Exploring Motherhood: A Multisensory Portrait of Complexity, Chaos, and Intertwining Experiences in Contemporary Daily Life

Tammie Leong, Media Design School, New Zealand

Abstract
The project seeks to explore the complex nature of motherhood by curating and showcasing a range of diverse encounters, connections, and sentiments presented as individual multisensory portrayals. The research intends to establish an anthology of personal encounters by distinct caregivers to uncover motherhood's intricate and interwoven facets in modern daily existence. This project features personal stories of motherhood, incorporating multimedia elements such as audio, photographs, illustrations, and video creations. These distinctive portraits will be harnessed to create interactive data visualizations to illuminate the manifold array of maternal experiences while questioning prevailing norms. The research blends elements of autoethnography and heuristic inquiry with the principles of metamodernism and data feminism. This research journey is deeply personal and rooted in my transition into motherhood. It has uncovered a spectrum of maternal expectations shaped by societal norms and cultural heritage, which I've grappled with and celebrated. Coming from a unique cultural background, my exploration of maternity care in New Zealand has highlighted the clashes between these two worlds – each with its values and perspectives, bridging Western and Eastern traditions. I've engaged in dialogues with peers and women navigating similar journeys to find solace and understanding. These conversations reveal a complex interplay of realities intertwined with factors like culture, race, class, and gender. They challenge conventional roles attributed to maternal and caregiving relationships, even prompting questions about the applicability of motherhood to fathers, guardians, and non-binary individuals. Shifting views on motherhood over time emphasize diverse maternal experiences, urging a deeper understanding.

Keywords: Autoethnography Research, Heuristic Enquiry, Motherhood, Bricolage Identity, Scrolly Storytelling

Introduction

This project originates from a personal standpoint, aiming to establish a shared understanding for expectant mothers as they navigate the uncharted waters of motherhood. It carries significance in initiating dialogues surrounding this complex and tumultuous lived experience. The Unravelling Mother project embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the intricate facets of motherhood, presenting a diverse array of experiences, connections, and emotions through individual multi-sensory representations. These narrative portrayals serve as retrospective self-narratives, vividly illustrating the profound emotions encountered during pivotal life periods as a caregiver.

This practice-led research asks:

"How can we comprehend the multifaceted journey of motherhood through an auto-ethnographic lens and depict it using non-linear narrative design and interactive scrolly-telling techniques?"

This query fuelled the exploration into the intricate dimensions of the maternal journey, employing innovative narrative techniques to capture the richness and complexity of this transformative experience.

1 Positioning the Researcher

1.1 Creative Tech Down Under

With a background in film, animation, and game design, I bring a diverse skill set spanning photography, CGI, and animation. This journey has honed my expertise in digital storytelling and user experience design. My hands-on experience as a game designer has deepened my understanding of digital narratives and user interactions, laying the foundation for my interest in the convergence of technology and storytelling.

My involvement in mapping stories with warm and cold data aligns with my expertise. Immersed in digital tools and photography, I leverage these mediums for effectively communicating complex data and creative exploration in the digital landscape. With over a decade in digital design and higher education, my proficiency extends to program evaluation, structural planning, and curriculum delivery, showcasing a commitment to educational excellence.

Figure 1: My interactive project in collaboration with TEDxAKL, design awards with my students and panel discussion about 'Design in the Age of AI' on Techweek TV

1.2 Indoor and Outdoor Living

Once a weekend surfer, riding waves with the ocean breeze, and a jiujitsu practitioner, I revelled in the empowerment and autonomy of a carefree life. Once a tool for self-discovery, my body unfolded its capabilities and played a role in mental empowerment, a facet I had not fully recognized until then. Approaching motherhood stirred a complex mix of emotions – fear of losing freedom and youth and an overwhelming, incomprehensible responsibility. The transition seemed daunting, contrasting sharply with the autonomy I cherished. Amidst this, a peculiar urge to nurture and a fantastical vision of the idealized motherhood figure emerged, along with a sense of familial tradition, adding weight to the responsibility of preserving the family lineage. The interplay of conflicting emotions has made the motherhood journey challenging and intriguing.

