Foucauldian historical approach to reveal discursive discontinuity, and Barthes' semiotics to analyze the meaning construction and connotations of the texts. The latter method is integrated with representations of mothers' roles, identity, and characterization in narrative texts. The researcher examines narratives in Thai media from 1932 to 2022. The platforms comprise of songs, novels, primetime soap operas on television, Facebook accounts with over 100,000 followers that post mostly about motherhood, the top-10 most followed celebrities who have infant Instagram accounts, Thai-subject compulsory education textbooks, *Mother & Child* magazines¹, and the Government-give-away *Mother and Child Health Handbook*.

The second step is narrative analysis. It is conducted by unstructured in-depth interview that lets the sample mothers tell their experiences and feelings of feeding and taking care of their children. This is done in order to support and cross-check the textual analysis, as well as to collect their media exposure, which includes the media consumed that is also studied as the text. The researcher interviews four groups of people: three groups of 4 mothers each who (1)

¹ The first magazine in Thailand that specifically targets to mothers.

are exclusively breastfed for at least six months (2) non-breastfed (3) had a mix of breastfeeding and infant formula in the first six months. One more group of experts was interviewed, which comprised of obstetrician-gynecologist Nithiwat Gijisriurai, M.D., midwife Preeyapon Thepprasit, and pediatrician Panida Swangsak, M.D. who stayed with mothers before, between, and after birth delivery.

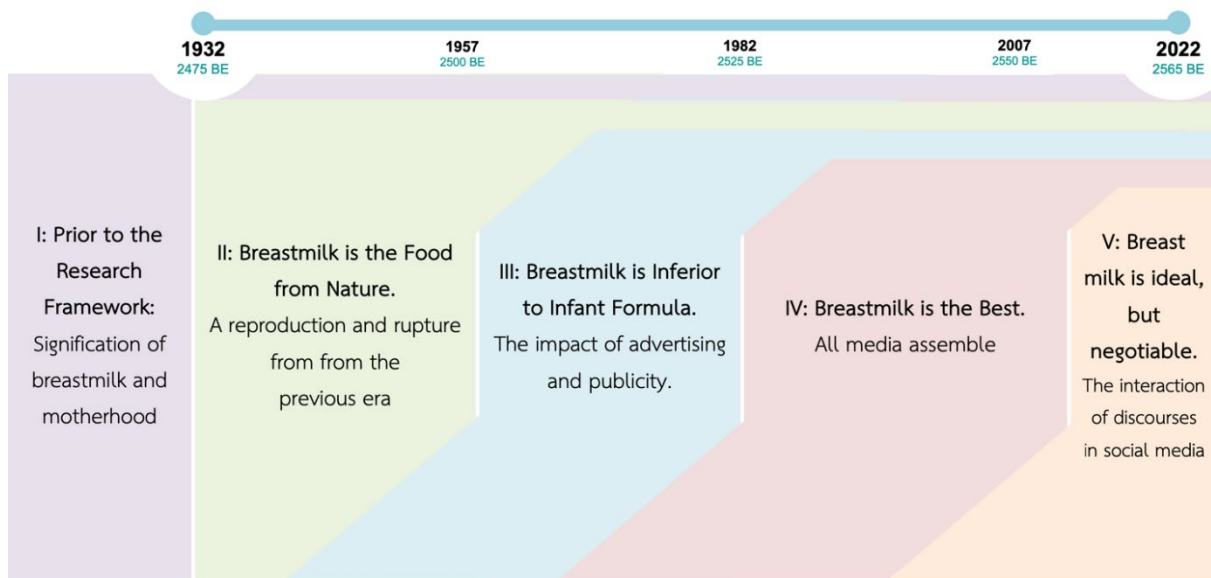
Figure 1: Scope of sampled texts



2. Findings

Breastfeeding discourses in Thai culture have been changing throughout history. The researcher examines mother-related narratives from 1932 to 2022, including the texts released prior to, but publicly republished during the research framework, using a Foucauldian discourse analysis approach and Barthian semiotics to analyze. We found discontinuity in the discourses and divided it into 5 discursive eras: (1) the pre-framework era: signification of breastfeeding and motherhood, (2) breastmilk is the food from nature: reproduction and rupture from the previous era, (3) breastmilk is inferior to infant formula: the impact of advertising and publicity, (4) breastmilk is best: all media assemble, (5) breastmilk is ideal but negotiable: the spread of discourses in one's own space.

