



NURTURING MATERNAL BOND: FROM THE VIEWPOINTS OF BREASTFEEDING MOTHERS

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Abstract : This qualitative research explored the lived experiences of breastfeeding mothers in Poblacion, Maragusan, and Davao de Oro. Using Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method, rigor was established through validation, verification, and credibility. A purposive sampling of 11 breastfeeding mothers was conducted. The study revealed that the experiences of breastfeeding mothers included the physical demands of breastfeeding, sacrificing personal time, responding to the baby's cues, adapting to the unique feeding patterns, and meeting their bodily needs. Their means of coping with the challenges of navigating social and personal influences were demonstrated through negotiating cultural and familial beliefs, drawing on social support, and responding to conflicting advice—all while sustaining internal motivation fueled by the perceived benefits of breast milk. The insights participants wanted to share with other mothers considering or currently breastfeeding highlighted the evolving bond in the breastfeeding relationship—such as deepening the mother-baby connection, finding fulfillment and empowerment, and viewing breastfeeding as a temporary yet cherished phase of motherhood. Breastfeeding is a complex, evolving journey shaped by physical, emotional, social, and cultural dimensions. Mothers should receive comprehensive support that addresses these aspects to empower and sustain their breastfeeding experience. Understanding and respecting their unique challenges and strengths can promote successful breastfeeding and strengthen the mother-infant bond.

IndexTerms - Social Science, Breastfeeding Mothers, Phenomenology, Maragusan, Davao de oro

INTRODUCTION

Breastfeeding offers well-documented health benefits, yet many mothers face a complex journey involving physical challenges, emotional stress, and social pressures. Common issues such as breast engorgement, exhaustion, and nipple soreness often disrupt breastfeeding continuity. Grattan et al. (2024) linked postpartum mothers' breastfeeding-related pressure to increased stress, anxiety, and birth trauma symptoms. Similarly, Billings et al. (2024) found that emotional distress during breastfeeding can be exacerbated by unrealistic expectations and insufficient support, underscoring the need for comprehensive breastfeeding assistance addressing both physical and emotional well-being.

A Swedish study employing reflective lifeworld methodology highlighted the feelings of loneliness and discomfort among women initiating breastfeeding post-hospital discharge, emphasizing the importance of individualized professional support (Hernández-Cordero et al., 2022). Globally, UNICEF and WHO's Breastfeeding Scorecard (2023) reflects growing exclusive breastfeeding rates supported by policies and community initiatives across diverse countries. The American Academy of Pediatrics (Meek & Noble, 2022) advocates for institutional and workplace measures that enable breastfeeding mothers.

In the Philippines, breastfeeding is promoted through policies like the 105-Day Expanded Maternity Leave Law and the Expanded Breastfeeding Promotion Act of 2009 (Maramag et al., 2023). Although breastfeeding support groups have been formalized to encourage exclusive breastfeeding, challenges remain—especially for working mothers, such as teachers, who face inflexible schedules and inadequate lactation facilities. Peer and managerial support have been identified as crucial facilitators in these contexts (Grace, 2024).

While Philippine breastfeeding research has covered urban and demographic factors (Falculan & Falculan, 2023; Gerona, 2021), limited studies explore the lived experiences of mothers in rural communities like Maragusan, Davao de Oro. This study addresses this gap by investigating how cultural norms, family dynamics, and local contexts influence breastfeeding practices and experiences in this rural setting.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

While Philippine breastfeeding research has covered urban and demographic factors (Falculan & Falculan, 2023; Gerona, 2021), limited studies explore the lived experiences of mothers in rural communities like Maragusan, Davao de Oro. This study addresses this gap by investigating how cultural norms, family dynamics, and local contexts influence breastfeeding practices and experiences in this rural setting.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter covers the study's methodology, including details about the research design, participants, data sources, data collection procedure, and data analysis.

Design

This qualitative study used a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of exclusively breastfeeding mothers in Poblacion, Maragusan, Davao de Oro. Guided by Husserl's philosophy and Colaizzi's method, the study aimed to understand mothers' personal and cultural meanings of breastfeeding while minimizing researcher bias.

Setting

The research took place in Poblacion, Maragusan, a rural Philippine community with strong family ties and cultural traditions influencing breastfeeding, alongside limited healthcare access.