Figure 2: Weekend surfing at my local beach and weekday Brazilian JiuJitsu training at night

1.3 Motherhood After Pandemic

In a distant land, the sense of family and kinship seemed elusive, exacerbated by the untimely death of my father just a month before the first lockdown in New Zealand. Grieving became a complex ordeal, entangled with administrative tasks and family expectations, further complicated by the physical separation of family members across the globe.

During lockdown rounds, discussions about building a new family emerged, inspired by my mother's resilience and swift embrace of life. Witnessing her courage motivated me to seek a renewed purpose, a new love, and the courage to embark on the journey of conception. The process, however, brought conflicting emotions as I simultaneously grieved for my father, and a miscarriage in the first month added emotional strain to our relationship. After nine months, the result we yearned for arrived – a positive confirmation of pregnancy. The overwhelming grief transformed into a celebration of life, marking a journey of growth, maturity, and unexpected joy.

Figure 3: My father accompanying me on my wedding day a year before his passing, and my mother's visit to New Zealand during my third trimester of pregnancy

2. Review of Contextual Knowledge

2.1 Dialogues on Motherhood

It is important to emphasize that this project is not designed to unveil an absolute truth. The exploration of motherhood unfolds through a lens of self-portraits (Borzello, F. 1998) within domestic interiors, delving into the nuanced intersection of beauty and the body as a vessel (Tamar Pollak, 2009). The domestic space, traditionally confined to the private sphere, transforms into a realm for self-discovery and learning, breaking away from conventional norms. This project extends beyond individual narratives, aiming to foster a sense of community among mothers and using metaphorical language to connect and exchange endeavours with others who traverse the challenging terrain of motherhood. Through this collective sharing, the project evolves into a dynamic dialogue, bridging the gaps between diverse maternal realities.

Maternal Fantasies (Sascia Bailer et al., 2021) explored how ancestral figures and inherited expectations shape contemporary maternal experiences through films, images, and performances. This project actively generates new narratives, vocabularies, and connections to traditional figures, aiming to reshape the discourse on motherhood. The resulting publication serves as both a handbook and archive, offering reflections, autobiographical writings, artworks, and a manifesto for a caring economy. They inspired me to seek a nuanced understanding of the maternal experience, fostering visibility and inclusivity in my project.

2.2 Data as Building Blocks

The project aims to celebrate coherence, absurdity, sincerity, and self-reflection, fundamentally grounded in a spirit of hope and optimism. Utilizing a method of collaged imagery and written narratives as data (Weber et al., 2018), a collective memory takes shape – a memoir capturing the diverse facets of the motherhood journey. The intertwining of visuals and words is a powerful tool for self-expression and storytelling, forming a unique biography. This memoir takes on a distinctive form, drawing inspiration from autobiographical memory.

Autobiographical memory becomes a timeline representing a moment, a milestone, or a reflection – offering a glimpse into the diverse facets of the motherhood experience. Linda Tuhiwai (2012) wrote in Decolonizing Methodologies that "each individual story is powerful. But the point about the stories is not that they simply tell a story or tell a story simply". In this context, acknowledging self-growth becomes a central theme within this narrative. Each entry becomes a stepping stone in the journey of self-discovery, acknowledging the growth that arises from the intricate dance between joy, struggle, and the everyday moments that define the motherhood experience. The motivation to capture data and document emotions in this way was inspired by a discussion with McMahon (2022), exploring current reproductive care systems concerning maternal health care and experiences of motherhood.