Figure 2: A discursive eras of the discontinuity of breastfeeding discourses



2.1. Pre-Framework Era: signification of breastfeeding and motherhood

2.1.1. Mother's milk is blood refined from the mother's chest.

Prior to the Siamese Revolution of 1932, breastfeeding was a common infant-feeding method. Nevertheless, breastmilk was meant to be more than just nutrition for infants, it had spiritual value that signified the soul of the mother. Released around 1345, Buddhism-influenced *Tri Poom Pra Ruang* aka *Three Worlds of Phra Ruang* states in the chapter on the origin of human beings that once all human beings, including Bodhisattvas and animals, are born, the love of the mother drives the blood in her chest to transform into milk. This phenomenon is common to all living creatures (Li Thai, 1912, p. 61).

The text explains the cosmology of nature and humans, encompassing karma and the system of reincarnation. It is widely regarded as the first Thai literature, which the fragment also featured in Thai textbooks across various curriculums.

This narrative construct two meanings of breastfeeding. Firstly, breastmilk is seen as a product of mother's love. Secondly, it is believed to originate from the mother's blood, a concept that became prevalent during that era and continues to influence breastfeeding episteme in Thai society these days, as evidenced by discussions in internet forums and social media. By being viewed as refined mother's blood, breastmilk symbolizes the mother's soul, body, and dedication. This symbolism is depicted on numerous occasions and through various forms of media.

2.1.2. Mother's milk symbolizes motherhood

Breastmilk, known as “*nom mae*” in Thai, literary translates to “mother's milk”, symbolizing the essence of motherhood, as if it carries the mother's soul within it. This concept evolved into a myth suggesting that the spirit could pass through breastmilk, even when provided by a wet nurse, which parallels beliefs in Western culture during the 14th to 18th century.

A wet nurse, known as “*mae nom*” in Thai, literally meaning “milk mother”, was regarded as a second mother. This concept was depicted in various literary works and historical narratives. For instance, in the story of *Honwichai-Kwawi*, a tiger cub was nurtured by a mother cow with her cow's milk. When the tiger's biological mother attacked the mother cow, the tiger saved her.

Similarly, in the 1932 literature "The Conqueror of Ten Directions", the protagonist's mother served as a wet nurse to a king, making the protagonist the king's milk brother. This notion recurred in later stories, such as the portrayal of King Rama I as virtually an heir of King Narai the Great of Ayutthata because he was a descendent of Kasa Pan, whose mother served as the wet nurse to King Narai (2005, p. 21).

2.1.3. Signification of breastfeeding in narrative

In mainstream classic literature produced prior to 1932, very few leading characters were female. Even if there were protagonists, such as Suriyothai, Lady Mo², Lady Chan and Lady Muk³, they did not necessarily exhibit motherly traits but rather supported their husbands, country, and royalty. Other than that, female characters were illustrated as the hero's mother.

The portrayal of motherhood was usually connected by breastfeeding or breastmilk as depicted in *Phra Apai Mani* (1870), *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* (1872), and *Sang Thong* that the hero's mother had to depart with her child, making her recapture the memory when she breastfed and nurtured. This is the technique to signify motherhood in narrative. Yet, the meaning of breastfeeding has predominantly been associated with breastmilk itself rather than simply as a feeding method. The *Trai Phum Phra Ruang* associates with breastmilk, rather than the method of feeding. Many works of literature reproduce this discourse, such as the scene in which a hermit magically produces breast milk or in *Phra Apai Mani*, when the Mermaid has a hermit deliver her breast milk to *Sudsakorn*, her son, on daily basis.

Although breastmilk is signified as the mother's soul, the act of breastfeeding did not necessarily connote a "good mother," as upper-class mothers often delegated this task to wet nurses. Their main role was predominantly perceived as being a wife, rather than nurturing their children.

2.2. Breastmilk is the food from nature: a reproduction and rupture from the previous era

2.2.1. The reproduction of breastmilk as a symbol of motherhood

Since 1932, breastfeeding discourses have been entrenched in this era, emphasizing the concept that the mother's milk derives from the blood inside her chest. The notion was reflected in the song "Kha Nam Nom" (literally meaning the value of breastmilk), which was released in 1949 and has become an unofficial anthem for Mother's Day, still played every year to this day. The lyrics assert that the blood in a mother's chest is refined into breastmilk for her children. From those, the denotation and connotations of breastmilk have been blended as the text became knowledge and the belief that was applied in breastfeeding campaigns to highlight the selflessness of being a mother.

According to texts, a woman's role was represented they were naturally born to be mothers. Lord Itsara Phakdi Tham Withet wrote in the 1935 book "Mae Ja" [Mommy] that women should behave like women and be housewives because when they get married and have children, they can raise them well.

This illustrates that elites maintain control over women, confining them to roles dictated by men, which is an exercise of patriarchy. Even the establishment of Mother's Day was initially linked to a population increase policy from the then-government.

