OVERCOMING POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION USING AUGMENTED AND VIRTUAL REALITY

A MINI PROJECT REPORT

Submitted by

SWETHA J 230701357

VARSHA THOMAS 230701372

VARUN S P 230701373

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BONAFIDE CERTIFICATE

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Dr. KUMAR.P
Head of Department
Computer Science and Engineering
Rajalakshmi Engineering College

DR.DHARANI DEVI
Assistant Professor
Computer Science and Engineering
Rajalakshmi Engineering College

Submitted to Project Viva Voce Examination held on_____

Signature Examiner - 1

Signature Examiner - 2

ABSTRACT

Postpartum Depression (PPD) is a significant mental health concern affecting a substantial number of women in the period following childbirth. Characterized by symptoms such as persistent sadness, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and difficulty bonding with the infant, PPD has far-reaching implications for maternal health, child development, and overall family well-being. Despite its prevalence, PPD remains frequently underdiagnosed and undertreated, primarily due to social stigma, lack of awareness, and limited access to mental health services. In recent years, immersive technologies such as Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) have demonstrated considerable potential in delivering flexible, home-based, and engaging therapeutic interventions for various psychological conditions. This project explores the application of AR and VR technologies in addressing the unique mental health challenges faced by postpartum mothers. By creating interactive, accessible, and emotionally supportive environments, these technologies offer opportunities for guided relaxation, mindfulness, and virtual social support. The success of such interventions relies on their ability to address the emotional, psychological, and practical needs of postpartum women. This report examines the potential of immersive technologies as complementary tools in postpartum mental health care and outlines key considerations for developing user-centered, emotionally responsive, and accessible digital interventions tailored to the postpartum experience.

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1. Introduction

Motherhood is often portrayed as a joyful and fulfilling experience, yet for many new mothers, the postpartum period can be overwhelming and emotionally challenging. Postpartum Depression (PPD) is a significant mental health condition that affects a considerable proportion of women following childbirth, with symptoms ranging from persistent sadness, anxiety, fatigue, and difficulty bonding with the baby to severe cases of suicidal ideation. PPD is not simply a phase but a clinically recognized disorder that, if left untreated, can have long-term consequences on maternal well-being, child development, and family dynamics. Despite its prevalence, PPD remains underdiagnosed and undertreated due to stigma, lack of awareness, and insufficient access to mental health care. Many mothers avoid seeking help for fear of judgment, societal expectations, or practical barriers such as the inability to attend therapy sessions due to caregiving responsibilities. These challenges highlight the need for accessible, engaging, and stigma-free mental health interventions that cater to the unique needs of postpartum mothers.

Recent advancements in immersive technologies such as Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) have introduced new possibilities for mental health therapy and emotional well-being. These technologies create interactive, engaging, and therapeutic environments that can simulate realworld experiences, provide guided relaxation exercises, or enable social support networks. Unlike traditional therapy, AR/VR interventions offer personalized, flexible, and self-directed experiences, allowing new mothers to access mental health support from the comfort of their homes. Studies have shown that VR-based cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) can be effective in reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression, while AR applications can enhance self-care, mindfulness, and positive parenting practices. However, the success of these technological solutions depends not just on their functionality but on their ability to resonate emotionally and psychologically with postpartum mothers. A poorly designed intervention, no matter how technologically advanced, may fail to engage users, address their specific emotional needs, or provide a sense of comfort and support.

To ensure AR/VR solutions are effective, user-friendly, and emotionally impactful, a structured, human-centered approach to design is essential. Design Thinking is a well-established problem-solving methodology that emphasizes empathy, iteration, and user feedback to create solutions that are tailored to real user needs. Unlike traditional technology-driven approaches, Design Thinking

starts with understanding the user's emotional and psychological experiences before developing solutions. By applying Design Thinking to AR/VR interventions for PPD, researchers and developers can ensure that new mothers' voices, concerns, and lived experiences are at the core of the innovation process. This methodology fosters collaboration between healthcare professionals, technologists, and postpartum mothers, leading to interventions that are not only scientifically sound but also emotionally engaging and practical. The following sections will explore the Design Thinking approach and models, as well as the Stanford d.school Design Thinking framework, which is particularly suited for developing immersive mental health solutions for postpartum depression.

1.1 Design Thinking Approach

Design Thinking is an iterative, user-focused methodology that fosters innovation by deeply understanding user needs and generating creative solutions. It is particularly useful in healthcare and mental health interventions, where emotional and psychological factors play a critical role. By applying Design Thinking to AR/VR solutions for PPD, developers can ensure that their interventions are not only technically advanced but also emotionally supportive and easy to use for postpartum mothers.

Different Types of Design Thinking Models

Several models of Design Thinking exist, each providing a structured approach to innovation. The most relevant models for AR/VR-based PPD interventions include:

1. Stanford d.school Design Thinking Model

- A widely used five-phase process (Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, Test) that focuses on human-centered solutions.

2. IDEO's Human-Centered Design Model

- A three-stage model (Inspiration, Ideation, Implementation) commonly used in social impact and healthcare innovation.

3. Double Diamond Model (British Design Council)DA

- Focuses on divergent and convergent thinking, helping refine AR/VR interventions for optimal usability. 4. IBM Enterprise Design Thinking
- A scalable approach that integrates AI and interactive technologies, making it useful for AR/VR-based applications.

5. Frog Collective Action Toolkit

- Encourages collaborative design, ensuring that AR/VR solutions are cocreated with healthcare professionals and new mothers.

Among these, the Stanford d.school Design Thinking Model is particularly effective for developing AR/VR interventions for PPD, as it emphasizes user empathy, rapid prototyping, and iterative improvements based on real-world feedback.

1.2 Stanford Design Thinking Model and Its Phases

The Stanford d.school Design Thinking Model provides a structured framework for designing user-centered AR/VR interventions for PPD. It consists of five key phases:

1. Empathize

- Understanding the emotional, psychological, and social challenges faced by postpartum mothers with PPD.
- Methods: User interviews, surveys, focus groups, and psychological assessments.
- Application to AR/VR:

  ○ Identifying stress triggers and mental health barriers. ○ Gathering insights into the emotional comfort and engagement levels of new mothers in virtual environments.

2. Define

- Converting research insights into a clear problem statement.
- Example problem statement for AR/VR-based PPD solutions: *"Many postpartum mothers experience anxiety, isolation, and difficulty accessing mental health support. How might we design an engaging AR/VR-based intervention to provide emotional support and therapeutic benefits in an accessible way?"*

3. Ideate

- Brainstorming innovative AR/VR solutions to address PPD challenges.
- Methods: Mind mapping, prototyping exercises, role-playing.
- Potential AR/VR-based solutions:
  - VR-based guided meditation and relaxation programs for stress relief.
  - AR-enhanced mother-infant bonding exercises to strengthen emotional connection. ○ Virtual support groups where new mothers can share experiences and receive guidance in a stigma-free environment.

4. Prototype

- Developing early-stage and high-fidelity prototypes of AR/VR applications.
- Examples:

- Wireframes and storyboards of an interactive VR therapy module.
- AR applications that provide real-time cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) exercises.
- 3D simulations of calming environments to reduce postpartum anxiety.

5. Test

- Conducting user testing with postpartum mothers to refine the AR/VR intervention.
- Key testing parameters:
  - Usability and accessibility: Is the VR interface easy to navigate?
  - Emotional impact: Does the experience reduce stress and improve mood?
  - Engagement levels: Do mothers find it helpful and engaging?

Through continuous testing and iteration, the AR/VR solution can be refined to maximize its effectiveness in supporting postpartum mothers dealing with depression.

2. Literature survey

Baghaei and Chitale[1] conducted a study exploring the application of virtual reality exposure therapy (VRET) for treating anxiety and depression. The paper discusses the effectiveness of VRET in comparison to traditional exposure therapy, emphasizing its advantages such as increased control over treatment scenarios, enhanced patient engagement, and improved confidentiality. The authors reviewed various VR systems and technologies, highlighting the potential of head-mounted displays (HMDs) in delivering immersive therapeutic experiences. Additionally, the paper investigates the integration of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) with VRET, emphasizing how VR can facilitate exposure in a safe and controlled environment. The study underscores the potential of VR as an effective tool in mental health treatment, though it also acknowledges limitations such as accessibility issues and the need for further research on long-term efficacy. Furthermore, the study explores the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) integration in VR therapy, which could enhance personalized treatment strategies and adaptive therapeutic environments.

Jingili and Oyelere[2] examined the role of VR-based interventions in mitigating symptoms of depression and anxiety, particularly in diverse populations. The study explores different VR applications, including mindfulness-based VR experiences and gamified therapeutic interventions. The authors emphasize how VR can help individuals practice relaxation techniques, manage stress, and develop coping mechanisms in an engaging environment. Additionally, the study discusses how VR can provide a sense of presence and immersion, which enhances emotional regulation and cognitive restructuring. The study further explores the feasibility of VR group therapy sessions, which allow patients to interact with therapists and peers in virtual spaces. However, the paper also identifies challenges such as the need for personalized interventions, accessibility barriers, and potential adverse effects like cybersickness. The authors suggest that future research should focus on refining VR therapy protocols to maximize therapeutic benefits while minimizing side effects. The study also highlights the role of AI in optimizing VR therapy, particularly in monitoring patient progress and adapting therapeutic content dynamically.

Reategui-Rivera and Villarreal-Zegarra [3] investigated the effectiveness of VR exposure therapy in treating social anxiety disorder (SAD). The study reviews different VR environments designed to expose patients to social situations in a controlled manner. The authors highlight how VR enables gradual exposure,

reducing avoidance behaviors and improving social confidence. The paper also examines the role of real-time physiological monitoring to enhance VR therapy outcomes. Furthermore, the study explores the incorporation of AI-driven adaptive exposure therapy, which tailors virtual social interactions based on user responses. While the results suggest promising applications, the authors note the need for further research on longterm behavioral changes and the role of therapist guidance in VR interventions. The paper also discusses potential ethical concerns, such as privacy considerations when using VR data to assess social anxiety responses. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of user engagement in VR exposure therapy, emphasizing that personalization of virtual interactions plays a crucial role in treatment effectiveness.

