

## Exploring the Transfer of Affect Through Clothing: Maternity Wear on Consumer Well-Being and Feelings of Parenting

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Pregnant women are instructed to practice ‘good’ motherly consumption for their body based on the advice of medical professionals, family, friends, and consumer culture (Miller, 2014). Doctors tell women to report any discomforts or unusual pains as they could be associated with the health of the fetus. Furthermore, women are supposed to ‘authentically’ appear excited about their changing role and unaffected by negative consequences of being pregnant (Nash, 2012). In Western culture, the health of unborn children is a social concern and consequently mother’s bodies are governed and medicalized (Westfall, 2006). Dressing oneself in maternity wear is challenging amidst these expectations since the garments are often viewed as unfashionable (Ogle et al., 2013), unable to represent women’s sense of self (Musial, 2004), or lacking a proper fit due to unstandardized sizing. Psychological and physiological issues with maternity garment design are not prioritized even though pregnant consumers express interest in clothing’s effect on their health and safety (Oh, 2016; Ho et al., 2009). This research explores the affects of garment comfort as it relates to feelings of well-being and early parenting.

Affect theory, viewed as a network of intensities, conceptualizes the energy transmitted between humans and nonhuman bodies. Postfeminist theory is used to approach constructions of pregnancy as it relates to gendered ideals, pregnancy, and womenswear. Building from both theories, this study investigates an affective relationship between pregnant women, their fetus, and clothing using quantitative methodologies. Maternal-fetal attachment (MFA) was conceived by Cranley (1981) as “the extent to which women engage in behaviors that represent an affiliation and interaction with their unborn child” (as cited in Doan et al., 2003). Life and health practices as well as women’s well-being are related to this bonding process (Brandon et al., 2009; Shen & Chen, 2021). As clothing comforts are also related to well-being and serve as a daily corporeal practice, this study hypothesized that well-being moderates the relationship between psychological (aesthetic, emotional) and physiological (ease-of-movement, sensorial) clothing comforts and maternal-fetal attachment (H1-H4). Understanding the interaction between clothing comforts and well-being on the formation of gestational bonding illustrates a critical side to liminal period dressing and the formation and extension of the self.

To test the hypothesis, an online survey and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants who were between 18-45 years of age and 20-30 weeks gestation. Wearing an outfit of their convenience, participants assessed their clothing comforts through visual analysis, light body movements, and tactile properties of wearing their garments. Detailed instructions were given to participants to ensure consistent procedures were taken for reliability. Using a 7-point Likert

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scale, women assessed aesthetic comfort using 3 items adapted from Kaplan & Okur (2008) and Park & Sullivan (2009), as well as emotional comfort using 3 items adapted from Li, Wu, and Spence's (2020) scale for positive emotion. Ease-of-movement comfort was measured using 7 items from Ho et. al (2008) maternity wear trials and sensorial comfort was measured using 6 items from the same study. Well-being was measured using the 10 item Brief Inventory of Thriving Scale (Su et al., 2014) and MFA was measured using Cranley's (1981) 24 item scale. From the months of June to October 2022, 101 usable responses were collected through online research company MTurk. Data was analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) as well as the macro 'PROCESS' version 4.2 by Andrew Hayes (2013). To strengthen the small sample size, bootstrapping with replacement created 5000 iterations of the original sample. Before analysis, variables were mean-centered to reduce multicollinearity. The Johnson-Neyman (J-N) technique was used to identify the levels of well-being that impacted a significant relationship between clothing comforts and MFA.

H1 was supported since the interaction between aesthetic comfort and well-being on maternal fetal attachment was found to be significant ( $R^2 = 0.384$ ,  $F(3, 101) = 20.135$ ,  $p < 0.002$ ). When well-being was above 0.404 ( $p < 0.05$ ; 29% of sample) and below -1.051 ( $p < 0.05$ ; 7% of sample) there is a greater effect of aesthetic comfort on maternal-fetal attachment. Similarly, H2 was also found to be supported since well-being moderates a stronger relationship between emotional comfort and maternal-fetal attachment ( $R^2 = 0.432$ ,  $F(3, 101) = 24.570$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ) when well-being is above 0.234 ( $p < 0.05$ ; 42% of sample) and below -0.742 ( $p < 0.05$ ; 13% of sample). H3 was not supported as the interaction between ease-of-movement comfort and well-being did not influence maternal-fetal attachment ( $p < 0.727$ ). Differing from the other outcomes, H4 was found to be significant, but in this case levels of well-being weakened the relationship between sensorial comfort and maternal-fetal attachment ( $R^2 = 0.376$ ,  $F(3, 101) = 19.447$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ). Like the other comforts, levels of significance were found when women's well-being was considerably high, above 0.205 ( $p < 0.05$ ; 42% of sample) or very low, below -1.444 ( $p < 0.05$ ; 4% of sample).

These findings reveal that clothing comforts of pregnant consumers should be taken more seriously, as they can alter feelings of bonding and connection with one's fetus. The impact of aesthetic and emotional clothing comforts on MFA when well-being is high, indicates that women's means of dressing the self for psycho-social purposes helps her to enact a new role as mother through consumption. For individuals with exceptionally low well-being, who also experience this significant relationship, these results could indicate the relevance of maintaining one's appearance for those who are more vulnerable. The weakened effect of sensory comfort on MFA shows that the tactile characteristics of garments are less important to the bonding process when women are experiencing greater wellness, or vice versa, when their wellness is low enough that sensory discomforts might be of less concern than other consumption related issues. Based on this study's results, there should be a greater commitment to support gestational health through clothing as it informs women's initial feelings of bonding and parenting. Pregnant

women's health can be strengthened through clothing systems, therefore turning a seemingly mundane act into a greater public health priority.

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