² Also known as Thao Suranari

³ Also known as Thao Thep Krasatri and Thao Si Sunthon

2.2.2. The rupture of breastmilk and the identity of women and motherhood

Although the meaning of breastfeeding mainly remained, the identity of motherhood changed. Breastmilk still contained spiritual signification, yet it was only through the biological mother. A wet nurse's role had become merely as a 'wet nurse,' rather than as a second mother like before. A textbook published in 1938 told a story about a rich spoiled child who was raised by babysitters and a wet nurse. He was a troublemaker. This narrative placed a wet nurse on the same level as a babysitter, and implied that biological mothers, or even relatives, were more proper to raise and nurture (Thammasakmontri & Anukitwithūra, 1938, p. 13).

A final verse in the song "Kha Nam Nom" sings that one drop of breastmilk is endlessly irreplaceable for a mother's gratitude. This coincided with a government campaign that promoted mothers as prominent civilians, the establishment of the Mother's Day in Thailand, and the renaissance of women's magazines in 1950s, all of which showed that a mother holds a prominent status in society and deserved gratitude.

There were more literary works that told stories of women and mothers in leading roles, even though it was typically mothers who followed their husbands and selflessly took care of their children for the rest of their lives such as *Four Reigns* (1953) and *Nang That [meaning Slave Girl]* (1955). A woman has a significance in narratives both in terms of societal and literary works.

2.2.3. The negotiation of westernization episteme through breastfeeding

This Western civilization and medical science came with breastmilk substitute products. Nestlé's *Milkmaid Brand* condensed milk was in the market and promoted in *Bangkok Times* newspaper since 1893. With the picture of infants on the print ad, condensed milk was meant to be infants' substitution for breastmilk, despite being not widely used at the time.

Figure 3: Milkmaid Brand advertisement in 1893 (Nestle.co.th; Standard Team, 2022)



Western science and medical episteme negotiated with Buddhism episteme with roots in Thai culture. Other than the promotion of breastmilk substitute products, the medical science in public health of taking care of babies had gradually been a new standard. This was seen in the novel "Four Reigns" (1953) where Ploy, the protagonist who represents traditional Thai woman, chooses the delivery process with a Thai tradition midwife, while her husband prefers a "Western doctor." She insists for a female midwife because she was not comfortable with letting male doctors help to give birth. Her husband complies with her. However, she later has a hemorrhage and the Western doctor saves her.

It shows that firstly, women had a lead role in narrative. Secondly, she could decide, not just follow the husband. Thirdly, Western civilization won the battle. In other words, Western science is better than traditional knowledge. Finally, even if the husband let her wife decide for

the matter of her body and their baby, it represents that giving birth and taking care of children is only a mother's duty, as opposed to other scenes in the story where her other duties consisted of nothing but supporting her husband and taking care of her children.

2.3. Breastmilk is inferior to infant formula: an influence of advertising and publicity

2.3.1. Infant formula dominates.

Breastmilk substitute products hit the market in the late 19th century and were on the rise in 1950s to 1970s. More brands were gradually imported while Thai dairy product industries were established.

The text states, “Swiss made” and “quality as good as mother's milk” in Pilatus Brand's 1963 print-ad and “Smart mothers feed with Vilac, pure powdered milk that contains 7 vitamins,” in Vilac Brand. It signifies the meaning of a substitute that is equivalent to breastmilk in terms of function, with the addition of vitamins that are even superior to breastmilk. The words “Swiss made” under the Pilatus brand name on top of the print ad implies that Western civilization is admirable. Furthermore, the words “smart mothers” refers to the target audience, indicating that well-educated and higher-class mothers select this product.

Figure 4: Vilac and Pilatus Brand print-advertisements in 1950 and 1963 respectively



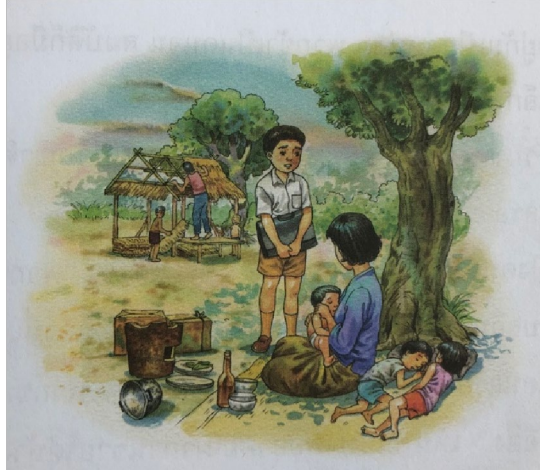
This sets a new norm of modern mothers. The new discourse dominated middle-class families in 1970s and 1980s. Advertising on mainstream media such as print-ads on magazines and television commercials was the marketing tool that had power. Even medical personal did not resist the use of infant formula, even though the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes (the Code) was released in 1981, as evidenced in *Mother and Child* magazine's columns written by doctors.