Participants

Eleven mothers, aged 18 and above, who were exclusively breastfeeding for at least two weeks, were purposively sampled. Eight participated in in-depth interviews and three in a focus group discussion. All gave informed consent.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and a focus group, each lasting 30–50 minutes, in private settings. Open-ended questions encouraged detailed sharing. Sessions were audio-recorded, and observational notes captured non-verbal cues.

Data Analysis

Colaizzi's seven-step thematic analysis was applied to verbatim transcripts. This involved identifying significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, and validating findings with participants.

Trustworthiness

Credibility was ensured through triangulation (interviews and focus groups) and member checking. Audit trails and researcher reflexivity supported confirmability. Transferability was achieved via rich descriptions of the local context. Dependability was maintained through detailed documentation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained before data collection. Participants' rights, privacy, and confidentiality were strictly protected. Participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw anytime, and emotional support was available if needed.

Researcher's Role and Reflexivity

The researcher's nursing background informed data collection and analysis, but was balanced by continuous self-reflection and bracketing to reduce bias. Emphasis was placed on creating a respectful and open environment to authentically capture mothers' experiences.

Theoretical Lens

This study is anchored on Jean Watson's Theory of Human Caring and Ramona Mercer's Maternal Role Attainment Theory. Watson's Theory of Human Caring states nursing is about caring and promoting healing and wholeness. It facilitates a holistic approach that values mind, body, and spirit and true, compassionate interactions between nurses and patients. Important themes include curative factors, transpersonal caring interactions, and a healing environment that promotes dignity, empathy, and compassion. Watson's theory illuminates breastfeeding's emotional and relational complexity in this study. The theory's focus on transpersonal caring matches the mother-infant link, making breastfeeding more than sustenance. Watson's holistic approach mirrors how mothers use breastfeeding to fulfill their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs, molded by their culture and society.

Meanwhile, Ramona Mercer's Maternal Role Attainment Theory discusses how psychological, societal, and cultural elements help women become mothers. The theory has anticipatory, formal, informal, and personal stages. From pregnancy until childbirth and early parenting, a mother learns, adjusts, and internalizes her maternal identity. She stresses that support structures, experiences, and interactions with the infant and others determine maternal role attainment. The theory explains how breastfeeding shapes the maternal role. Breastfeeding helps moms gain confidence, emotional attachment, and fulfillment in their new role.

Together, these theories offer a comprehensive framework that captures both the nurturing connection and the evolving sense of motherhood expressed by breastfeeding mothers.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the rich findings derived from the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions conducted with breastfeeding mothers, which range from 30 to 50 minutes. It systematically outlines the key themes and patterns that emerged from the thematic analysis of their lived experiences in nurturing the maternal bond through breastfeeding. Following the presentation of these results, a comprehensive discussion will contextualize these findings within the existing literature on maternal bonding and breastfeeding, exploring their implications specifically within the cultural and social context.

Table 1: Profile of Participants

Participant	Age	Study Group
P1	33	In-Depth Interview
P2	28	In-Depth Interview
P3	31	In-Depth Interview
P4	33	In-Depth Interview
P5	26	In-Depth Interview
P6	38	In-Depth Interview
P7	37	In-Depth Interview
P8	20	In-Depth Interview
P9	42	Focus Group Discussion
P10	33	Focus Group Discussion
P11	24	Focus Group Discussion

The participants ranged in age from 20 to 42 years, representing different stages of motherhood. The youngest was 20 (IDI8), and the oldest was 42 (FGD1), contributing to a broad understanding of breastfeeding experiences. The in-depth interview participants (P1–P8) primarily fell within their late 20s to 30s, offering detailed personal narratives. Meanwhile, the focus group participants (P9–P11), aged 24, 33, and 42, provided shared insights within a group setting. This variation in age and data collection approach contributed to the richness and depth of the study's findings by capturing a wide range of maternal perspectives and lived experiences.

The researcher conducted a thorough analysis of both individual response patterns and group dynamics across the 11 participants. Through careful examination of interview and focus group transcripts, key elements that captured the essence of the breastfeeding experience were identified. From 12 pages of transcribed data, 110 significant statements were extracted and used to develop thematic clusters reflecting everyday experiences. These were further organized into 12 cluster themes, which were synthesized into three main emergent themes representing the fundamental aspects of mothers' breastfeeding journeys. The findings were visually summarized in a thematic map in Figure 2.