2.3 Collage in the Feminine Arts

The artist, Hannah Höch, employed old postcards, photographs, newspapers, and advertisements to challenge the male-dominated. Hoch's political commentary and feminist narrative emerged distinctly in the predominantly male-dominated sphere. In her most renowned work, "Das schöne Mädchen" (The Beautiful Girl, 1920), Höch depicts the emergence of Germany's new woman. In 1934, In 'A Few Words on Photomontage,' Höch discussed her view that photomontage represents a unique and incredibly fantastic field for creative individuals.

Another artist who used collage to challenge gender norms was the German-Argentine photomontage artist Grete Stern. Her visual deconstructions carefully examine prevailing notions of femininity and the (female) body in a modernizing culture. Stern crafted a series of photomontages titled Sueños/Dreams (1949), conveying the anxieties and excitements associated with the transformation of modern femininity.

2.4 Narrative Aesthetic and Scrolly-Telling

Jordan (2019) wrote that 'Post-Digital Storytelling' delves into metamodernism, proposing a groundbreaking creative approach transcending digital and non-digital distinctions. Jordan explores the evolving poetics of this transmedial, post-digital condition, focusing on storytelling techniques like hypertextual and locative mobile methods. Centred on twenty-first-century storytelling, Jordan acknowledges shifts in creative expression across traditional print and non-digital art forms. The work uncovers how metamodernist principles influence this technique by examining scrolly storytelling, breaking down conventional barriers between digital and non-digital storytelling. It contributes valuable insights into the evolving storytelling landscape in the metamodern era.

This project aims to deliver immersive and profound narratives, encouraging audiences to engage critically, playfully, and autonomously using data visualization and creative technologies. Integrating scrolly storytelling as a poetic expression, the project's intended narrative is visually engaging and interactively. Each scroll becomes a poetic revelation, contributing to a richer understanding of the multifaceted nature of motherhood and the diverse stories it encompasses. This approach introduces interactive elements, allowing viewers to engage through actions like dragging and sliding. By embracing non-linearity, the project recognizes that each viewer embarks on a unique journey, encountering diverse emotional and cognitive pathways.

In data representation, the project conceptualizes a story as data, accentuating its potency in conveying complexity, relatability, memorability, and impact (Oesch et al., 2022). The strategic integration of storytelling and data enriches the content and contributes to a more immersive and enduring impact on the viewer.

3. Self Search Methodologies

This project reflects on my experiences by employing autoethnographic inquiries motivated by a desire to navigate self-identity and foster acceptance within my circumstances. Ellis et al. (2011) define autoethnography as a blend of "autobiography and ethnography," offering a lens to examine personal experiences within cultural and social contexts.

Moustakas (2011) outlines that heuristic methodology aims to capture qualitative depictions that delve into the heart and depths of personal experience, encompassing situations, events, conversations, relationships, feelings, thoughts, values, and beliefs. In the heuristic approach, the artist engages in a discovery process, becoming intertwined with the project. Utilizing collage techniques and establishing a connection between the artefact and myself as the designer, intuition played a crucial role in imprinting a "personal mark" onto the work (Binz, 2016). Collage arrangements visually represented the "internal experiences" shaping the project (Sela-Smith, 2002).