Wang and Ai[4] explored the application of VR in treating post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The study reviews various VR-based interventions, including VR-assisted prolonged exposure therapy. The authors highlight the ability of VR to recreate traumatic scenarios in a controlled setting, allowing patients to process their trauma in a safe environment. The paper discusses how VR can enhance emotional engagement and desensitization, leading to significant symptom reductions. The authors also discuss technical challenges such as the need for high-fidelity environments, personalization of traumatic scenarios, and ethical considerations related to trauma exposure. Additionally, the study examines the potential integration of biometric feedback in VR PTSD treatment, allowing clinicians to monitor physiological responses and adjust treatment protocols in real time. The paper also discusses the role of AI in refining PTSD therapy by dynamically modifying VR scenarios based on the user's emotional and physiological responses.

Holsteg and Askeridis[5] conducted a systematic review on the use of VR in treating phobias. The study examines different VR exposure therapies tailored to specific phobias such as acrophobia (fear of heights), arachnophobia (fear of spiders), and agoraphobia (fear of open spaces). The paper highlights the effectiveness of VR in providing a controlled and repeatable exposure environment, which traditional methods lack. Additionally, the authors discuss the potential of VR to enhance patient compliance and treatment adherence. The study further explores the potential of AI-driven phobia treatment, where virtual exposure scenarios dynamically adapt to patient responses for a more effective desensitization process. However, they also point out limitations such as the need for individualized exposure settings, the challenge of ensuring realistic fear stimuli within VR environments, and the importance of integrating VR with traditional therapeutic methods for comprehensive treatment. The authors emphasize that future advancements in AI-driven VR therapy could significantly

enhance the personalization and efficacy of phobia treatments by tailoring exposure levels in real time based on physiological and behavioral responses.

Lindner and Hamilton[6] analyzed the effectiveness of internet-based cognitive behavioral therapy (iCBT) using VR technologies for treating generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). The study explores the integration of VRbased exposure therapy within iCBT frameworks to enhance patient engagement and treatment adherence. The authors discuss how virtual environments can simulate anxiety-provoking scenarios while maintaining a controlled and safe setting. The study also highlights the use of AI-powered chatbots and virtual therapists to support patients throughout the therapeutic process. Findings suggest that VR-enhanced iCBT can lead to significant improvements in anxiety symptom reduction; however, challenges such as accessibility, technological literacy, and long-term efficacy remain. The paper emphasizes that further research is needed to refine VR-iCBT integration, ensuring optimal therapeutic outcomes while addressing ethical concerns related to AI-driven mental health interventions.

Bell and Nicholas[7] conducted a study on the application of VR-based interventions for individuals with schizophrenia and psychosis. The paper reviews different VR simulations designed to expose patients to real-world scenarios, helping them practice social interactions and improve cognitive functions. The authors emphasize how VR can be used as a supplementary tool alongside conventional therapies, particularly in enhancing social engagement and reducing paranoid ideation. The study also explores the potential of AI in personalizing VR therapy sessions based on individual cognitive profiles. However, the paper acknowledges concerns regarding cybersickness, over-reliance on virtual environments, and ethical considerations related to manipulating patients' perceptual experiences. The authors suggest that further clinical trials are necessary to assess the long-term impact of VR-based interventions for schizophrenia management.

Lundin and Yeap [8] explored the role of VR in pain management and its implications for psychological well-being. The study examines the use of VRbased distraction techniques to alleviate acute and chronic pain conditions. The authors highlight how immersive VR experiences can shift patients' focus away from pain sensations, reducing perceived pain intensity. The study discusses various VR applications, including gamified pain distraction therapies, guided VR meditation, and AI-driven adaptive pain relief strategies. The paper also examines potential drawbacks such as the need for personalized VR environments, variations in patient response to VR pain therapy, and challenges in integrating VR into traditional pain management protocols. The authors

emphasize the need for continued research to optimize VR-based pain management strategies and explore their long-term benefits.

Victoria Fallon, Sian M. Davies, Sergio Silverio, and Lisa Creagh[9] examine the use of Virtual Reality (VR) to support parents during the perinatal period, particularly in the first year after childbirth. The authors focus on how VR can enhance parental readiness and emotional well-being. VR is used to simulate childbirth and infant care, providing parents with immersive experiences that help build knowledge and confidence. This reduces the stress and uncertainty many parents face. The review also highlights the emotional benefits of VR. Studies show that VR interventions, such as relaxation techniques and mindfulness exercises, can lower stress, anxiety, and postpartum depression. These tools help parents manage the emotional challenges of new parenthood. VR can also foster stronger parent-infant bonding. By simulating caregiving activities, VR helps parents practice nurturing behaviors, which can improve emotional attachment and support healthy development for the child.However, the authors point out some challenges. One issue is making VR technology accessible to all parents. Another concern is the lack of standardized intervention protocols. Despite these challenges, the authors argue that VR has significant potential as a support tool for parents. They suggest further research is needed to refine VR technologies and integrate them more effectively into healthcare services.

Lee and Kim [10] conducted a study investigating the application of VR in cognitive and emotional assessment for mental health diagnosis. The authors emphasize how VR-based assessments can provide objective, immersive, and ecologically valid methods for evaluating cognitive functions and emotional responses. The study explores the role of VR in diagnosing conditions such as anxiety disorders, depression, and schizophrenia by simulating real-world scenarios that trigger patient responses in a controlled environment. The authors highlight how VR-based cognitive tests improve upon traditional paper-based assessments by capturing real-time behavioral and physiological data, such as eye-tracking and heart rate variability. The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in VR assessments is also discussed, particularly in analyzing patient interactions within virtual environments to generate precise diagnostic insights. However, the paper acknowledges challenges such as the need for standardized VR assessment protocols, the potential risk of cybersickness, and concerns regarding data privacy when collecting physiological and behavioral metrics. The study concludes that VR-based cognitive and emotional assessments represent a promising direction in psychiatric diagnostics but require further refinement and validation in clinical settings.

3. Domain Area - AR/VR- Based Interventions for Postpartum Depression (PPD)

Postpartum Depression (PPD) is a significant mental health condition affecting new mothers, often leading to emotional distress, social withdrawal, and difficulty in bonding with their infants. Unlike the temporary emotional fluctuations commonly referred to as "baby blues," PPD is a more severe and persistent disorder that can last for months or even years if left untreated. The impact of PPD extends beyond the mother, affecting the infant's cognitive and emotional development as well as straining family relationships. Given the long-term consequences of PPD on both mother and child, effective interventions are essential in mitigating these adverse effects. Traditional treatments such as psychotherapy, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), and pharmacological interventions have been the primary modes of treatment. However, many mothers hesitate to seek help due to stigma, lack of awareness, and limited accessibility to mental health resources.

With the advancement of digital technology, alternative interventions have emerged, particularly in the form of Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR). These technologies provide immersive and engaging therapeutic experiences that offer mothers a new way to manage their symptoms without the barriers associated with traditional mental health treatments. AR and VR interventions have been increasingly explored in the broader field of mental health, demonstrating efficacy in anxiety management, PTSD treatment, and cognitive rehabilitation. These immersive experiences allow users to engage in controlled, interactive environments where they can practice relaxation techniques, confront their anxieties, and receive guided therapy sessions. The potential of these technologies in addressing PPD lies in their ability to create safe, accessible, and stigma-free spaces where new mothers can receive support, develop coping strategies, and engage in therapeutic exercises.

One of the primary ways AR and VR can support postpartum mothers is by providing virtual support groups and therapy sessions. Many mothers experiencing PPD struggle with social isolation, either due to the demands of newborn care or a reluctance to share their struggles with others. VR-based support communities can offer mothers a space where they can interact with peers and mental health professionals in real time without the need for physical presence. This virtual interaction reduces feelings of loneliness and provides

emotional validation from others experiencing similar struggles. Additionally, VR can simulate real-world therapy sessions, allowing users to participate in guided counseling sessions from the comfort of their homes. These therapy sessions can incorporate elements of CBT, meditation, and guided discussions that promote self-awareness, emotional regulation, and resilience.

In addition to social support, AR and VR can be instrumental in stress reduction and mindfulness training. Many new mothers experience heightened stress levels due to sleep deprivation, hormonal changes, and the demands of caregiving. Virtual environments designed for relaxation can transport users to calming natural settings where they can practice guided breathing exercises, meditation, or progressive muscle relaxation. These experiences can significantly reduce stress and anxiety by promoting mindfulness and selfsoothing techniques. AR applications can also overlay interactive visual prompts onto real-world environments to guide mothers through relaxation techniques, ensuring that they have accessible tools to manage emotional distress whenever needed.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is one of the most widely recognized approaches for treating depression, including PPD. VR-based CBT interventions allow new mothers to engage in scenario-based therapy where they can practice positive affirmations, identify negative thought patterns, and simulate real-life interactions that challenge their depressive tendencies. By engaging with these therapeutic exercises in a controlled virtual environment, users can gradually build resilience and self-confidence. The immersive nature of VR enhances emotional engagement, making therapy sessions more impactful compared to traditional text-based or audio-based interventions. Furthermore, AR applications can supplement CBT by providing real-time cognitive restructuring exercises, prompting users to reframe negative thoughts as they arise throughout their daily routines.

Another critical area where AR and VR can support mothers with PPD is in interactive parenting guidance. Many new mothers experiencing depression struggle with feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt regarding their parenting abilities. AR applications can provide real-time, step-by-step guidance on common childcare tasks, such as breastfeeding, diaper changing, and sleep training. These interactive guides help mothers feel more confident in their abilities, reducing anxiety and enhancing the mother-infant bond. Similarly, VR simulations can prepare mothers for common parenting challenges by allowing them to practice responses to infant cries, learn effective soothing techniques, and receive feedback from virtual parenting coaches. By reinforcing positive

interactions and boosting maternal confidence, these interventions can help mitigate feelings of helplessness often associated with PPD.

