



## Pregnancy Chic: A co-creative design approach for maternity fashion

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Keywords: Co-design, Design process, Maternity

Maternity clothing trends have mirrored fast fashion where clothing is generally worn for a short time and then discarded after pregnancy. In the past two decades there has been emerging exposure of pregnancy in the media transforming maternity fashion from concealing the baby bump to displaying it as a fashion accessory (Fox, Heffernan & Nicolson, 2009). While apparel choices for women during pregnancy have become more fashion forward, a gap exists between fashion trends and actual lifestyles of pregnant women. As more women are currently working longer into their pregnancies (Gao & Livingston, 2015), there is a need for maternity apparel that is comfortable, stylish and suitable for a variety of occasions. The purpose of this study is to explore design opportunities more suitable for the maternity market through applications of a co-creative design process. This study helps to fill a gap in the maternity market by using a design process that includes a large qualitative survey from reflections of recent mothers, market analysis of existing options and a collective Facebook group for feedback of design ideas.

Involving end users in early stages of a design development process can have a lasting positive impact on the created object (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). In this study, end users were initially involved in an online survey to help uncover future design opportunities for the maternity market. Upon receiving IRB approval, a link to the survey was posted to a Facebook breastfeeding group with approval from the moderator and sent through Facebook messages encouraging others to share by snowball sampling. Of the 240 women that participated, 13% were currently pregnant and 92% had children under age 3 with the youngest being 5 days old. Findings indicated a strong desire for comfortable clothing that did not look like maternity wear and could be worn in a variety of professional settings. Participants commented, "I'd like more choices that don't scream I'm wearing maternity clothes" and "I wish maternity clothes looked more like regular clothes". There were also aspirations for clothing that considered postpartum. For example, a participant suggested, "Please consider clothing that can be worn, before during and after pregnancy without appearing too maternity." Others strongly suggested nursing aspects of postpartum. "I would love pregnancy shirts/dresses that double as nursing tops. I've had to buy a whole new wardrobe just for nursing." While few companies like hatchcollection.com and aulaitshop.com address maternity/postpartum/ nursing-friendly clothing, findings from the survey indicate there is still a strong need for this emerging market.

Upon uncovering design opportunities in the online survey from this emerging market, design development began for maternity apparel that addresses maternity, postpartum and nursing. A combination of draping, hand sketching, diagramming and technical illustrations were used to come up with initial ideas. Based on findings from the survey, designers narrowed down ideas to four functional concepts to show selected participants. These concepts involved loose adaptable silhouettes for maternity into postpartum, button openings for nursing, gathered

crossing pieces for nursing, and overlapping flaps for nursing. All designs could be worn before, during and after pregnancy while considering optional access for nursing. As a follow-up to the larger qualitative study, interested participants were asked to join a closed Facebook group to give additional inspiration and feedback in the design development stage. Participation was completely voluntary and participants were not compensated in any way. Ten participants from the online survey responded with interest in the Facebook group. Designers posted four functional ideas as technical diagrammed flats and then invited participants to comment. While only five participants commented, the designers did receive useful feedback such as “I really like the ruched layers that give easy access for nursing. It looks comfortable, too.” Participants responded most positively to the look with the ruched crossing pieces. Therefore, designers created a sample muslin of this design and posted it to the group for feedback. After seeing the actual sample, more participants agreed it was a great option for nursing. One commented, “I like the built in bra and opening for nursing right at the bust. There aren’t as many options like that currently available.” Since 2010 breastfeeding rates in the United States continue to rise (Bartick et al., 2017). Therefore, it is apparent more nursing clothing options are needed.

Designers found the online survey beneficial in uncovering key design needs in an emerging market. There was also great potential with the closed Facebook group for online design collaborating to better understand real needs of the consumer. While working directly with consumers in design development is not without its challenges, the designers found this a valuable process that provided important insights to better understand needs of consumers. In future studies designers feel the Facebook group could be better utilized to receive more responses through organization of posts and inviting customers with similar styles that know each other to increase comfort of responding. This study has several implications for both researchers and designers in the fashion industry who are well equipped to engage their consumers. Design researchers could share ideas with customers through social media to gain insights for innovative products and better understand their customers’ needs.

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