



Growing a Baby Bump

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Contextual Review and Concept Statement

“I don’t want my clothes to declare that I’m a mom; just that I’m a woman.” There can be conflicting desires between dress and identity during pregnancy. The combination of physical, psychological, and emotional changes at this time can be one of the most symbolic transformations a woman could ever experience. Expecting mothers are often identified by the visual cues of their expanding bodies, yet in western culture the ideal female body is presumed to occupy minimal space. This contradiction can place women in a challenging transition as they shift their pregnant self-image. Pregnant women are now also remaining in the public eye on display by working historically closer to their due dates than ever before (Gao & Livingston, 2015). This along with media influence has shifted the pregnant body image from classically concealing the baby bump to now emphasizing it (Fox, Heffernan, & Nicolson, 2009). These changes have caused maternity fashion to evoke a tension where this community of women are often trying to accommodate their expanding bodies through a compromise of style, comfort, and function. The purpose of this design installation is to reveal some of these pressures through the female experience, while also aiming to honor this important change. We sought to answer the question: how could design be used to better understand and illustrate a community of expecting mothers’ experiences with their changing appearance?

To explore this question, we first examined the context of other design researchers who have looked to use design to illuminate other communities’ struggles revolving around identity. Reddy-Best (2015) and (2018) has developed thorough design research that brings active awareness to those that experience social inequality, such as the LGBTQ and Black community. While our design work is not addressing the same levels of inequality, understanding Reddy-Best’s approaches of visually representing the experiences of these communities provided a background for this design approach. Specifically, the use of digitally printed text and a silhouette’s ability to reveal visual indicators of a community were approaches from Reddy-Best’s work that we found valuable. Through an analysis of marketable maternity wear, companies such as HATCH, ASOS Maternity, Seraphine and PinkBlush clearly show an endeavor for style, comfort, and function. While companies like HATCH promote comfort and reuse, others such as ASOS Maternity promoting trendy fashion that emphasize the baby bump.

Aesthetic Properties, Visual Impact, Process, Technique, and Execution

This design research started with collected responses from over two hundred and forty women who are mothers or future mothers to be. Upon IRB approval, a survey link was posted to a Facebook breastfeeding group with moderator approval and sent in Facebook messages for additional snowball sampling. These women reflected on personal experiences with fashion as their bodies evolved during pregnancy. Findings revealed how these women consistently negotiated style, comfort, and function as it related to their shifting appearance. Responses such as “We feel frumpy enough” and “Our bodies are consistently changing” are examples used to illustrate concerns through use of digital print and embroidery in the installation.

After collecting quotes from reoccurring themes, a botanical print alluding to growth was created by integrating the women’s comments in Adobe Photoshop. This silk organza print serves as a backdrop

for a suspended sculptural garment representing tension in the transforming female body. An A-line dress pattern was created in Optitex with a laser cut out of the belly area to communicate the internal change (Figure 1). A dimensional leaf pattern shapes the expanding garment to represent thriving transformation within the growing baby bump. One challenge discovered was that the dress needed to be more sculptural to represent the image of a pregnant body. Therefore, we added boning horizontally across the chest and thick interfacing under the top of the dress to provide a three-dimensional effect. A digital visualization was created on Adobe Photoshop to test and revise the overall concept using a dress mockup (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Front of the A-line dress pattern.

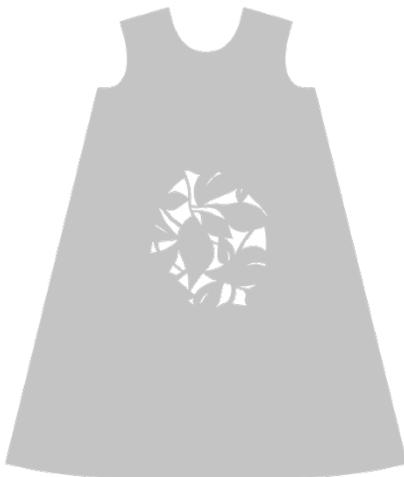


Figure 2: Digital visualization for the installation.



Additionally, to add more dimension to the dress, quotes were embroidered on the silk organza leaves. Wires were also machine sewed along the edges of each leaf using zigzag stitches to retain the shape. Finished fabric leaves were attached on the front of the dress as well as extending throughout the space with thin fishing wires hanging from the ceiling. The goal of this installation design was to create an engaging environment that highlights these women's journeys with their changing appearance.

Cohesion

Cohesion of the design focuses on visually representing tension within the experiences of these expecting mothers as they adjust to fashioning their changing bodies. Each aspect of the design including the digitally printed quotes, botanical laser cut outs, and silk organza leaves were worked out to demonstrate how these women encounter this flourishing, yet at times, uncertain transition.

Significance, Rationale, Contribution, and Originality Innovation

The rationale for this installation aims to value a community of expectant mothers through a display of their encounters with fashion and identity during this major life transition. Viewers are invited to engage with the installation as a way to better understand shifting identities experienced by this community. Reflections from these women set out to exemplify the influence of fashion on contemporary femininity when growing a baby bump. This installation adds to previous work from others who raise awareness about community experiences. With this work, we aim to encourage and support others looking to explore similar design approaches. We could further this work by exploring a similar design approach within a community of women experiencing postpartum.

References:

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