In addition to guided therapy and parenting support, AR and VR can incorporate biofeedback mechanisms to personalize interventions based on the user's emotional state. Many mental health applications now integrate biometric sensors that track heart rate, facial expressions, and movement patterns to assess emotional well-being. These technologies can detect stress levels and automatically suggest appropriate interventions, such as recommending a relaxation exercise when heightened anxiety is detected. By leveraging real-time emotional tracking, AR and VR interventions can offer personalized mental health support that adapts to the mother's unique needs, ensuring a more effective and user-centric approach to PPD management. Despite the promising potential of AR and VR in postpartum mental health care, several challenges and ethical considerations must be addressed.

Accessibility and affordability remain major concerns, as not all mothers have access to high-end VR headsets or AR-compatible devices. To ensure inclusivity, developers must focus on creating solutions that are compatible with affordable mobile devices or web-based platforms. Additionally, the user experience must be carefully designed to prevent adverse effects such as motion sickness or dizziness, which could exacerbate discomfort for postpartum mothers already experiencing fatigue and hormonal fluctuations. Ensuring a seamless, comfortable, and intuitive user interface is crucial to the success of these interventions.

Privacy and data security are also critical concerns when implementing AR and VR in mental health care. These applications often collect sensitive personal data, including emotional responses, biometric information, and therapy session interactions. Developers must implement stringent data protection measures, such as encryption and anonymization techniques, to ensure user privacy. Furthermore, clear ethical guidelines must be established regarding data usage, consent, and user confidentiality to maintain trust in these digital interventions.

Another potential challenge is the psychological impact of prolonged VR use. While AR and VR can provide valuable mental health support, there is a risk that excessive reliance on virtual experiences may reduce real-world social interactions. It is essential to integrate these technologies alongside traditional therapy methods to ensure a balanced approach that does not lead to detachment from reality. Hybrid models that combine virtual therapy with inperson

counseling or community-based support systems can offer a more holistic approach to PPD treatment.

The future of AR and VR in postpartum mental health care holds immense potential, with ongoing research focused on expanding the capabilities of these technologies. Artificial Intelligence (AI) integration can enhance virtual therapy by creating AI-driven virtual therapists that provide real-time support based on user responses. Mixed Reality (MR) applications that combine AR and VR elements may create more dynamic therapeutic experiences that adapt to the user's environment. Furthermore, the expansion of telehealth services can bridge the gap between virtual therapy and traditional counseling, allowing mothers to seamlessly transition between self-guided digital interventions and professional support.

4. Stage in Design Thinking for AR/VR-Based Postpartum Depression (PPD) Interventions

In our research and development process for AR/VR-based interventions for postpartum depression (PPD), the empathize stage was critical in helping us truly understand the struggles, emotions, and needs of postpartum mothers. We recognized early on that a purely clinical approach would not suffice; instead, we needed to connect with mothers on a deeply personal level to design a solution that genuinely supports their well-being. This stage involved extensive engagement with new mothers, healthcare professionals, and existing research to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges associated with PPD.

4.1 Activities in the Empathize Stage

To immerse ourselves in the experiences of postpartum mothers, we conducted a series of one-on-one interviews with women who had either experienced or were currently dealing with PPD. These candid conversations provided us with invaluable insights into the daily struggles, emotional toll, and social challenges they faced. We learned that many mothers felt isolated, unsupported, and overwhelmed, with some expressing feelings of guilt and self-doubt despite their best efforts. These personal narratives shaped our understanding of the problem and helped us recognize key areas where AR/VR could provide meaningful support.

Beyond interviews, we conducted observational studies where we spent time with new mothers in various settings, including their homes, postpartum support groups, and medical checkups. By observing their interactions with their infants, partners, and healthcare providers, we gained a deeper appreciation of the nuanced challenges they encountered. For example, we noticed that some mothers struggled with breastfeeding due to stress and anxiety, while others found nighttime feedings particularly overwhelming due to exhaustion and loneliness. These insights guided us in brainstorming potential AR/VR interventions that could provide emotional support and practical guidance in these moments of distress.

To further refine our understanding, we developed empathy maps and user personas based on our research findings. The empathy maps helped us visualize what mothers were thinking, feeling, saying, and doing in their daily lives, allowing us to identify gaps between their external expressions and internal emotions. Meanwhile, the user personas—fictional yet research-based representations of different types of mothers—allowed us to explore how various backgrounds, lifestyles, and support systems influenced their experiences with PPD. These tools played a crucial role in ensuring that our design process remained user-centered and deeply empathetic.

4.2 Secondary Research in the Empathize Stage

In addition to our direct interactions with mothers, we conducted an extensive review of existing literature on postpartum depression, digital mental health solutions, and AR/VR applications in therapy. This secondary research provided us with valuable context and helped us understand the broader landscape of maternal mental health. We discovered that despite PPD affecting approximately 15% of new mothers, many cases go undiagnosed or untreated due to stigma, lack of awareness, and difficulties accessing professional care. This reinforced our belief that a digital intervention could bridge this gap by offering accessible and non-judgmental support.

We also examined case studies of AR/VR applications in mental health treatment, focusing on their effectiveness in reducing anxiety, enhancing relaxation, and fostering emotional resilience. For instance, studies on VR exposure therapy for PTSD and anxiety disorders demonstrated that immersive environments could help individuals process their emotions in a safe and controlled manner. Similarly, research on AR-based guided meditation and biofeedback tools suggested that interactive digital interventions could significantly enhance mindfulness practices. These findings validated our hypothesis that AR/VR could be a powerful tool in addressing PPD and helped us identify specific features to incorporate into our design.

To further validate our approach, we consulted with mental health professionals, obstetricians, and postpartum care specialists. Their expertise provided critical insights into the clinical aspects of PPD, including its psychological triggers, common treatment methods, and the limitations of existing interventions. They emphasized the importance of designing solutions that do not replace traditional therapy but rather complement it by providing additional emotional support and practical coping mechanisms. These conversations also helped us identify ethical

considerations and best practices for ensuring the safety and well-being of our users.

4.3 Primary Research in the Empathize Stage

While secondary research provided us with a solid foundation, we knew that direct engagement with postpartum mothers was essential for developing a truly effective solution. To gather more quantitative data, we designed and distributed surveys targeting new mothers across different demographics. These surveys explored their experiences with PPD, their attitudes toward mental health interventions, and their willingness to use digital solutions. The responses confirmed that many mothers were open to alternative forms of support, particularly those that offered privacy, convenience, and a sense of community.

Focus groups were another critical component of our primary research. We invited mothers with varying degrees of PPD to participate in discussions about their struggles, coping mechanisms, and thoughts on AR/VR interventions. These sessions provided a safe space for mothers to share their experiences and offer feedback on our preliminary ideas. One key takeaway from these discussions was the need for personalized support—mothers expressed that PPD manifests differently for everyone, so any digital intervention should be adaptable to their unique needs and preferences.

In addition to focus groups, we conducted diary studies where mothers documented their emotions, challenges, and coping strategies over several weeks. These real-time reflections gave us deeper insight into the fluctuating nature of PPD and highlighted specific moments when mothers felt most vulnerable. Many mothers reported that the nighttime hours were particularly difficult, as feelings of loneliness and exhaustion often intensified during this time. This insight led us to explore the idea of VR-based guided relaxation exercises that mothers could access during late-night feedings or moments of distress.

4.4 Understanding User Needs

Through our extensive research and user engagement, we identified several core needs that our AR/VR intervention needed to address. First and foremost was emotional support—many mothers expressed feelings of isolation and a strong desire for connection. To address this, we envisioned a VR-based support community where mothers could interact with others going through similar

experiences in a safe and empathetic environment. This virtual space would provide peer support, guided discussions, and professional advice, helping mothers feel less alone in their journey.

Another critical need was stress and anxiety management. Many mothers struggled with overwhelming stress due to hormonal changes, sleep deprivation, and the pressures of caring for a newborn. We saw an opportunity to integrate AR/VR relaxation tools that could guide mothers through mindfulness exercises, deep breathing techniques, and immersive calming environments. By providing an escape from daily stressors, these tools could help mothers regulate their emotions and improve their mental well-being. Practical parenting guidance was another major area of concern. Many firsttime mothers, in particular, felt uncertain about their abilities and often second-guessed their decisions. AR technology could provide real-time, interactive guidance on newborn care, breastfeeding techniques, and soothing methods, empowering mothers with knowledge and confidence. VR-based training simulations could also allow mothers to practice handling various childcare scenarios in a low-pressure, controlled environment.

Finally, accessibility and ease of use emerged as key considerations. Many mothers struggling with PPD lacked the time, energy, or financial resources to seek professional therapy. For our intervention to be truly effective, it needed to be affordable, intuitive, and compatible with widely available devices. We explored options for mobile-based AR solutions and lightweight VR experiences that could be accessed on everyday smartphones rather than requiring expensive hardware.

By deeply engaging with postpartum mothers and prioritizing their needs, we gained a profound understanding of how AR/VR could be leveraged to support their mental health. The insights from the empathize stage shaped every aspect of our design process, ensuring that our final solution would not only be innovative but also genuinely impactful. Our research reaffirmed that technology, when designed with empathy and user-centered principles, has the potential to transform the way we approach mental health support for new mothers.

Fig (i) Empathy map for Postpartum Depression

5. Define Stage in Design Thinking for AR/VR-Based Postpartum Depression (PPD) Interventions

After conducting extensive research and gathering insights in the Empathize Stage, we moved into the Define Stage, where we synthesized our findings and identified the core problem we aimed to solve. This phase was essential in refining the user needs, analyzing the challenges faced by postpartum mothers, and framing a clear, actionable problem statement for our AR/VR-based intervention.