In this section, I outline the methods I used to inform the development of the work. These included four stages: (1) photo album and curiosities, (2) autoethnographic journaling, (3) animation and consideration and (4) iterative prototyping.
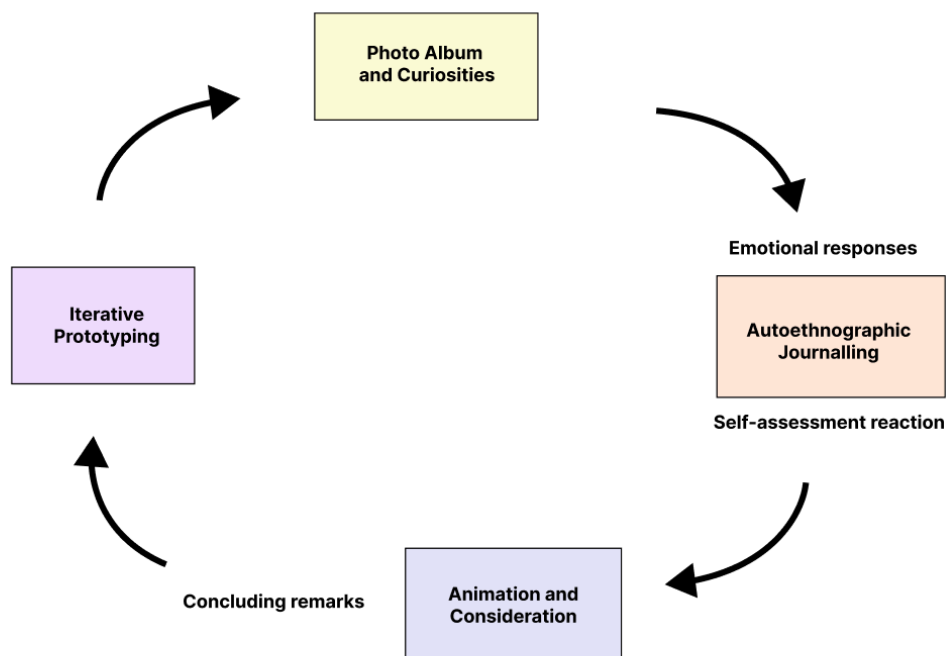

Figure 4: Phases of the Practice Methods

3.1 Photo Album and Curiosity

Heuristics, described as a form of personal problem-solving and an endeavour to understand the essence of life through internal pathways of self (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985), allowed for flexibility, leading the project in various directions (Binz, 2016). Reflective practice, as per Schön (1987), is a "dialogue of thinking and doing through which I become more skilful", centred around problem-solving and "reflective-in-action". Throughout the creative process, I could reflect on my thoughts, respond in the action-present to influence outcomes and connect the unfamiliar with the familiar (Tan, 2020).

Utilizing the medium of the thumbnail with a camera, we engaged in a self-reflective endeavour, crafting a collection of selfies that formed an album chronicling the intricate journey of conceiving a child. This visual documentation effectively draws connections between past and present experiences, encapsulating diverse emotions. The photographs capture poignant "self-reflective instances" of pre-parenthood, offering glimpses into moments marked by happiness, optimism, setbacks, frustration, and anxiety. This self-curated collection serves as a visual narrative, vividly portraying the emotional responses intricately woven into the fabric of our journey toward parenthood.
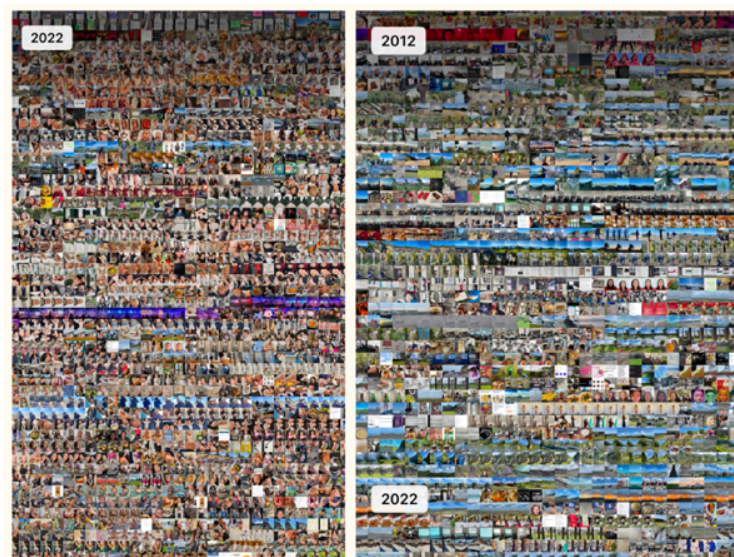

Figure 5: Aggregated mobile galleries capturing moments before,
during pregnancy, and postpartum