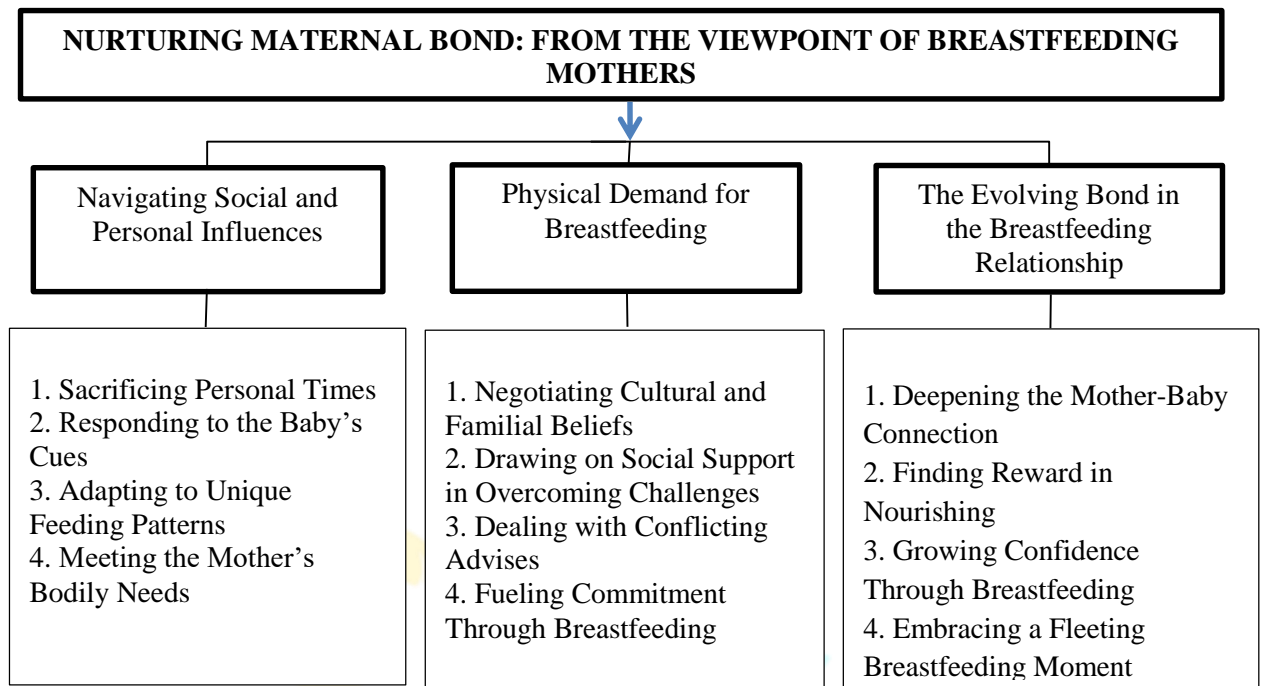


Figure 2: Thematic Map

Emergent Theme 1: Experiencing the Physical Demand of Breastfeeding

This theme highlights how breastfeeding shapes a mother's daily life through physical demands and intimate interactions. Participants described adapting their routines around their babies' unique feeding needs, balancing feeding with sleep, hygiene, and nutrition. Breastfeeding was experienced as a continuous, embodied process requiring physical and emotional adjustment, not just nourishment.

Cluster 1: Sacrificing Personal Time
Mothers shared how breastfeeding consumes significant personal time, often overlapping with rest and self-care. They described sacrifices like reduced "me time," sleepless nights, and the challenge of balancing feeding with work or entrepreneurial duties. For many, feeding dictated their movement and social activities, requiring them to stay close to their babies or limit outings. These sacrifices are amplified for rural mothers, who face limited support and cultural expectations, leading to exhaustion and reduced autonomy. This reflects studies (e.g., Snyder et al., 2021; Hermann-Turner et al., 2024) showing breastfeeding's time demands cause fatigue, social isolation, and loss of personal identity.

Cluster 2: Responding to the Baby's Cues
Breastfeeding was described as a sensorial, responsive process involving touch, positioning, and reading infant cues. Mothers attuned to physical signs such as cuddling and feeding behaviors to regulate feeding rhythms. Proper latch and breast emptying influenced satisfaction and sleep duration. Challenges like nipple soreness impacted this delicate physical interaction, consistent with research on breastfeeding difficulties (Cook et al., 2021). Breastfeeding is thus a dynamic, physical dialogue fostering emotional bonding.