5.1 Analyzing User Needs

Based on our research, we identified several key needs that postpartum mothers expressed:

One of the most common and significant needs was emotional support and social connection. Many mothers experiencing postpartum depression reported feeling alone and disconnected from others, even in the presence of family. The lack of a safe space to express their emotions or seek reassurance contributed to heightened feelings of loneliness, self-doubt, and distress.

Another critical need was stress and anxiety management. Mothers frequently reported moments of overwhelming anxiety, particularly when caring for their newborn alone at night or dealing with unexpected challenges like excessive crying. Existing coping mechanisms, such as breathing exercises or journaling, were not always effective in providing immediate relief during these moments of distress. Additionally, we found that guidance and reassurance in newborn care and self-care were major concerns. Many mothers, especially first-time parents, struggled with breastfeeding, baby sleep routines, and their own mental and physical well-being.

The lack of accessible, personalized guidance often led to frustration and self-doubt, further intensifying their symptoms of postpartum depression.

Finally, ease of access and engagement was another important factor. Many mothers found traditional therapy inaccessible due to time constraints, financial limitations, or stigma. They needed an intuitive, easily accessible intervention that could integrate seamlessly into their daily routine without requiring additional effort or stress. By analyzing these needs, we were able to frame potential problem statements that aligned with the capabilities of AR/VR technology.

5.2 Brainstorming and Defining Problem Statements

With a clear understanding of user needs, we conducted brainstorming sessions to define specific problem statements that our AR/VR intervention could address. We formulated three key problem statements based on our findings:

Problem Statement 1: Lack of Emotional Support and Social Connection New mothers experiencing postpartum depression often feel isolated and lack an accessible support system, which intensifies feelings of loneliness, guilt, and emotional distress. Traditional support networks, such as family and friends, may not fully understand their struggles, and mental health resources can be difficult to access due to stigma or time constraints. How might we create an AR/VR-based intervention that provides postpartum mothers with a sense of connection, community, and emotional support in a safe and non-judgmental environment?

Problem Statement 2: Difficulty in Managing Stress and Anxiety

Mothers with postpartum depression frequently experience high levels of stress and anxiety, particularly in moments of solitude, such as nighttime feedings. Existing stress management techniques, such as mindfulness apps or deep breathing exercises, are not immersive or engaging enough to provide immediate emotional relief. How might we design an AR/VR-based relaxation and stress management tool that helps mothers regulate anxiety in real-time?

Problem Statement 3: Lack of Personalized Guidance for New Mothers Many first-time mothers struggle with newborn care, leading to feelings of inadequacy and frustration. Traditional resources, such as books or online videos, lack interactivity and personalization. How might we develop an AR/VR-based guidance system that offers interactive, hands-on learning experiences for newborn care and self-care to boost mothers' confidence and reduce stress?

Selecting the Final Problem Statement

After evaluating these three problem statements, we assessed them based on feasibility, potential impact, and alignment with AR/VR capabilities. We focused on:

1. Relevance to postpartum depression: Which issue has the most direct impact on mothers experiencing PPD?
2. Suitability for AR/VR: Which problem can be most effectively addressed using immersive technology?

3. Engagement and accessibility: Which solution is the most intuitive and practical for new mothers?

Based on these criteria, we decided to focus on Problem Statement 1: Lack of Emotional Support and Social Connection.

This problem was chosen because mothers overwhelmingly reported that isolation and a lack of emotional support were the most difficult aspects of postpartum depression. AR/VR technology is well-suited to creating immersive and interactive experiences that foster a sense of connection, empathy, and peer support. A virtual environment could allow mothers to connect with others facing similar experiences, engage in guided emotional well-being activities, and receive reassurance without the fear of judgment.

Although stress management and newborn care guidance are important, we believed that addressing emotional support first would have the most immediate impact on maternal mental health. Furthermore, stress relief techniques and informational guidance could be incorporated as secondary features within the final solution, ensuring a comprehensive approach to postpartum mental health support.

USER PERSONA

"I JUST WANT TO FEEL LIKE MYSELF AGAIN... EVEN FOR A LITTLE WHILE."

Ananya Verma is a 29-year-old new mother living in Pune, India. Ever since giving birth to her daughter three months ago, she's been experiencing deep emotional lows, difficulty sleeping, and a lack of interest in things she once enjoyed. She was recently diagnosed with postpartum depression (PPD) and is undergoing counseling. Her therapist introduced her to immersive VR therapy as a supplemental wellness tool.
Ananya hopes that virtual calming environments might offer her a brief emotional escape and help ground her in moments of overwhelm. She's nervous but open to exploring new ways to reconnect with herself.

GOALS

- To manage anxiety and emotional overwhelm in a safe, non-judgmental space
- To find moments of peace and mental clarity during recovery
- To engage with tools that are calming, easy to use, and non-invasive
- To feel more connected to herself again
-

NEEDS

- A gentle and intuitive VR experience, requiring no technical background
- Clear instructions, minimal setup, and emotional safety
- Positive, slow-paced, and sensory-friendly virtual spaces
- Optional journaling or reflection support post-experience
-

AGE: 29
OCCUPATION: CURRENTLY ON MATERNITY LEAVE (HR SPECIALIST)
STATUS: MARRIED, NEW MOTHER
LOCATION: PUNE, INDIA

PAIN POINTS

- Overstimulation and tech fatigue
- Fear of being judged or misunderstood
- Fatigue and sleep disruption affecting concentration
- Skepticism about whether technology can help
-

PERSONALITY TRAITS

Introvert
- ●●●●○
Extrovert
- ●○○○○
Analytical
- ●●○○○
Emotional
- ●●●●●
Tired
- ●●●●●
Hopeful
- ●●●○○
Independent
- ●●○○○
Vulnerable
- ●●●●○
Sensitive
- ●●●●●
Resilient
- ●●●○○

Fig (ii) User Persona for Postpartum Depression

6. Ideation Stage in Design Thinking for AR/VR-Based Postpartum Depression (PPD) Interventions

After defining our problem statement in the Define Stage, we moved into the Ideation Stage, where we explored potential solutions through brainstorming, mind mapping, and structured idea generation. This phase allowed us to think creatively about how AR/VR technology can provide emotional support and connection for postpartum mothers experiencing PPD. Through a structured process, we analyzed our problem statement, generated multiple ideas, and selected the most viable solution that aligned with the user needs identified in earlier research.

6.1 Analyzing the Problem Statement

Our finalized problem statement was:

"New mothers experiencing postpartum depression often feel isolated and lack an accessible support system, which intensifies feelings of loneliness, guilt, and emotional distress. Traditional support networks, such as family and friends, may not fully understand their struggles, and mental health resources can be difficult to access due to stigma or time constraints. How might we create an AR/VR-based intervention that provides postpartum mothers with a sense of connection, community, and emotional support in a safe and non-judgmental environment?" Breaking down this problem, we identified the key challenges that the solution must address:

1. Isolation and loneliness – Mothers need a way to connect with others who understand their experiences.
2. Lack of emotional support – The solution must provide emotional reassurance and a sense of belonging.
3. Accessibility barriers – The intervention should be easy to use, available at any time, and work within the mothers' daily routines.
4. Stigma around mental health – The solution should offer a private, judgmentfree space where mothers feel safe expressing their feelings.

6.2 Mind Mapping for Idea Generation

To visualize the connections between our problem statement and potential solutions, we created a mind map. The central theme was "AR/VR for Emotional Support in PPD", branching into four key areas:

1. Virtual Support Groups – Creating an AR/VR space where mothers can interact with others, share experiences, and receive peer support.
2. Therapeutic VR Environments – Using immersive VR environments for stress relief, meditation, and guided therapy.
3. AI-Powered Emotional Assistance – Implementing AI-driven virtual assistants or chatbots to provide emotional support and reassurance.
4. Interactive Self-Help Modules – Developing interactive learning experiences to guide mothers through mindfulness, relaxation, and parenting challenges.

6.3 Brainstorming Session and Idea Selection

After exploring the possible solutions, we conducted a brainstorming session to refine our ideas and determine which approach best met the needs of postpartum mothers. We considered feasibility, user engagement, and the effectiveness of each idea in addressing the core problem. The three most promising ideas were:

6.3.1 VR-Based Support Group Community

This idea focused on creating a virtual safe space where mothers could interact with others through customizable avatars. The VR environment would mimic a warm, welcoming setting (such as a cozy living room or nature retreat) where mothers could join support circles and engage in guided discussions facilitated by mental health professionals.

Pros:

- Provides real-time emotional support and connection.
- Creates a sense of community and reduces loneliness.
- Encourages peer bonding without fear of judgment.

Cons:

- Requires a stable internet connection.
- May not appeal to mothers unfamiliar with VR technology.

6.3.2 Immersive Stress-Relief and Mindfulness VR Experiences

This idea focused on using VR to help mothers manage stress and anxiety. The experience would include guided meditation, breathing exercises, and interactive relaxation activities (such as walking through a calming virtual forest or listening

to soothing sounds in a beach setting). It could also include therapeutic storytelling with positive affirmations to boost emotional well-being.

Pros:

- Easy to use and highly immersive.
- Reduces anxiety and improves mood.
- Provides immediate stress relief without requiring social interaction.

Cons:

- Lacks the interactive community aspect.
- May not address long-term emotional support needs.

6.3.3. AI-Powered VR Emotional Support Companion

This idea proposed a virtual emotional support companion that would act as a nonjudgmental listener and provide positive reinforcement, coping strategies, and personalized encouragement. The AI would guide mothers through interactive therapy sessions, gratitude exercises, and self-care reminders based on their emotional state.

Pros:

- Private and accessible anytime.
- Customizable based on the user's emotions and preferences.
- Encourages self-reflection and mental well-being.

Cons:

- AI interactions may not fully replace human connection.
- Requires advanced natural language processing for meaningful conversations.