Infant formula became symbolic of the upper class, which middle-class families preferred. The middle class acted like the upper class in the past, where mothers did not need to breastfeed. It represented wealthy families that could afford the product, believing it was suitable for the baby and even had added vitamins that breastmilk did not have. On the contrary, condensed milk was a symbol of lower-educated, lower-class mothers who could not afford imported infant formula. This is evident in literature that the subject matter and the protagonist are often mothers or motherhood such as “Plerng Boon” (first published in 1966) and “Thong Nue Gao” (first published in 1986)⁴. The latter narrative portrays the protagonist as a bad mother who cared only about herself, especially her appearance, and cared less of her own children. She

⁴ These two novels have been adapted to television dramas more than once.

blamed her mother-in-law for being stingy because she did not buy infant formula for her like other elite families did. Consequently, she fed condensed milk to her children instead of breastfeeding them.

Figure 5: *Breastfeeding portrayal in Thai Language Coursebook curriculum 1978 (p. 46)*



Not only condensed milk, but an image of breastfeeding was also portrayed in 1978-curriculum Thai Textbook that there was a homeless mother breastfed her baby in public, and it was represented as a shame.

2.3.2. Raise and nurture: a new identity of motherhood

With the dominance of bottle-feeding, there was a negotiation of power between men and women in which the duty of a mother is no longer feeding. On the one hand, this can be seen as a mother losing her authority, on the other hand, this is a freedom of the mother to exercise her own will that is not determined by society.

Although the duties of mothers in this era did not solely focus on breastfeeding, they were framed to do other tasks such as taking care of people in the house, teaching their children, doing housework, and working outside the home. The Thai-subject textbooks curriculum of 1978 portrayed the image of mothers (including grandmothers) staying in a kitchen, while fathers worked outside the house, such as gardening and repairing. There was content showing that a mother was engaging in housekeeping duties such as cleaning and cooking. Additionally, there was a car seat advertisement in a magazine that features a picture of a mother about to drive a car with her child is in the car seat next to the driver's seat.

Not only being oppressed by other duties that a mother was expected to do, the myth of being inferior to men in terms of intelligence remained. The researcher found out that there was a "Dumex-1 Plus Hi-Q 1" powdered milk 2002-commercial that illustrated a father as an intelligent being. He was a well-known successful businessman that chose the product for his child, yet it was not presented that the father was the one who fed. His lines in the television commercial were, "My job needs to use a brain." It did not only signify that smart people chose the product, but also implied that the child would be smart just like the father, which was still a reproduction of the myth that men were intelligent, whereas women were just born to nurture, with additional duties to do.

2.4. Breastmilk is the best: all media assemble

2.4.1. Breastmilk strikes back

“Breastfeeding is best”: the knowledge from medical science has spread throughout Thailand. The researcher found articles written by a doctor in *Mother & Child* magazine, also featured in *Mother and Child Handbook*, a giveaway handbook distributed by public hospitals to all pregnant women since 1985. However, at that time it was not the dominant discourse. Doctors suggested but did not force mothers to breastfeed. It gradually gained momentum by and peaked in the 2010s when all mainstream media reproduced the discourse.

When Crown Prince Mahavajiralongkorn⁵’s wife gave birth to their first son in 2005, the royal news that was broadcasted every day on every television channel at 8 P.M. reported that Her Royal Highness intended to breastfeed, as suggested by the team of doctors. A year later, there was a royal project that promoted breastfeeding. This project influenced other institutions and became governmental public health policy to promote breastfeeding, which had airtime on television news program.

All media and individuals after that resonate the discourse as found in television dramas and celebrities’ Instagram posts. The television drama adaptations of *Plearnng Boon* (2017) and *Nang That* [Slave Girl] (2016) literally had a scene or two to describe the benefits of breastmilk. The portrayal of good mothers was reflected with the mother who breastfed, while the villainous character rejected breastfeeding as in those dramas, also in *Thong Nue Gao* (2013).

The researcher examined the top-10 most followed Thai celebrities who have babies on Instagram and found out that all of them have mentioned about breastfeeding or at least shown that they breastfed, whether by words, emoji, or pictures.

Figure 6: “100 packs of breastmilk” on Instagram post (Source @gggubgib15)



Hence, the statement “breast is best” has been shown everywhere from websites or the packaging of infant formula products, the social media pages of mother-and-child influencers, to information blended with the narrative of television series. Nevertheless, the meaning of breastfeeding predominantly refers to breastmilk, rather than breastfeeding as a method. This corresponds to the in-depth interview: all 12 interviewees perceived that breastmilk was the

⁵ Crown Prince Mahavajiralongkorn later ascended to the throne as King Rama X since 2016.

best in terms of nutrition. Midwife Preeyapon Thepprasit confirmed that over the past five years, all Thai upper-middle-class mothers under her care at Samitivej Sukhumvit Hospital⁶ never asked for infant formula. They all preferred breastfeeding.

