



Nurturing Bond: healing through baby-wearing design

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Contextual Review and Concept

Mothers experiencing events such as preterm labor or birth, domestic violence, and sexual assault are all considered traumatic events. Traumatic events can trigger emotional and physical responses to mothers that affect their relationship with their child, including breastfeeding (Kendall-Tackett, 2020). As a designer who has experienced all of these traumas, I was inspired to use design to visualize an experience and solution that myself and others in my community used to heal: baby-wearing. Baby-wearing has been proven to support and aid in healing of mothers who suffer from trauma (Blois, 2005).

The intimacy of clothing has great impact on the personal and social experiences of mothers who are post-partum (Longhurst, 1997; Sohn & Bye, 2015). In the US, women are expected to keep problems they experience postpartum unaddressed (Santhanam, 2021). Harmful social stigmas and lack of support from medical professionals contribute to potential traumas a mother can experience during her relationship with her newborn, including breastfeeding. The shift in focus a new mother experiences from just herself to now her newborn child can also cause chaos in how she self-identifies (Brown & Hodges, 2016). My own breastfeeding experience was impacted by domestic violence, sexual assault, and PTSD. I relied on community support of other mothers to be successful at breastfeeding despite those struggles, and the mothers in my community introduced me to baby-wearing.

Baby-wearing has traditionally been used to support new mothers by acting as an aid to support to the radical difference life with a newborn is (Blois, 2005). A common use for baby-wearing is breastfeeding support. When breastfeeding mothers are given the opportunity to express their struggles and collectively share their stories, it can “allow a release of feelings that eases suffering” (Palmer, 2019). Research has also proven that breastfeeding can be a mode of healing for a mother who has experienced trauma (Kendall-Tackett, 2020). The purpose of this design is to collectively represent my personal struggles with trauma and breastfeeding, other mothers’ experiences, and the healing nature baby-wearing can have for those who have experienced trauma while breastfeeding. The transformable design of the buckle carrier top represents the multifunctionality of garments that is desired in the postpartum market from new mothers (Lapolla & Chen, 2022).

Methods: Aesthetic, process, technique, and execution

This design research started with an investigation of how breastfeeding has been represented in art and fashion, maternity wear throughout history, and a personal survey of my own experience. In the search it was identified that representations of breastfeeding are often directly personal, and a wide range of garments tailored to breastfeeding incorporate baby-wearing in the construction. I chose to merge these two recurring themes in my design. In Adobe Photoshop, I recreated photographs from my own breastfeeding journey by drawing digitally, and created a repeating textile print using these drawings (Figure 1). I intentionally chose to utilize minimally detailed line drawings on my figure's appearance as a way for other mothers to potentially self-identify when viewing this textile print. This print was duplicated into two colorways and printed on 100% organic cotton.



Figure 1: Digitally drawn breastfeeding textile print

The silhouette of my design is a fitted sleeveless bodice with a square neckline, adjustable snaps along the center back, and buckle mechanisms to create a baby-wearing feature. The center front panel is sewn open on the princess seam from the waist level down, with buckles attached to the bottom of the panel, as well as the shoulder seams of the garment. This creates a flap that can be folded up and buckled, and to be used for baby-wearing. The center panel of the bodice is lined and quilted with foam to create additional comfort for the mother and the child when worn. The skirt is an A-line silhouette with a high-low hem, adjustable waist, and features the 2nd colorway of the breastfeeding textile print. Due to the adjustable features of this ensemble, this design can accommodate a mother through the changes her body will experience as a result of being post-partum.

Cohesion

The cohesion of this design focuses on visually representing the intersectional experiences of motherhood, breastfeeding, and impacts of clothing choice. Each aspect of this design was used to show

the multifaceted affects pregnancy & birth, breastfeeding, and baby-wearing can have on the identity of a mother who has experienced trauma.

Design contribution

The rationale behind this design and the design research used my own experiences as a breastfeeding mother for a relationality inquiry into my work. This approach is described as a way for artists to use their embodied experiences and identity as motivating factors for their creations (Keifer-Boyd, 2011). The contribution my design has aims to incite conversations that allow mothers to express what their post-partum and breastfeeding experiences are, and influence a further body of work exploring this relationship. I plan to further this work by studying more baby-wearing techniques and implementing them in design, as well as continue my research on mother's personal experiences with clothing during pregnancy and post-partum.

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