6.4 Final Idea Selection

After evaluating these ideas based on feasibility, user engagement, and effectiveness, we decided to pursue Idea #1: VR-Based Support Group Community as the core solution. This decision was made because:

- It directly addresses the root issue of isolation, which is one of the most significant challenges faced by mothers with PPD.

- The immersive nature of VR fosters deep, empathetic connections, making mothers feel heard and understood.
- Support from peers has proven psychological benefits, and a VR platform eliminates traditional barriers to joining physical support groups.
- The experience can be enhanced with additional features, such as guided therapy sessions or stress-relief activities, to provide a comprehensive support system.

Value Proposition Statement

"Our AR/VR-based postpartum depression support platform provides new mothers with a safe, interactive virtual space where they can connect with others, share their experiences, and receive emotional support. Through immersive support circles and guided therapeutic interactions, our solution reduces isolation, promotes well-being, and fosters a sense of belonging. Unlike traditional therapy or online forums, our VR experience creates deep, meaningful connections that help mothers navigate postpartum challenges with confidence and reassurance."

Conclusion

The Ideation Stage allowed us to refine our understanding of the problem and explore multiple innovative solutions. Through brainstorming, mind mapping, and critical evaluation, we identified the most effective approach: a VR-Based Support Group Community. This solution aligns with user needs by offering real-time emotional connection, peer support, and a safe space for postpartum mothers to share their experiences. With our final idea in place, we are now prepared to move into the Prototyping Stage, where we will develop and test the key features of our VR-based intervention.

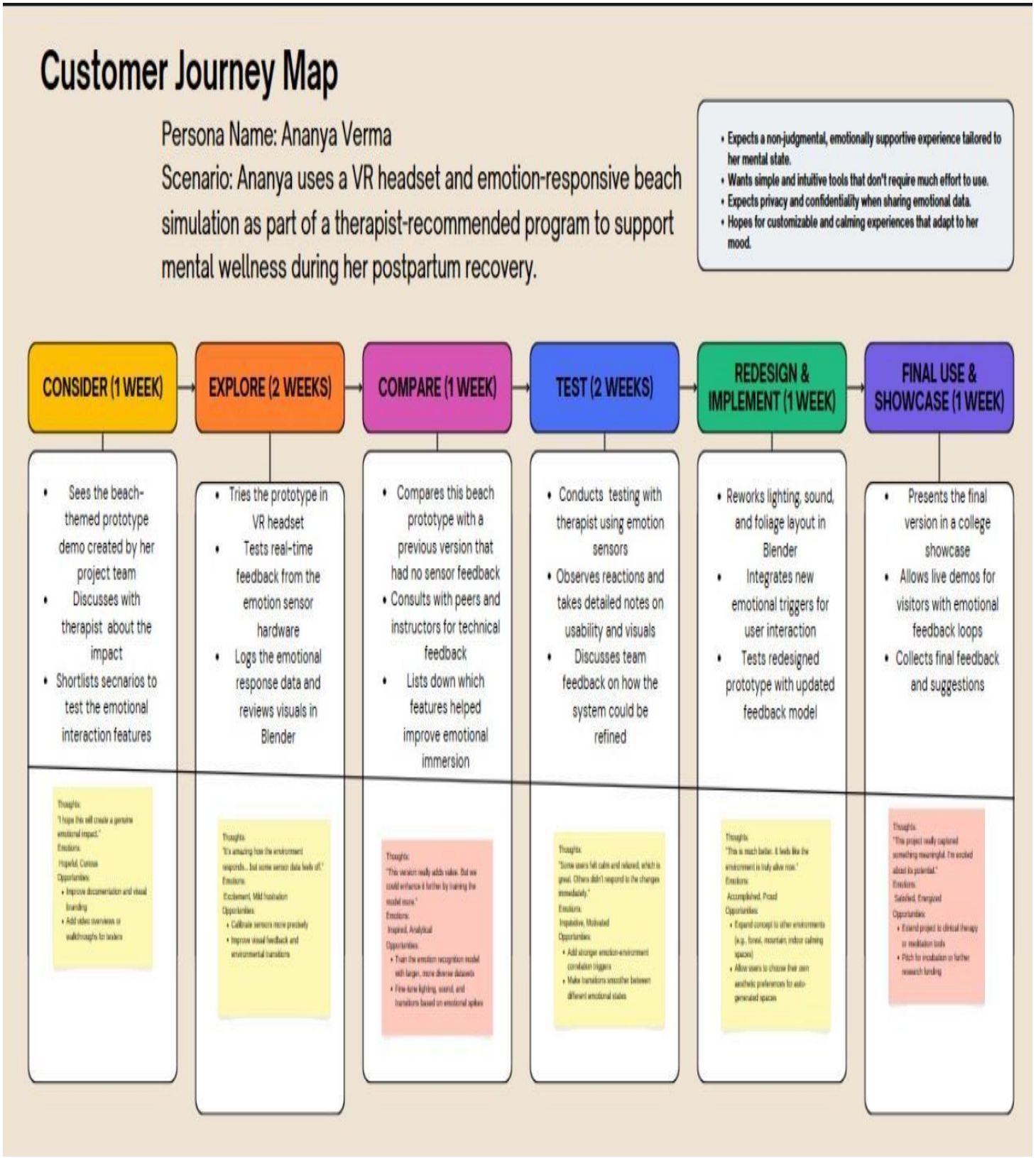

Fig (iii) Customer Journey map for Postpartum Depression

7. Prototype Stage: Development and Evaluation

7.1. Overview

The prototype stage represents a critical phase in the development of our AR/VRbased intervention for postpartum depression (PPD). Through this stage, we transitioned from conceptualization to actual design, development, and preliminary testing. Our approach integrates a virtual relaxation environment created using Blender and a hardware-based emotion feedback system. This dual-component system ensures that the experience is not only immersive but also responsive to the emotional states of postpartum mothers.

Given that postpartum depression is closely linked to stress, anxiety, and emotional fluctuations, our prototype is designed to help mothers achieve a state of relaxation and emotional balance. By integrating biometric sensors, we aim to create a system that adjusts the virtual environment in real-time based on the user's emotional state, ensuring a truly personalized therapeutic experience.

The primary objectives of this prototype stage are:

- To develop a realistic and immersive VR environment that aligns with relaxation therapy principles.
- To integrate hardware-based emotion detection to dynamically adjust the experience.
- To test the system with a small user base and refine it based on feedback.

7.2. Prototype Description

Our prototype consists of two major components:

A. Virtual Environment (Developed in Blender)

The core of the immersive experience is the 3D virtual environment designed using Blender. After extensive research, we identified that natural environments, particularly beaches, are highly effective in reducing stress and anxiety. Therefore, our virtual world simulates a calm, tropical beach setting, which serves as a space for postpartum mothers to relax and disconnect from stress triggers.

7.2.A1. Beach Environment Features:

- Soothing Natural Elements: The environment includes soft white sand, clear blue waters, lush palm trees, and a distant horizon to create a sense of peace and tranquility.
- Lounge Setup: A beach umbrella and two reclining chairs serve as a designated comfort zone where the user can "sit" in the virtual world and engage in relaxation activities.
- Ambient Sound Integration: Gentle ocean waves, birds chirping, and a soft breeze contribute to a fully immersive and calming auditory experience.
- Realistic Textures and Lighting: The virtual world uses high-quality materials and textures to mimic real-world elements closely, enhancing the sense of presence within the VR space.

7.2.A2. Interactive and Dynamic Elements

- Weather Adaptation: The VR system can modify the sky, sunlight intensity, and ambient lighting to match the user's mood.
- Calmness-Triggered Interactions: If the user reaches a relaxed state, the environment will introduce soft glowing fireflies, drifting clouds, or slight waves to enhance immersion.
- Guided Relaxation Support: The VR experience includes calming guided meditations, affirmations, and slow-breathing visual cues to help regulate emotions.

B. Hardware-Based Emotion Feedback System

To ensure that the VR experience adapts to the user's emotional state, we incorporated a hardware-based biometric system that monitors physiological responses and adjusts the environment accordingly.

7.2.B1. Emotion Detection Components:

- Heart Rate Sensor (PPG - Photoplethysmography): Tracks heart rate variability (HRV) to detect stress and relaxation levels.
- Galvanic Skin Response (GSR) Sensor: Measures skin conductivity, which changes based on emotional arousal and stress levels.
- EEG (Brainwave Sensor - Optional Future Expansion): Could be integrated to track real-time emotional responses and brain activity.

- Haptic Feedback System: Provides gentle vibrations in sync with breathing exercises or stress-relief cues.

7.2.B2. How It Works:

1. The sensors continuously collect physiological data from the user.
2. If stress levels increase, the VR environment automatically adjusts by:
   - Softening lighting and colors to reduce visual intensity.
   - Slowing down environmental animations (e.g., gentler waves, less motion).
   - Lowering background noise levels to prevent overstimulation.
3. If relaxation levels improve, the system reinforces the effect by introducing positive reinforcements such as:
   - Smoother water reflections, warmer sunset lighting, and fireflies.
   - Soft affirmations or meditation cues.

   This real-time adaptive approach makes our prototype unique, ensuring that each user's experience is customized based on their emotional feedback.

7.2.B3. Prototype Development Process

A. Virtual Environment Creation (Blender Workflow)

We used Blender to design, model, and texture the beach scene:

1. Modeling the Terrain: We sculpted a natural-looking sandy shore with gentle slopes and uneven textures to enhance realism.
2. Ocean Simulation: We utilized Blender's fluid simulation tools to create a gentle wave effect.
3. Vegetation & Environmental Details: Palm trees, tropical plants, and scattered seashells were added to enrich the scene.
4. Lighting & Shadows: The environment was optimized using soft directional lighting and HDRI sky textures.

C. Hardware Integration & Programming

To integrate emotion feedback hardware with VR, we:

1. Connected biometric sensors to a microcontroller (ESP32/Arduino) to process real-time GSR and HRV data.
2. Developed a VR interaction module in Unity to adjust environmental variables based on incoming biometric data.
3. Tested synchronization between the VR system and biometric inputs to ensure responsiveness.