3.2 Autoethnographic Journaling

Described by Besio and Butz (2009) as a "form of self-narrative," autoethnography, as articulated by Fourie (2021), allows for freedom of style and tone for authentic self-expression. Within the framework of this project, autoethnography serves as a vehicle to articulate my narratives, delving into the complexities of my early womanhood and the transformative journey into motherhood. The exploration extends to reflections on my current experiences and the evolving dynamics of my body and role in the present. Engaging in a practice of crafting love notes directed inward, I delved into web blogging as a means of self-expression. Employing self-assessment reactions, I revisited the web blog, rearranging elements—sometimes in chronological order and other times for design and alignment enhancements, all to enhance the visual experience for the reader.
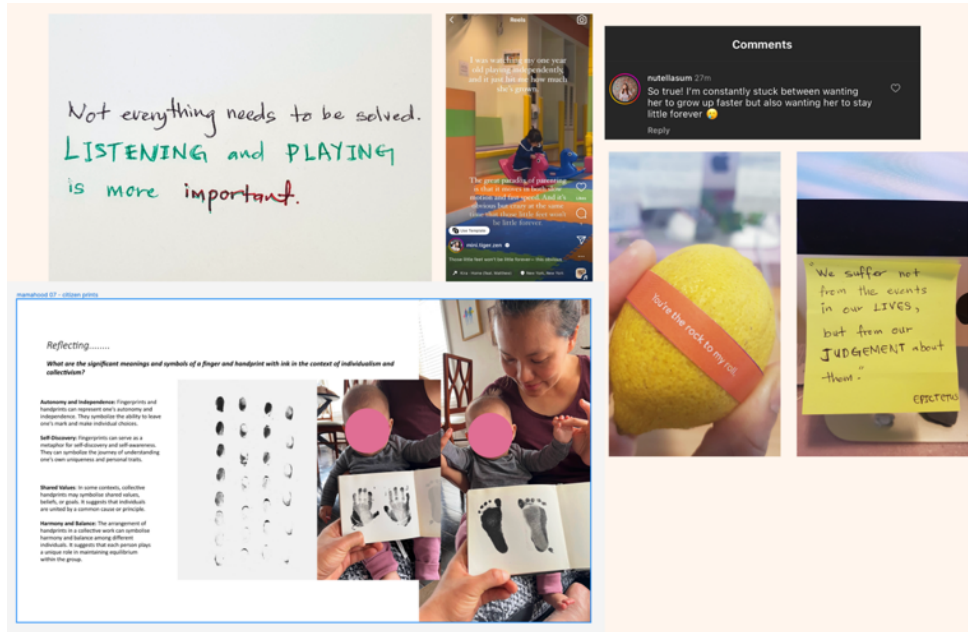
Figure 6: Assembled annotations from physical papers, digital notes,
social media reminders on mobile, and photo archives

3.3 Animation and Consideration

The process began with creating ideation boards and mapping out visual concepts that would later evolve into artwork. Transforming these ideas into tangible pieces involved careful consideration, leading to crafting a chronological timeline. In conclusion, it is essential to acknowledge the changes that transpired during this creative journey, accompanied by acquiring knowledge. The visual impact of GIFs, often enhanced by humour, emotion, or cultural references, makes them highly shareable and relatable across diverse audiences. The inherent repetitiveness of the loop can imbue the animation with a timeless quality, reinforcing critical elements of the narrative audiences (Morgan & Scholma-Mason, 2017). Decisions about the strategic placement of GIF animations and the selection of visuals for animation were meticulously made, recognizing the unique narrative potential embedded in their succinct, looped nature and visual richness, extending beyond immediate contexts.

3.4 Iterative Prototyping

Developing each composition and page for scrolling involves a comprehensive process encompassing low-fi and hi-fi prototyping stages. This entails meticulous attention to formatting and typographic placement, ensuring a refined visual structure. Throughout these stages, constructive criticism will be actively sought to guide the direction of my practice, fostering continuous improvement and refinement. The consideration of artistry in practice remains a pivotal aspect, driving the creative decisions and enhancing the overall aesthetic appeal of the work.