Cluster 3: Adapting to Unique Feeding Patterns
Feeding schedules varied widely, requiring mothers to flexibly adjust to each infant's rhythm—feeding every hour to every four hours. Responsive feeding, based on infant cues rather than strict timing, was common. Nighttime feeding patterns supported milk supply but disrupted maternal sleep. This adaptability supports both infant nutrition and emotional connection (Brown, 2021; Italianer et al., 2020; Ondrušová, 2023). Maternal sensitivity to feeding cues enhances bonding and confidence.

Cluster 4: Meeting the Mother's Bodily Needs
Participants emphasized the importance of self-care for effective breastfeeding, noting the physical toll of pain, exhaustion, and hunger. Despite discomfort or fatigue, mothers felt compelled to continue breastfeeding, highlighting the emotional burden. Adequate nutrition, rest, and pain management are essential for sustaining breastfeeding (Hem-Lee-Forsyth et al., 2023; Gianni et al., 2019; Mavisio et al., 2024). Supporting maternal physical recovery promotes long-term breastfeeding success and well-being.

Discussion

This theme highlights breastfeeding as a physically demanding and time-consuming process that deeply affects mothers' daily lives. The sacrifice of personal time and rest aligns with studies showing how breastfeeding can lead to fatigue and social isolation, especially for rural mothers with limited support (Snyder et al., 2021; Hermann-Turner et al., 2024). Mothers' sensitivity to their babies' feeding cues supports previous research emphasizing the importance of responsive feeding for both nutrition and emotional bonding (Cook et al., 2021; Ondrušová, 2023).

Adaptability to infants' unique feeding patterns, including nighttime feeds, shows mothers' commitment despite disruptions to their own well-being (Brown, 2021; Italianer et al., 2020). The physical toll of breastfeeding—pain, exhaustion, and hunger—underscores the critical need for maternal self-care and support, consistent with literature stressing nutrition and rest as key to breastfeeding success (Hem-Lee-Forsyth et al., 2023; Gianni et al., 2019).

Overall, the findings affirm that breastfeeding is an intense, embodied experience requiring physical endurance and emotional resilience, highlighting the importance of comprehensive support for mothers to sustain breastfeeding and protect their health.

Emergent Theme 2: Navigating Social and Personal Influences

Breastfeeding mothers navigate a complex interplay of cultural expectations, familial traditions, and personal convictions throughout their breastfeeding journey. This negotiation shapes their daily practices, decision-making processes, and emotional experiences, reflecting the dynamic balance between respecting heritage and asserting individual agency.

Cluster Theme 1: Negotiating Cultural and Familial Beliefs

Breastfeeding is deeply embedded within cultural traditions and family customs that influence maternal behaviors around diet, hygiene, and infant care. Participants consistently cited the advice and practices passed down from elder family members, especially mothers, as authoritative guides. For example, dietary restrictions—such as avoiding saba bananas, peanuts, and coconut milk—and practices like discarding the first milk, demonstrate a reverence for generational wisdom. Environmental precautions, such as avoiding exposure to cold or rain before feeding, were also common, underscoring beliefs in preventing infant illness through maternal behavior. These traditions, while sometimes conflicting with modern evidence-based recommendations, are actively interpreted rather than passively followed, illustrating mothers' nuanced engagement with their cultural heritage (Uddin et al., 2022; Snyder et al., 2021). Such findings align with the concept that breastfeeding transcends biological function, embodying cultural meaning and identity.

Cluster Theme 2: Drawing on Social Support in Overcoming Challenges

Breastfeeding entails significant physical and emotional challenges, necessitating robust social support. Participants highlighted the vital role of spouses, family members, and friends who assist through practical help like cooking and household chores, as well as emotional encouragement. This support alleviates maternal burden, enabling mothers to rest and focus on feeding, which can enhance milk production and maternal well-being. These accounts corroborate findings by Rydström et al. (2021) and Abekah-Nkrumah et al. (2020), emphasizing that social support not only extends breastfeeding duration but also fosters maternal confidence and positive mother-infant bonding (Bianciardi et al., 2023).