2.4.2. Breastmilk is medicine. Infant formula is poison.

Colostrum was perceived as useless milk and not fed to infants in Thai culture before 1950s (Sathirakoses, 1968). Yet, it was illustrated as a valuable cure through the breastfeeding campaigns decades later. The new statement is a connotation of the medical information that illustrates the immune system stimulated by the colostrum. One of the metaphors used in this context, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, was “Breastmilk = Vaccine”. It was found in influencers’ social media, news agencies, the 2016-edition *Mother and Child Health Handbook*, and also on television series.

The pros of breastfeeding were not just illustrated as medical information, but they were also blended with entertainment media such as the television drama “*Nang That*” (2016) where scenes explicitly showed a father character suggesting to a mother to breastfeed because the infant has diarrhea, and the father informs that the Western doctor suggests that breastmilk is the cure.

However, it became a denotation when it came to the context of the breastfeeding campaign. The meaning of breastmilk as the cure is not only to limit to the colostrum, nor benefit to babies, but also to the mothers, as shown in a pediatricist’s Facebook page that has over 500,000 followers (<https://www.facebook.com/SuthiRaXeuxPhirocnKic>). She stated on one of the posts entitled “13 amazing benefits of breastmilk” (November 15, 2013) that rubbing breastmilk on your face can help with acne, or cure burned skin, diaper rash, cracked nipples, acute otitis externa, etc. She also mentioned that in the long term, breastfed infants have a lower risk of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, multiple sclerosis, asthma, allergies, or even cancer when they grow up (November 13, 2013). The technique that usually appears in the meaning construction is to use the word “amazing” or “special” when promoting breastfeeding, just like in the post of a shopping page that turned into a breastfeeding influencer with over 200k followers (<https://www.facebook.com/NommaeShop>) sharing quotes or information, “Every woman produce breastmilk, amazing nutrition since the birth of human being – Gabriel Palmer” (April 8, 2011).

A breastfeeding campaign endorsed by the WHO and UNICEF, which was under medical science episteme and western civilization power, influenced the baby-feeding method to change from infant formula domination to exclusive breastfeeding. Breastmilk was constructed to be not only nutritious for infants, but also for older children. More importantly it symbolized not only ‘motherhood’ but also ‘good mothers.’

As opposed to breastmilk, the binary opposition is a common meaning construction method that devalues infant formula as ‘poison’. This signifies a mother who feeds the baby with infant formula as a selfish, impatient, undedicated, and low-educated mother. This technique is generally used in personal social media platforms and governmental *Mother and Child Health Handbook* between year 2008 and 2020.

It was reflected in the in-depth interviews that six out of eight mothers who fed their child with infant formula did not intend to use infant formula at first. They experienced health conditions that caused them to be unable to breastfeed or to produce enough breastmilk. Eventually, they felt guilty because they did not achieve their goal like “other mothers” who were fulfilled with the role of exclusive breastfeeding mothers. Besides, one of the interviewees asked for donated

⁶ A private hospital located in downtown Bangkok.

breastmilk rather than use infant formula because she wanted to be labelled as an exclusive breastfeeding mother.

2.5. Breastmilk is ideal, but negotiable: The interaction of the discourses in social media

2.5.1. Objectification of breastmilk

The breastfeeding discourse still dominates, as evidenced in the interview with the sample mothers and the midwife. Over 90 percent of middle-class people have knowledge of breastfeeding and intend to exclusive breastfeed for the first six months. All mainstream media reproduced the meaning of breastmilk that has nutrition as though it is a vaccine, however it is being objectified as human's milk.

One of the breastfeeding phenomena the researcher found in the age of social media is the community of breastmilk donation. There is a Facebook group consisting of over 38,000 users. There are donors, mothers who asked for donated milk for their own children or even for other children. The donated breastmilk is certainly not filtered by any medical institution, yet rather filtered by the donor saying that they do not have any chronic health conditions. Some of the most common declarations are "don't drink alcohol, non-smoking, avoid fermented foods, no HIV."

The banner on the profile of the page shows the words: *"NommaeSharing," a choice for mothers who cannot breastfeed, and willing to take "risk for getting breastmilk donated" instead of "risk from infant formula"*.

It reflects that there are mothers who firstly interpret infant formula as "poison" and breastmilk merely as food that does not comprise the mother's spirit in it. This human's milk has a status like industrialized cow milk that every pack is all the same. Despite doctors suggesting that person-to-person breastmilk donation is risky as there could be a chance of hidden virus and bacteria, these mothers prefer to take it with the belief that it is still better than infant formula and that it is also a merit.