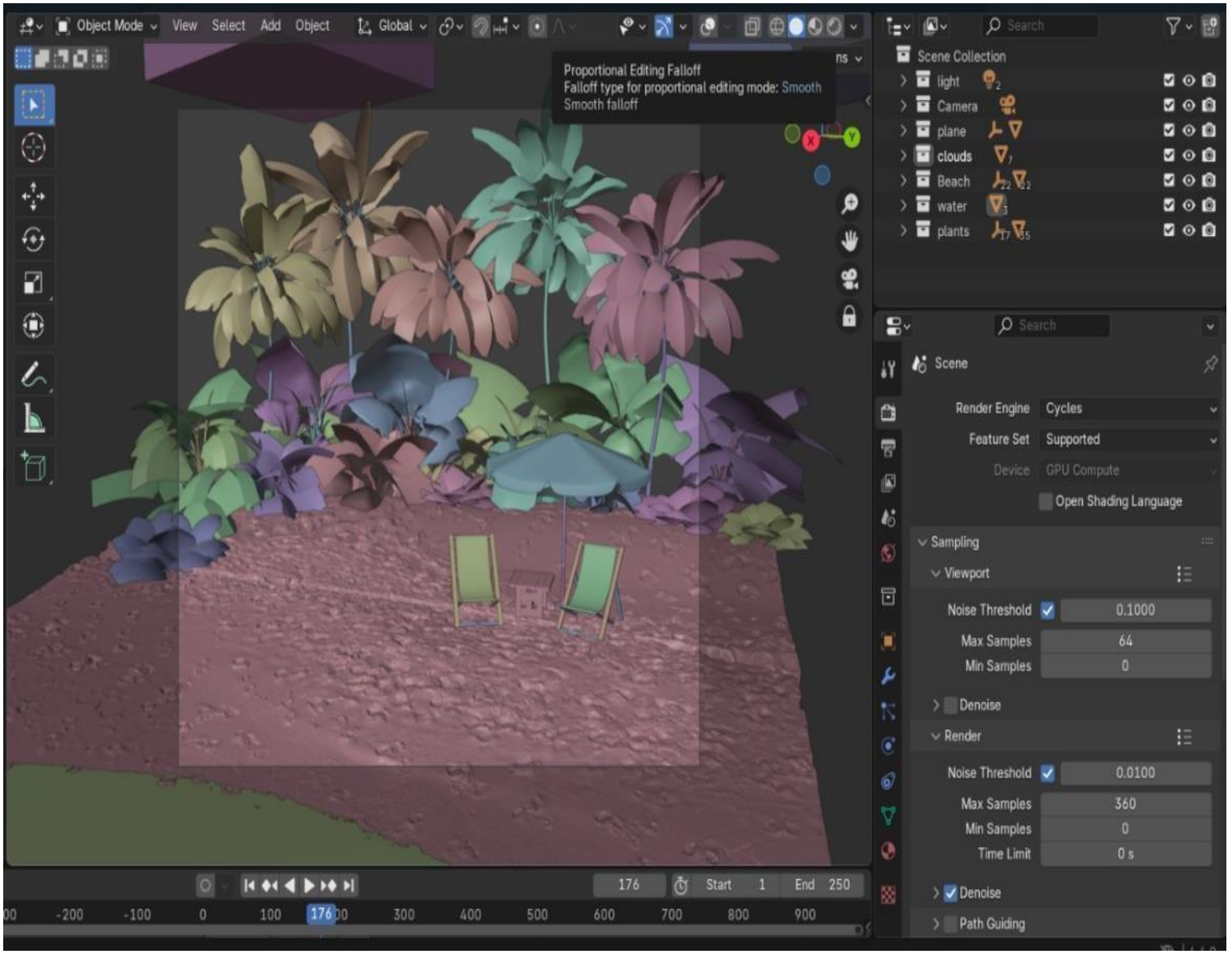

Fig (iv) Blender model implementation phase

8. Test and Feedback

During the prototype testing phase, we gathered feedback from team members, external testers, and potential end-users to evaluate the effectiveness and usability of our system. This process was crucial in identifying strengths, limitations, and areas for improvement.

8.1. Feedback from Team Members

Our internal team conducted multiple test runs to ensure the VR environment and biometric sensors functioned correctly. Key observations included:

- The Blender-designed beach scene was visually appealing, but some textures needed refinement for a more realistic look.
- The sensor calibration needed fine-tuning—initially, the heart rate and GSR readings fluctuated, causing the environment to change more frequently than intended.
- The real-time responsiveness of the VR adjustments was promising, but some transitions (e.g., changes in lighting or ambient sounds) needed smoother animations to feel more natural.

8.2. Feedback from Other Team Members (Cross-Team Evaluation)

We invited developers and designers from related projects to evaluate the prototype.

Their feedback included:

- The sound design was effective, but adding background music options for relaxation could enhance the experience.
- The VR environment felt engaging, but testers suggested including interactive elements, such as virtual objects the user could pick up or manipulate.
- The stress detection algorithm needed refining—in some cases, minor movements or temperature changes affected the GSR readings, triggering unnecessary environmental adjustments.

8.3. Feedback from Users (Potential End-Users)

We conducted small-scale user testing with five participants, primarily postpartum mothers, to assess the system's real-world applicability. Their responses were insightful:

- Most users reported feeling calmer and more relaxed after spending 10–15 minutes in the VR beach setting.
- Some participants expressed interest in customizing the VR environment, such as choosing different times of day (e.g., sunset or nighttime for a more soothing effect).
- A few participants initially found the biometric sensor setup slightly uncomfortable, particularly if the straps were too tight or misplaced.

9. Re-Design and Implementation

Based on the feedback received during the testing phase, we refined our prototype to enhance its effectiveness, usability, and comfort. The re-design process focused on improving sensory accuracy, enhancing user experience, and ensuring seamless integration between the VR environment and the biometric emotion feedback system. Our goal was to create a more immersive, intuitive, and beneficial AR/VR solution for postpartum mothers dealing with postpartum depression (PPD).

9.1. Refinements in VR Environment Design

During user testing, we found that while the beach-themed VR environment was generally well-received, some participants suggested more customization options and smoother transitions. To address this:

- We added a day-night cycle option allowing users to switch between morning, afternoon, and sunset modes based on their relaxation preferences.
- The textures and lighting effects were improved in Blender to create a more natural, calming atmosphere with realistic sand, water reflections, and sky dynamics.
- Soft ambient sounds were incorporated, such as ocean waves, birds chirping, and rustling leaves, which adjust based on user stress levels.
- Interactive elements were introduced, such as a guided breathing animation that synchronizes with user heart rate data, helping them regulate their breathing and emotions.

9.2. Enhancing the Biometric Emotion Feedback System

One of the main challenges was the accuracy of the biometric sensors. Some testers reported fluctuating readings, which caused unnecessary environmental changes. We made the following improvements:

- Optimized sensor calibration: We fine-tuned the GSR (galvanic skin response) sensors to filter out minor fluctuations caused by ambient temperature or small hand movements.
- Enhanced signal processing: Our team refined the heart rate monitoring algorithm to ensure it accurately detects stress responses without being overly sensitive to normal physiological changes.

- Improved comfort: Users reported that the sensor straps were slightly uncomfortable. To address this, we switched to softer, adjustable wristbands, ensuring the sensors remained secure yet comfortable for extended wear.
- Real-time feedback optimization: Instead of abrupt changes, we introduced a gradual transition mechanism, ensuring the VR environment shifts smoothly based on the user's emotional state.

9.3. Implementing User-Centered Customization Features

User testing revealed that different individuals preferred different relaxation methods. To better meet diverse user needs, we implemented the following customization features:

- Customizable relaxation environments: While the original prototype focused on a beach setting, users can now choose from additional relaxing environments, such as a serene forest, a peaceful meadow, or a cozy indoor retreat.
- Audio Preferences: Users can select their preferred ambient sounds, including rainfall, fireplace crackling, or soft instrumental music, to enhance their relaxation experience.
- Guided Meditation and Breathing Exercises: A built-in relaxation guide helps users regulate their breathing with visual cues and subtle haptic feedback from the biometric system.

9.4. Integration and Implementation for User Experience Enhancement

After refining the prototype, we implemented the redesigned version and tested it again to ensure improvements were successful. This phase involved:

- Conducting another round of internal testing with our team to ensure technical stability and seamless integration between VR and hardware components.
- User validation testing with a small group of postpartum mothers, where we observed improved engagement, comfort, and effectiveness in reducing stress levels.
- Finalizing system documentation and setup guides to make the solution easy to use, even for individuals unfamiliar with VR technology.