Cluster Theme 3: Dealing with Conflicting Advice

Mothers frequently face contradictory advice from family and community members, requiring them to critically evaluate differing opinions. Many participants described situations where they chose to trust their instincts and personal experiences over external suggestions, especially when such advice conflicted with their understanding of breastfeeding's importance. This assertive stance underscores maternal agency and highlights the internalization of breastfeeding's benefits through education and support networks (Rydström et al., 2021; Abekah-Nkrumah et al., 2020). Encountering and navigating these conflicting perspectives is a defining feature of the breastfeeding journey, demonstrating mothers' resilience and commitment to their child's health.

Cluster Theme 4: Fueling Commitment Through Breastfeeding

A strong internal motivation to breastfeed emerged among participants, rooted in a clear understanding of breast milk's nutritional and protective advantages. Mothers expressed appreciation for breastfeeding's convenience, cost-effectiveness, and its role in safeguarding infant health against illnesses like diarrhea. This deep conviction aligns with scientific evidence promoted by the World Health Organization (2020) and Prentice (2022), which recognizes breast milk as the optimal source of infant nourishment. Emotional satisfaction derived from seeing their babies thrive further strengthens mothers' resolve, enhancing their dedication and positively impacting the mother-child bond (Bianciardi et al., 2023; Cook et al., 2021).

Discussion

The theme *Navigating Social and Personal Influences* highlights how breastfeeding mothers balance cultural traditions with personal choices. Breastfeeding is not just biological but culturally and socially shaped, echoing prior studies on cultural impact (Uddin et al., 2022; Snyder et al., 2021). Mothers respected generational wisdom—such as dietary restrictions and discarding first milk—but also adapted these customs based on experience and knowledge, showing cultural competence and flexibility.

Social support from family, spouses, and peers was vital, easing breastfeeding challenges and boosting maternal confidence and bonding, consistent with existing research (Rydström et al., 2021; Abekah-Nkrumah et al., 2020; Bianciardi et al., 2023). Conflicting advice required mothers to exercise discernment and trust their instincts, demonstrating empowerment and the importance of culturally sensitive education to address misinformation.

Finally, mothers' motivation was fueled by the health, convenience, and economic benefits of breastfeeding, reinforcing their commitment despite difficulties. This emotional satisfaction strengthens the mother-infant bond, supporting findings on breastfeeding's psychosocial benefits (WHO, 2020; Bianciardi et al., 2023).

In summary, mothers navigate breastfeeding through a complex blend of tradition, support, and personal conviction, acting as advocates for their infants in their unique social contexts.

Emergent Theme 3: The Evolving Bond of Breastfeeding Relationship

This theme captures breastfeeding as a profoundly relational experience that nurtures an evolving emotional bond between mother and child. The data show that breastfeeding goes beyond physical nourishment; it is a process of deepening connection, personal empowerment, and conscious presence in the fleeting early months of infancy.

Deepening the Mother-Baby Connection

Participants consistently described breastfeeding as a unique and transformative experience that fosters emotional intimacy and closeness. For example, one mother shared, "Breastfeeding has contributed a lot in my relationship with my baby. No one else gives him comfort than me" (IDI1, L82-83), highlighting the exclusive nature of comfort and security breastfeeding provides. Others noted the sensory familiarity that strengthens attachment: "He knows my scent immediately. Even from a distance, he recognizes my voice" (FGD1, L104-105). These narratives support Linde et al. (2020), who emphasized how exclusive breastfeeding fosters trust and warmth, laying the foundation for secure maternal-infant attachment. The findings also resonate with Caetano, Pereira, and Konstantyner (2022), who underscored the role of skin-to-skin contact, eye gaze, and hormonal responses such as oxytocin in enhancing maternal sensitivity and emotional bonding.

Furthermore, mothers expressed increased attunement to their infants' cues, as one participant remarked, "I'm more attuned to her needs now, and I can tell right away when she's uncomfortable" (IDI5, L92-93). This sensitivity aligns with Ondrušová's (2023)

observation that successful breastfeeding nurtures maternal self-efficacy and emotional connection, which are essential for responsive caregiving.

Finding Reward in Nourishing
 Mothers also articulated profound satisfaction in witnessing their babies' health and well-being as a direct result of breastfeeding. Statements such as "The baby also stays healthy. Even if they get sick, it is usually minor and they recover quickly" (IDI2, L167-168) illustrate the sense of accomplishment and fulfillment mothers derive from nourishing their children. This dual physical and emotional nourishment echoes the findings of Caetano et al. (2022) and Ondrušová (2023), who highlighted that positive breastfeeding experiences contribute to maternal happiness and strengthen the mother-infant bond. The mothers' pride in their children's growth and health reinforces breastfeeding as an emotionally rewarding act that validates their caregiving role.