Figure 7: An iteration of the prototype crafted for one of the portraits

4. Critical Framework

4.1 Musings of the Past

The initial idea behind the project was centred on the anticipation of building a family. However, this concept swiftly evolved into a singular focus on our child, encompassing considerations of self, body, and roles. Despite this shift, the idea lacked depth and failed to offer another dimension for personal growth. It resembled a highway without stopping to reflect on the past or contemplate the future. This led to a new perspective: "Reflecting on the distant past, the recent past, the immediate past, and the present." Memories transformed into a cherished space, fostering familial closeness and catalyzing tangible connections. The exploration took a non-linear, more spiritual approach to understanding time, acknowledging its ambiguity. The concept further delved into unravelling the notions of 'mother' and 'hood.' The process of unravelling involved iteratively packing and unpacking the timeline, hoping to discover enlightening insights that might not be immediately apparent. This approach aimed to create a space where the timeline is not constrained to a linear order, allowing for a more nuanced exploration of motherhood's complex and evolving concepts.

Figure 8: Collection of photographs, featuring my childhood, wedding day, and the initial night alone at home with my one-month-old baby

4.2 Narrative Features

Embracing the aesthetics of Metamodernism involves navigating the nuanced interplay between modern and postmodern sensibilities. This stylistic approach allows for a dynamic engagement with hope and optimism, capturing the essence of a worldview that acknowledges the complexities of contemporary existence while maintaining an aspirational and positive outlook. Metamodernist aesthetics in the project reflect a commitment to exploring multifaceted narratives and emphasize the transformative potential inherent in

exploring maternal experiences. It is a conscious choice to infuse the work with hopefulness, resonating with the project's broader thematic exploration and contributing to a visually compelling and emotionally resonant storytelling experience.

The project utilizes three perspectives—feminist, personal, and maternal.

Embracing an interconnected narrative style, I distinguish between the "what" (story) and "how" (narrative discourse). In 'Exploring Motherhood,' a continuous narrative unfolds across each scroll, featuring layered narration from feminist, personal, and maternal perspectives. Abbott's (2022) distinction between events and representation underscores this approach. The project introduces a non-linear, fragmented narrative discourse, in line with Wilson's (2008) definition, authentically capturing chaotic experiences and expressing genuine personal narratives. The interplay between the "what" (experiences) and "how" (diverse voices) within the portraits shapes a compelling story.

Distinct voices redefine self-identity and female body representation, weaving intricate stories into visually compelling artefacts enriched by multimedia elements like texts, photos, and animations. These portraits form the foundation for an interactive data visualization endeavour, illuminating maternal experiences and challenging norms. Using data as building blocks aligns with McMahon's work, contributing to collective dialogues envisioning feminist futures. This dynamic platform captures and engages diverse maternal realities, fostering a dialogue for an inclusive and empowered future.

Figure 9: Exemplary arrangement and composition of portraits within
the Exploring Motherhood project

4.3 Type and Treatment

The project's interface employed the concept of scrolling and sliding, allowing the user to have the agency to determine the speed and pace of the story. The non-linear narrative design allows viewers to jump into different stages at any given time, offering them flexibility and control over their engagement. Implementing a non-linear narrative aligns with the emerging poetics of an inherently transmedial and hybrid post-digital condition enhanced by animation effects. This choice introduces an interactive element, enabling viewers to navigate the story at their discretion.