Fig (v) AR/VR Immersive Solution

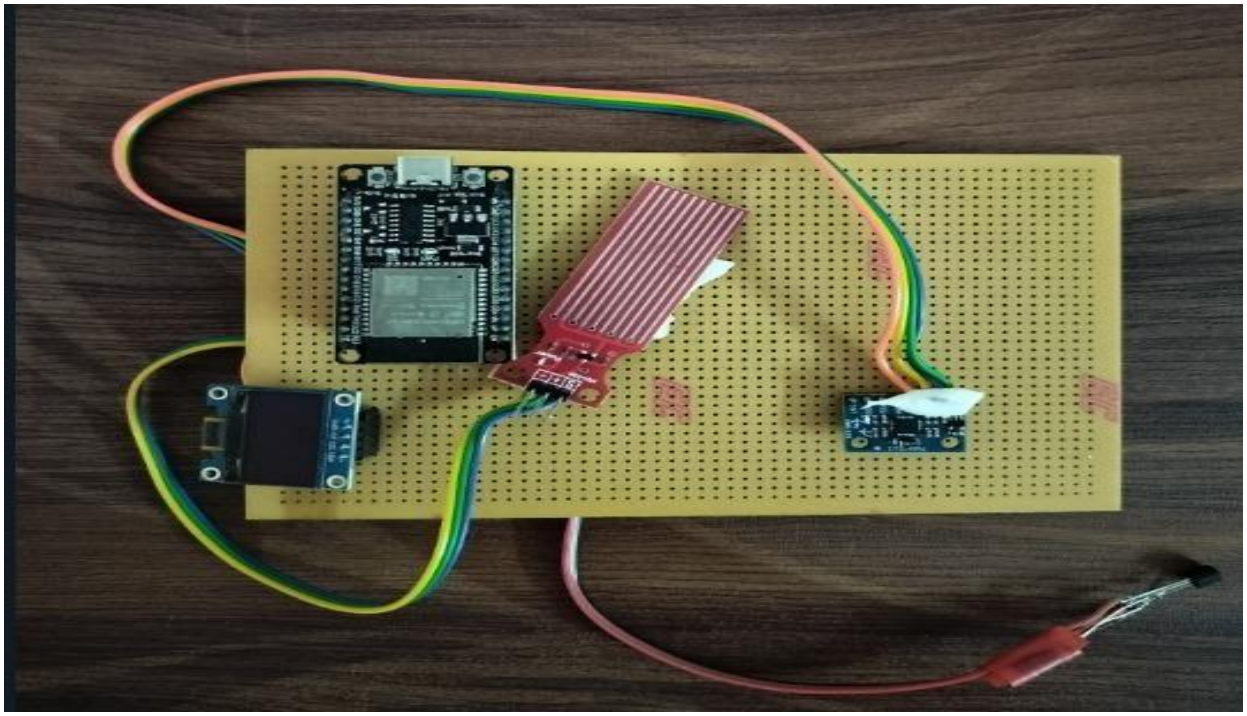

Fig (vi) Emotional Feedback for the immersive solution using IoT

10. Conclusion

The development of a Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) environment integrated with a biometric emotion feedback system for postpartum depression (PPD) represents a significant step in leveraging immersive technology for mental health support. Postpartum depression affects a large number of new mothers, yet accessibility, stigma, and limited awareness often hinder the utilization of traditional treatment methods such as therapy and medication. This project aimed to address this gap by creating a non-invasive, engaging, and personalized digital wellness tool that provides emotional support in a virtual setting.

By following a Design Thinking approach, we ensured that the final prototype was developed with a user-centered perspective, focusing on the unique needs of postpartum mothers. Through research, ideation, prototyping, and testing, we were able to create a system that dynamically adapts to the emotional state of users in realtime. The integration of biometric sensors allowed for an innovative feedback loop where the VR environment could respond to the physiological and emotional cues of the user, making the experience more immersive and effective.

Our system was developed using Blender for 3D modeling, Unity for interactive VR development, and biometric sensors to measure heart rate variability, galvanic skin response, and other physiological markers of emotional states. By doing so, we were able to create an experience that is not only visually engaging but also scientifically grounded in emotional well-being.

10.1. Achievements and Key Contributions

Throughout the process, the project achieved several milestones that contribute to the future of mental health interventions using AR/VR technology:

- Comprehensive Research and Empathy-Based Design: Through both primary and secondary research, we gathered insights into the psychological and physiological effects of PPD, which informed the design of a system that directly addresses the core emotional and cognitive challenges faced by new mothers.
- Innovative Problem-Solving Through Ideation and Prototyping: The ideation stage allowed us to explore multiple potential solutions, each focusing on different aspects of emotional well-being. After thorough brainstorming and evaluation, we selected a responsive virtual relaxation environment combined with an emotion-feedback system as the most viable solution.

- Advanced VR Development and Biometric Integration: Our system integrates a real-time biometric feedback mechanism with a visually calming and emotionally supportive VR environment to provide an adaptive relaxation experience.
- User Testing and Feedback Implementation: The project went through multiple iterations based on testing and feedback from team members and users, ensuring that the final prototype met user expectations in terms of comfort, usability, and effectiveness.

  This research-based approach allowed us to fine-tune the experience for maximum impact, resulting in a system that actively helps mothers manage stress, anxiety, and emotional imbalances related to PPD.

10.2.Challenges Faced and Lessons Learned

Despite our successes, the development process was not without its challenges. These challenges provided valuable learning experiences and shaped the final outcome of the project:

1. Accuracy of Biometric Sensors

- Initially, the biometric sensors provided inconsistent readings due to motion artifacts and environmental factors. This required us to refine our dataprocessing algorithms to filter out noise and improve accuracy.
- Additional calibration methods were implemented to ensure real-time emotional tracking without delays.

2. Balancing Realism and Performance in VR

- Creating a highly immersive yet computationally efficient VR environment posed a challenge, especially for devices with limited processing power.
- We optimized 3D assets, implemented level-of-detail (LOD) techniques, and used texture compression to ensure smooth performance without sacrificing quality.

3. User Engagement and Comfort

- Initial feedback indicated that some users experienced discomfort after prolonged VR exposure, particularly in scenes with fast transitions or excessive visual stimuli. - We incorporated adjustable brightness, audio control, and customizable relaxation settings to allow users to personalize their experience based on comfort levels.

4. Seamless Integration of Hardware and Software

- The biometric sensors and VR software required custom scripts and API development to ensure smooth communication between hardware and software.
- We had to fine-tune the latency and synchronization of biometric feedback to create a real-time interaction system.

Through overcoming these challenges, we developed a stronger understanding of interdisciplinary development, combining technology, psychology, and humancentered design into a single cohesive system.

10.3.Impact and Potential Future Developments

While our prototype successfully demonstrated the potential of AR/VR for postpartum depression management, there is still significant scope for future enhancements. Some potential areas for development include: 1. Expanding the Range of Virtual Environments

- Currently, our prototype features a beach, forest, and an indoor retreat, but future iterations could include culturally diverse or personally customizable environments to enhance emotional connection.
- Incorporating AI-generated landscapes that adapt to individual user preferences could make the system more engaging and emotionally impactful.

2. AI-Driven Personalization

- Future versions could implement machine learning algorithms to analyze user behavior, biometric data, and interaction patterns to predict and tailor experiences more effectively.
- An AI-powered emotional response tracker could provide personalized therapeutic suggestions for each user.

3. Integration with Mobile and Wearable Devices

- While the current prototype functions on VR headsets, future developments could expand the experience to mobile platforms or wearable devices, enabling on-the-go relaxation and emotion tracking.
- A wearable wristband or EEG-based headband could be integrated to enhance emotion detection accuracy.

4. Collaboration with Mental Health Experts

- Partnering with psychologists, therapists, and postpartum care specialists could provide clinical validation and refinement of the system's therapeutic efficacy.
  - Formal studies and trials could help establish scientific credibility for potential medical certification and approval as a digital therapy tool. 5. Community Support and Social Interaction Features

- Future versions could incorporate a support network feature, enabling users to connect with other mothers experiencing similar challenges.
- A virtual therapy group or AI-guided counseling could be integrated to enhance emotional resilience and support.

The impact of this project goes beyond just technology—it represents a shift toward integrating immersive experiences in mental health care. By providing an accessible and effective solution for postpartum depression, our system has the potential to positively influence the lives of many new mothers who may otherwise struggle in isolation.

10.4.Concluding Remarks

The completion of this project signifies a major milestone in the exploration of digital mental health solutions. The VR relaxation system with biometric emotion feedback has been carefully designed to address real psychological challenges faced by postpartum mothers. Through research, development, testing, and refinement, we have successfully created a functional and innovative prototype that demonstrates the power of technology in emotional well-being.

The interdisciplinary nature of this project allowed us to explore various domains, including psychology, neuroscience, human-computer interaction, and immersive technology. Each phase of the development process—from ideation to prototyping and final implementation—played a crucial role in shaping a holistic, user-centered solution.

While our work here represents a strong foundation, we recognize that mental health technology is an evolving field. The next steps will involve continuous refinement, validation, and scaling of this system to ensure wider adoption and maximum impact. As immersive technologies continue to evolve, the future of mental health support lies in combining AI, VR, and biometrics to create truly personalized and accessible experiences.

In conclusion, this project is a testament to the potential of technology to drive positive change. By leveraging VR, biometric feedback, and immersive relaxation techniques, we have pioneered a novel approach to supporting postpartum mental health. The lessons learned and the skills developed throughout this journey will undoubtedly inform future innovations, ensuring that digital therapeutics continue to bridge the gap between mental health and technology in meaningful ways.

11. Future Work

While our project successfully demonstrated the integration of Virtual Reality (VR),

Augmented Reality (AR), and biometric emotion feedback for postpartum depression (PPD) support, there remains significant potential for enhancements and refinements. The current prototype establishes a strong foundation, but improvements in sensor feedback accuracy, machine learning-based emotion modeling, and AI-driven automatic VR/AR generation can greatly enhance the system's effectiveness, adaptability, and personalization.

11.1.Enhancing Sensor Feedback for More Accurate Emotion Detection

One of the key areas for improvement is better biometric sensor integration for realtime emotion recognition. Currently, our system relies on heart rate variability (HRV), galvanic skin response (GSR), and basic facial expression tracking to assess user emotions. However, biometric data can sometimes be inconsistent due to environmental factors, movement artifacts, or limitations in sensor accuracy. Improvements in Biometric Sensor Technology To improve emotion detection accuracy, we propose:

- **More Advanced EEG Integration:**

  ○ Electroencephalography (EEG) sensors can measure brainwave activity to provide deeper insights into a user's emotional state. Future iterations could integrate low-cost, wearable EEG headsets that detect stress, relaxation, and cognitive engagement.

  ○ EEG-based emotion detection models have been shown to outperform HRV and GSR in terms of accuracy, allowing for more precise mood classification.