This charity signifies the donor to have the status of the upper class in motherhood community for she has more than enough 'capital' to donate to impoverished-of-breastmilk persons. She could even post how generous she is as though PR articles in high-class magazine features.

On a second level of meaning construction, the anti-infant formula leads to anti-cow's milk in general. There are movements that campaign infants to avoid dairy products because they can cause allergies, such as a post from a million-followers Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/HappyBreastfeeding> (August 3, 2014).

2.5.2. The power of mothers as a narrator and negotiation of the discourse

Since social media become mainstream in recent years for middle-class women, it allows mothers to be a narrator and to be able to choose her role in her own narratives. A mother can be any role that she wants such as narrator, main character, supporter, photographer, director, editor, etc. This gives power to mothers as individuals. Still, the researcher found that many mothers reproduced the breastfeeding discourse by showing breastfeeding activities and nurturing role. However, there are mothers who negotiate by posting her husband feeding breastmilk from the bottle or nurturing.

It seems like social media is naturally an outlet to share discourses, however it is not completely a free speech platform, as evidenced in the post of a father feeding from @lydiasarunrat (July 23, 2016). Some comments gave praise such as "This is a lovely father," "All men who nurture babies are cute," "Breastmilk is best. Keep fighting lovely father." Yet, there were comments

that objected to the act, such as “In the first-second month, you should breastfeed, not bottle feeding.” The positive comments show that the discourse of baby feeding in general is seen as the mother’s job; therefore, it is special when a father helps.

Furthermore, there is a post from @gggubgib15 endorsing powdered milk products, which was targeted toward toddlers over 1 year old. Comments on social media reproached her for not genuinely supporting breastfeeding, even though the product was formula 3. The celebrity then deleted the post to avoid conflict. This manifests that breastfeeding still holds power. It also reflects that it is not necessarily free to challenge the dominant discourse.

The researcher found that a public figure challenged the nutritional value of breastmilk on her Twitter platform. This showcased a counter discourse that an individual could ignite. Despite some supporters, the vast majority of comments were fired at her. This demonstrates the power of dominant discourse, as it would not let the oppositional discourse emerge. That was the only instance that the researcher found, and this issue has never been raised again. Nevertheless, it shows that the discourse was starting to be shaken, although not overnight.

Corresponding to the *Mother and Child Health Handbook* 2002 edition, the section that talks about brushing teeth used the title “Mother Brushes for the Baby,” with the content and picture shows that it is mother’s job to do it. This was revised in 2012 edition with the title “Caring for Baby’s Teeth,” and the content refers to the father, mother, and guidance. This reflects the role of nurturing that does not limit to women. Besides, the handbook since 2021-edition has not opposed the use of infant formula for promoting breastfeeding anymore. It shows the resolution of the use of binary oppositions between breastmilk and infant formula.

3. Discussion

3.1. Middle-class mothers embrace upper-class practice

As opposed to the studies of Phonpradapphet (2018) and Rahayu (2020) which explore whether the myth of being a mother was created by the media, today’s technology allows an individual to create and negotiate with that. The sample celebrities challenged the myth by posting the picture of their husbands bottle-feeding their children, showing that it was not just a mother’s duty or that some of them could be happy and wealthy single moms. Nevertheless, the traits of being a perfect mother should be stylish, wealthy, and well-educated remain. It was explicit that the sample celebrities and interviewees represented themselves on social media as such by the photography, the motherly appearance, appliance, and expensive lifestyle. It reflects that these middle-class mothers emulate the upper class.

This suggests that the middle class embraces the upper class’s traits and distribute them. In terms of breastfeeding discourses, every rupture connects to an assimilation of the upper class such as the use of infant formula in the middle-class mothers to represent their wealth and body shape concern, and when the monarchy promoted breastfeeding, the middle-class mothers followed. In a Thai context, this would be a prediction that the ethos of the upper class always appeals to the middle class.

3.2. Patriarchy-feminism, pseudo-individualism, and internalized misogyny

With the breastfeeding discourse nowadays, the power of individuals is questionable. Women seem to have power to negotiate with patriarchy because of the significant duty that only women can do. However, by empowering women to exclusively breastfeed, it would turn out that women are oppressed. Corresponding to Van Esterik (1994) who was concerned that a

breastfeeding campaign would label a mother as a producer of labors, the signification of good mothers represented on social media separates the role of men and women and frames women to do only a “woman’s job” which does not get in the way of patriarchy.