The exploration of this narrative varies based on several factors. The viewer's equipment, including screen size and format, plays a role, as does the viewer's savviness in engaging with screen-based publications. Additionally, the viewer's order of engaging with the story depends on their interest and relatability to specific aspects. The storytelling techniques

employed, such as hypertextual, locative mobile, and collaborative storytelling (viewer interaction), contribute to the diverse scope of the story. The interplay of these elements ensures that each viewer's experience is unique, creating a dynamic and engaging narrative tailored to individual preferences and interactions.
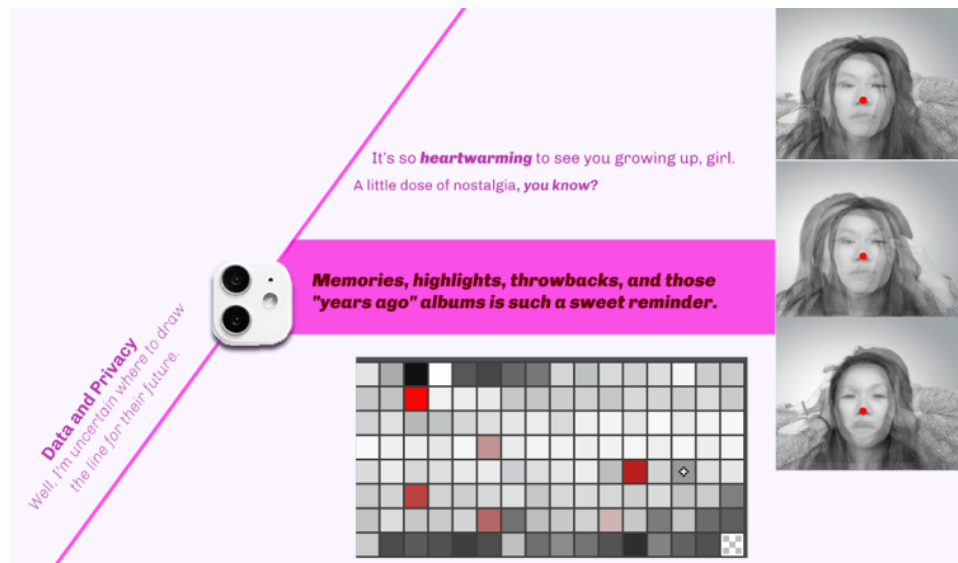

Figure 10: Illustration of diverse treatments and experimental explorations applied to the components for assembling the composition of a single portrait in the project

5. Project Demo

Please view 'Exploring Motherhood' portraits using this link or this address: https://www.tammieleong.com/exploringmotherhood.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this project serves as a poignant translation of the multifaceted experience of motherhood, intricately weaving together imagery and publication design. The body of work that underpins this creative endeavour acts as a compendium, capturing the varied contexts of being a mother and the unpredictable nature of life's journey. Throughout this research expedition, the interplay between contexts and the creative process has been instrumental in shaping the project's format, narrative, and visual elements. Employing self-search methodologies has enabled a profound dialogue between lived experiences and intuitive, creative processes. Reflecting on positive and challenging memories facilitated a deeper understanding of the present and anticipation for the future.

Rooted in my voyage into motherhood, this project has unearthed a diverse spectrum of maternal anticipations, navigating societal norms and cultural heritage with moments of wrestling and celebration. The practical work aspires to be more than just 'chewed'; it seeks to be 'digested' by the viewer through a gradual and fragmented multifaceted reading, embracing the personal, feminist, and maternal perspectives. Operating as a data visualization endeavour, the goal is to present a comprehensive and nuanced portrayal of motherhood. Guided by the principles of intersectional feminist thought (D'Ignazio & F. Klein, 2020), this portrayal acknowledges motherhood's intricacies, challenges, and joys while challenging hierarchical and empirically flawed classification systems.

It is crucial to emphasize that this project does not aim to unveil an absolute truth but encapsulates the spirit of metamodernism, as described by Turner (2015). Defined by its simultaneous coherency, preposterousness, earnestness, and self-questioning, it is ultimately rooted in hope and optimism. The evolving attitudes and beliefs surrounding motherhood across time underscore the prevalence of diverse maternal experiences, contributing to a rich tapestry of narratives that defy simplistic categorizations.

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Contact email: tammie@mediadesignschool.com