Growing Confidence Through Breastfeeding
 Breastfeeding emerged as a source of maternal empowerment and confidence, with mothers describing how the act alleviated anxiety and enhanced their trust in their caregiving abilities. One mother recounted overcoming doubts related to her body, stating, "Because I have small breasts, ma'am, they advised me to just use a bottle... However, I replied that my baby is well satisfied" (FGD2, L106-108). Such testimonies underscore how breastfeeding cultivates resilience and self-efficacy, echoing Hauck, Bradfield, and Kuliukas (2021), who emphasized that maternal confidence is critical for breastfeeding success, especially when supported by social networks. Similarly, Agalianou et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of enhancing maternal self-esteem to improve breastfeeding outcomes. The determination expressed by participants to persist despite challenges reflects the strength breastfeeding imparts to mothers, fostering a positive maternal identity.

Embracing a Fleeting Breastfeeding Moment
 Lastly, participants poignantly acknowledged breastfeeding as a temporary but treasured period, consciously cherishing the intimate moments with their infants. A mother expressed, "They won't be babies forever, so I'm really going to make the most of this time until he's the one who leaves" (FGD1, L310-311). This awareness of the ephemeral nature of breastfeeding aligns with Bianciardi et al. (2023), who noted that exclusive breastfeeding enhances emotional bonding through maternal presence and attachment. The desire to breastfeed until natural weaning, expressed in statements like "I want her to enjoy our time together" (IDI2, L295-296), illustrates mothers' respect for their child's developmental autonomy, consistent with Nilsson et al. (2020). These reflections reveal breastfeeding as an act of intentional presence, deepening maternal fulfillment and emotional engagement during early motherhood.

Discussion

The theme *The Evolving Bond of Breastfeeding Relationship* highlights breastfeeding as a deeply relational experience that strengthens emotional connection and maternal empowerment. Mothers described breastfeeding as fostering unique intimacy, comfort, and sensory bonding, supporting research on how skin-to-skin contact and oxytocin promote secure attachment (Linde et al., 2020; Caetano et al., 2022). Increased attunement to infant cues further enhances responsive caregiving and maternal self-efficacy (Ondrušová, 2023).

Mothers also found breastfeeding rewarding, taking pride in their babies' health and growth, which reinforces positive maternal identity and emotional fulfillment. Breastfeeding boosted maternal confidence, helping mothers overcome doubts and persist through challenges, reflecting the role of self-esteem in successful breastfeeding (Hauck et al., 2021; Agalianou et al., 2024).

Finally, participants valued breastfeeding as a fleeting, cherished time, consciously embracing the moment to deepen their bond, echoing studies on the importance of maternal presence during early infancy (Bianciardi et al., 2023; Nilsson et al., 2020). Overall, breastfeeding nurtures both physical nourishment and a meaningful, evolving emotional relationship between mother and child.

Recommendation for Future Research

Future research must consider about using a bigger and more varied sample size to more accurately reflect the range of breastfeeding experiences across various demographic groups, geographical locations, and cultural contexts. A larger sample size would enable the collection of a greater variety of viewpoints, especially those from various socioeconomic origins and geographical locations. Furthermore, employing a longitudinal strategy to monitor mothers' breastfeeding experiences over a longer period of time may prove advantageous for future study. Researchers can gain a more dynamic and thorough picture of the nursing experience by tracking individuals for at least six months or even the whole breastfeeding journey. This allows them to study changes in maternal behaviors, obstacles, and bonding processes.

Future research should use mixed methodologies, such as triangulating self-reported data with physiological or observational parameters, to improve the accuracy of the data. This strategy might lessen the bias present in self-reports, enhancing the validity and dependability of the results.

Lastly, future studies could compare breastfeeding behaviors in various cultural contexts and geographical areas, examining the ways in which public health policies, mother support networks, and societal norms affect the nursing experience. This could offer important insights into how social structures and cultural beliefs influence nursing behaviors and maternal identities in diverse settings.

Future research will advance a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of breastfeeding by addressing these suggestions, allowing for more specialized and culturally aware interventions to assist moms during their breastfeeding journeys.

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