Furthermore, the researcher did not see many men interact with the posts, and from the interviews, none of the fathers got involved with the choice of feeding. Mothers felt pressured basically from other women, whether relatives or friends from both the physical and virtual world. The most common meaning construction method is the use of binary oppositions that signify non-breastfeeding mothers as not being good mothers, and some mothers represent themselves online as better mothers. This manifests internalized misogyny. Despite being the power of the mother, as Campbell (1984) suggests, breastmilk symbolizes the power of mothers to suppress other women, not men.

There was opposition from an activist celebrity who questioned the overclaimed value of breastmilk in terms of consistency and myth in one of her posts on social media. The consequence was that she got heavily criticized online by commenters and she has not talked about the subject since. This reflects the phenomenon of the echo chamber and the spiral of silence on social media.

In the world of social media, it seems that a mother has the freedom to seek out information, believe in anything, and have freedom of speech. However, she is fed by the algorithm that frames her to see what she already believes. Even if she tries to oppose the dominant discourse and speak up, it is extremely challenging to be accepted by others. Eventually, her speech is washed out, and she has to stay in a community that only has people with a shared ideology in common. Different communities tend to stay on their own and hardly exchange ideology with other groups. This phenomenon makes women unintentionally reproduce patriarchy rather than oppose to it. With that, the researcher suggests that despite breastfeeding being the best method known today, by avoiding standardized and romanticized images of good mothers by breastfeeding would empower all mothers to choose the most appropriate method under their limitations. As the middle-class mothers already know the benefits and intend to breastfeed, they would certainly choose the best option they can for their children.

3.3. Capitalism finds a way

Capitalism, including its tools such as marketing, advertising, and publicity, has been blamed for promoting the value of infant formula to replace breastfeeding in 1970s to 1990s. Consequently, the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes regulates all forms of marketing communication of infant formula and any other substitutes for infants. In Thailand, the act of legislation has banned marketing tools since 2017. Nevertheless, the infant formula industry finds ways to promote infant formula to go with the breastfeeding campaign.

The infant formula industry uses a strategy of the promotion of non-infant formula by using similar packaging design, identical corporate identity with resemblance to infant formula products from the same brand. Furthermore, it promotes breastfeeding, especially the nutrition in breastmilk such as alpha-lactalbumin, sphingomyelin (advertised by S-26 Gold), MFGM (advertised by Enfa). Even though it superficially targets toddlers or older age groups, it targets infants and implies that the product has nutrition, just like breastmilk.

Not only with infant formula, capitalism blends in with breastfeeding promotion, with all products that breastfeeding mothers are made to believe that they need, such as an electric breast pump (from the interview, over 80 percent of mothers have bought one before giving birth), breastmilk stimulation supplements, and also a new profession, such as breast milk coaches. These are mostly non-medical personnel that give advice or provide a service to

enhance breastmilk. With all of this, it shows that under a capitalist system, capitalism reaches everywhere, no matter with infant formula or breastfeeding, industrialization or naturalism, Westernization or local belief: it just finds a way.

3.4. Buddhism vs western science epistemes: motherhood vs individualism

Throughout the history of Thai society in modern era, the episteme that influence the discourse was a negotiation of Buddhist episteme and Western medical science. The Buddhist episteme for Thai culture is a combination of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Brahma. The episteme was also influenced by the upper-class, in this sense, it was royalty that had the power to reproduce the narrative. *Trai Poom Phra Ruang*, which determines the meaning of breastfeeding and cosmology that embedded this belief, was written by a king of the Sukhothai Kingdom. The breastfeeding campaign in Thailand was driven by a royal project. Mother's Day in Thailand is dated after Queen Sirikit of Thailand, who is symbolized as the mother of the nation. Buddhism and monarchy are blended as also evidenced that *Dhammayuttika*, an order of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand, which was reformed by King Rama IV when he was a prince.

Western science and technology were also promoted by King Rama IV. In modern days, medical science and individualism negotiate the episteme of breastfeeding discourse, with the knowledge of nutrition, immunity, and motherhood signification. On the one hand, medical science supports the value of breastmilk, on the other hand, it objectifies breastmilk into merely human's milk, which leads to breastmilk donation on social media. Likewise, Buddhist episteme supports breastmilk as a spiritual bond between mother and child, conversely, it implies that the mother who donates breastmilk is a merit.

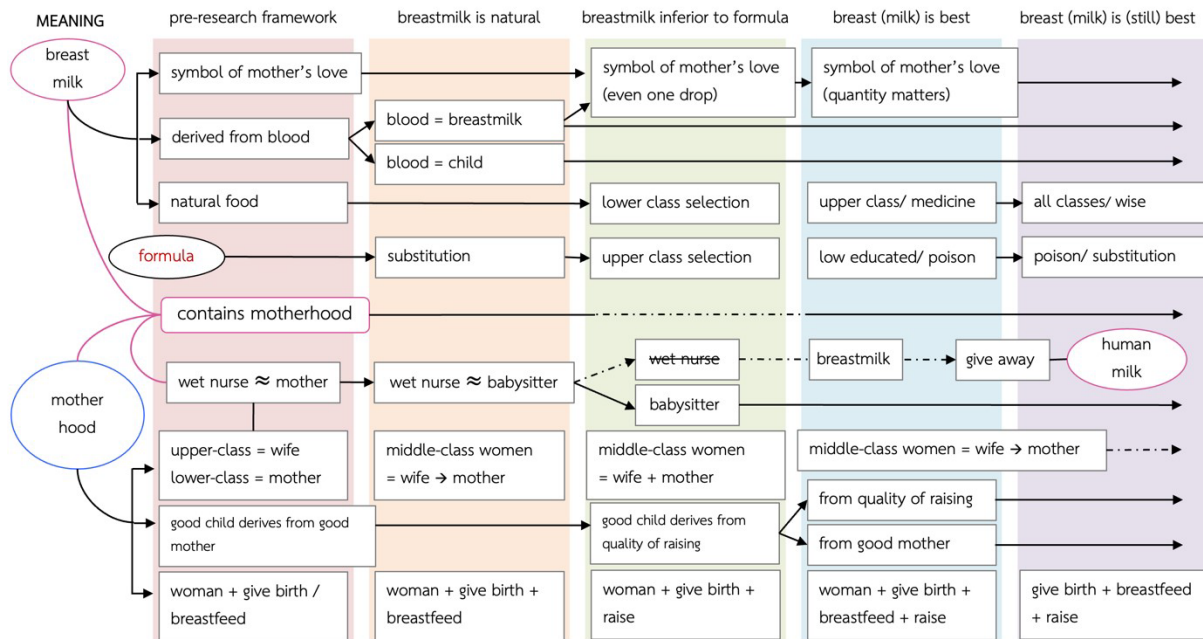
The Buddhist worldview and Western scientific perspectives on health issues interact through media narrative and advertisements for milk substitute products and breastfeeding. Sometimes they oppose while sometimes they support one another. When a discourse dominates, it means that the episteme of Buddhist and Western fit altogether. Just like the case of the breastfeeding campaign in Thailand that values breastmilk and the dedication of mother as blood from the chest, the Western episteme supports the value of breastmilk in terms of nutrition and immunity. With these two, a discourse is virtually unshakable.

4. Conclusion

From the personal experience of the researcher towards the impact of the breastfeeding discourse in the modern era, it affected the researcher's wife's mental health and the self-perception of not being a good mother because she could not exclusively breastfeed. This research's contribution is to literate the discourse, to help make aware that there are ways to negotiate with the power of the discourse. At a minimum, it is to realize that nothing is absolute; things keep changing, and that includes the meaning of breastfeeding and its signification with the construction of good mothers.

The discourse sets social expectations and standards that have a huge influence over the way mothers think, feel, and behave to achieve being good mothers. As evidenced, the meaning of breastfeeding was constructed back in the 14th century by the narrative of the origin of breastmilk in *Tri Phum Phra Ruang*, a Buddhist-influenced cosmology literature. There were times that breastfeeding was a natural method, the shift to infant formula preference for middle-class mothers, back to breastmilk signifies good mothers, to the interaction of the discourses. It all shows the maneuver of the discourse that no one nor institution absolutely dominates. Things change, even though it is not immediate. However, it needs understanding, time, and other people who have common ideology for any change to occur.

Figure 7: Discontinuity of breastfeeding discourses



5. Recommendations

The researcher suggests opportunities for future research as follows:

- 1) The genealogy of breastfeeding in a different context. Since this research focuses on texts that target the middle-class in a specific timeframe and geographical location, it would be beneficial to cover texts targeting lower-class mothers, or another cultural context.
- 2) The mental health issues that affect mothers according to breastfeeding issue. The previous studies predominantly focused on how breastfeeding is beneficial to mothers, but the pressure felt by mothers has been neglected. A study of the breastfeeding promotion campaign and the effect on mothers would create new territory in social science on health issues that concern individuals' mental health rather than perceiving them as objects.
- 3) This research studies breastfeeding as a discourse that was interacted by power, knowledge, and driven by the media. Hence, other issues that are dominant discourse could be studied to reveal if the power and authorities also exercise control over society, as seen in breastfeeding issue.

Acknowledgments

This paper is an output of Ph.D. dissertation in Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University entitled *The Construction of Breastfeeding Discourses and Interaction Through Narrative in Thai Media*, under the supervision of Associate Professor Dr. Preeda Akarachantachote.

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