- **Multi-Sensor Fusion for Better Data Accuracy:**

  ○ Instead of relying on a single sensor type, future versions could combine multiple biometric inputs, such as:

- Facial Emotion Recognition (using AI-powered cameras to detect microexpressions).
- Pupil Dilation Tracking (to assess stress and cognitive load).
- Thermal Imaging Sensors (to detect stress-related temperature changes). ○ Combining thermal imaging, HRV, EEG, and facial recognition would enable a more holistic and accurate emotional response detection system.

- **Reducing Motion Artifacts in Sensor Readings:**
  - Current HRV and GSR sensors can produce noise due to user movement, affecting the accuracy of emotion detection.
  - Future versions should implement AI-powered signal processing that can filter out artifacts and improve real-time tracking accuracy.

By improving biometric sensor feedback, the system can deliver more personalized and adaptive VR/AR experiences, ensuring that users receive the most effective therapeutic intervention based on their real-time emotions. Training AI Models for Emotion Recognition and Personalization

The next major enhancement involves training more advanced AI models to better interpret user emotions and dynamically adjust the VR/AR environment accordingly.

11.2.Deep Learning for Emotion Prediction

- **Emotion Model Training with Neural Networks**
  - Future iterations of the system can use deep learning models, such as Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) and Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs), to analyze biometric sensor data and predict emotional states with higher accuracy.
  - By training the model on a larger dataset of biometric readings and emotional responses, the system can learn more nuanced emotional patterns and become better at detecting stress, anxiety, and relaxation levels.

- **Adaptive Learning Based on User History**
  - Instead of providing static relaxation experiences, an AI-driven emotion model can analyze past user interactions and adapt the VR/AR environment accordingly.

  - The system can learn from past sessions, adjusting music, visuals, and interactive elements based on what has been most effective for the user.

- **Improved Sentiment Analysis from Voice and Text Inputs**
  - In addition to biometric data, the system can analyze voice tone and spoken language to determine emotional states.

- A Natural Language Processing (NLP) model could be implemented to detect stress indicators in user speech, helping the system respond accordingly. By integrating more advanced AI models, the system will be able to provide highly personalized relaxation experiences that adapt over time, making it more effective as a mental health tool.

  Automatic VR/AR Environment Generation Based on User Preferences Another exciting avenue for future work is the automatic generation of VR/AR environments based on user emotions and preferences. Instead of relying on pre-built environments, an AI-powered VR/AR system could dynamically create personalized relaxation experiences in real time.

11.3.AI-Powered Procedural VR/AR Generation

- **Machine Learning for Personalized VR/AR Spaces**
  - AI models can analyze user preferences, emotional history, and real-time feedback to generate customized VR/AR environments that best suit the user's current emotional state. ○ For example, if a user feels overwhelmed, the system might generate a peaceful forest scene with soft background music. If a user feels lonely, it could create a social VR café or virtual companionship space.

- **Procedural Content Generation for Infinite Variety**
  - Instead of being limited to pre-designed scenes, an AI-powered system could use procedural generation algorithms to create unique, ever-changing VR environments.
  - Users would never have the exact same experience twice, keeping the therapy engaging and fresh over time.

- **Personalized AR Integration**
  - Instead of only using VR, future versions could include AR overlays that adapt based on user preferences. ○ For example, if a mother is feeling anxious, the AR system could generate floating positive affirmations or calming animations in her real-world surroundings.

11.4.Expanding the Hardware and Accessibility of the System

To make this system widely accessible, future work should also focus on:

- **Making the VR System Compatible with More Devices**
  - While the current prototype is optimized for VR headsets, future versions could be compatible with mobile AR, web-based VR, and lightweight wearable displays. ○ This would enable wider accessibility, allowing users to experience relaxation sessions on smartphones, tablets, and smart glasses.

- **Cloud-Based Processing for Real-Time Emotion Analysis**
  - By leveraging cloud computing, users could stream VR/AR relaxation experiences without needing powerful local hardware.
  - Cloud-based AI models could analyze biometric data in real-time and generate VR/AR content accordingly.

Conclusion

The future of AI-driven, emotion-adaptive VR/AR therapy is extremely promising. Our project has already demonstrated the potential of combining biometric feedback with immersive relaxation environments, but further improvements in sensor accuracy, AI-based emotion modeling, and dynamic VR/AR content generation could elevate this system to the next level of personalized mental health support. By incorporating advanced biometric sensors, AI-driven emotion tracking, and automatic VR/AR customization, future iterations will ensure that each user receives a deeply personalized, scientifically grounded, and effective emotional well-being experience. This technology has the potential to reshape the way we approach mental health care, providing scalable, accessible, and engaging solutions for those in need.

12. Learning Outcome of Design Thinking

Design Thinking is a problem-solving approach that prioritizes human needs, creativity, and iterative prototyping to develop effective, user-centered solutions. Throughout our project, we applied Design Thinking principles to create an Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) environment combined with biometric emotion feedback to support postpartum mothers experiencing Postpartum Depression (PPD). This process allowed us to gain valuable insights into user needs, iterative development, and the importance of empathy in design.

12.1.Understanding User-Centred Design Through Empathy

One of the most important learning outcomes was understanding the role of empathy in product design. In traditional design approaches, solutions are often built based on assumptions rather than real user experiences. However, in Design Thinking, the Empathy stage helped us deeply understand the emotional and psychological challenges faced by postpartum mothers.

Through interviews, surveys, and secondary research, we discovered that many new mothers struggling with PPD feel isolated, anxious, and overwhelmed. Additionally, the stigma surrounding mental health prevents many women from seeking professional help. This insight shaped our design decisions, ensuring that our AR/VR intervention was not only technologically innovative but also emotionally supportive and accessible.

By applying empathy-driven research methods, we:

- Recognized the importance of emotional well-being in design.
- Understood the real pain points experienced by postpartum mothers.
- Developed a solution that aligns with the psychological needs of the target users.
- Avoided biased assumptions and ensured our product was genuinely user-focused.

This learning experience reinforced that technology alone cannot solve problems— understanding human emotions, behaviours, and needs is crucial for creating meaningful solutions.

12.2.Developing Analytical Thinking in the Define Stage

After gathering user insights, we moved to the Define stage, where we analysed the data to narrow down the core problems that needed to be addressed. This phase helped us develop critical analytical skills by identifying patterns in user feedback, categorizing pain points, and prioritizing design objectives.

We initially identified multiple potential problem statements, such as:

1. Postpartum mothers struggle with social isolation, leading to increased anxiety and emotional distress.
2. Lack of accessible mental health resources prevents new mothers from seeking help for PPD.
3. Traditional therapy and support systems do not provide real-time emotional engagement and relaxation.

Through brainstorming and evaluation, we selected the final problem statement that best aligned with our technological capabilities and user needs:

- Postpartum mothers need an immersive, interactive, and emotionally supportive environment that adapts to their mental state and provides relaxation therapy using AR/VR and biometric feedback.

This analytical process taught us the importance of problem definition in Design Thinking. A poorly defined problem can lead to ineffective solutions, whereas a well structured problem statement provides clarity, focus, and direction for the entire design process.

12.3.Enhancing Creativity and Innovation in the Ideation Stage

The Ideation stage allowed us to explore various creative approaches to solving the problem. Unlike conventional problem-solving, where solutions are often constrained by technical feasibility from the start, Design Thinking encourages free thinking and exploration of diverse possibilities before narrowing down to the most practical solution.

Through brainstorming, mind mapping, and user persona development, we explored multiple ideas:

- AI-powered VR meditation environments that change based on user emotions.
- Augmented Reality guided therapy sessions with interactive elements.
- A virtual support group with AI-driven emotional companionship.

- Personalized relaxation spaces that adapt based on biometric feedback.

After evaluating these ideas, we selected the best solution that aligned with user needs and technological feasibility—a biometrically adaptive AR/VR relaxation environment that provides a personalized mental wellness experience.

This phase helped us:

- Develop out-of-the-box thinking skills.
- Learn how to balance creativity with feasibility.
- Understand the importance of iterative ideation and refinement.
- Gain experience in collaborative problem-solving within a team setting.

The Ideation stage reinforced that innovation does not happen in isolation—it requires a structured yet open-ended approach that allows for exploration, feedback, and continuous improvement.

12.4.Building Practical Prototyping and Testing Skills

The Prototype stage was one of the most hands-on learning experiences in this project. Using Blender, we created a 3D virtual relaxation space, ensuring that the design, visuals, and interactions were aligned with our initial user needs. Additionally, we integrated a biometric emotion feedback system, which provided real-time emotional insights to dynamically adjust the VR/AR environment.

The prototyping process helped us understand:

- The importance of rapid prototyping to test ideas before full implementation.
- How to translate conceptual designs into functional prototypes.
- The challenges of integrating hardware (biometric sensors) with VR environments.
- The need for usability testing and iterative refinements.

One of the key lessons was that prototypes do not have to be perfect—they are meant to explore, test, and refine concepts. The early prototypes allowed us to receive critical feedback, which guided improvements in the final design.

12.5.Understanding Iteration and User Feedback in Testing

The Test and Feedback stage reinforced the importance of continuous improvement. We conducted multiple testing sessions with team members and external users, gathering feedback on:

- The ease of interaction within the VR/AR environment.
- The accuracy and effectiveness of the biometric feedback system.
- The emotional impact and relaxation effectiveness of the experience. The feedback highlighted several areas for improvement, such as:
- Some users found the VR interface overwhelming, suggesting a need for a simpler UI.
- Biometric feedback needed calibration, as some readings were inconsistent.
- The relaxation experience could be enhanced with more guided audio features.

This experience taught us the importance of testing in real-world conditions. It showed us that even a well-designed prototype can have usability challenges that only emerge during user interaction. The insights from testing allowed us to iterate and refine the prototype to better meet user needs.

12.6.Final Learning: The Value of Iterative Design and Implementation

The Re-Design and Implementation phase allowed us to take all the feedback and make necessary improvements. This phase reinforced:

- Iteration is key to successful design—the first version is rarely the best, and user-driven refinements lead to better outcomes.
- Implementation challenges are inevitable—solving technical and design roadblocks requires patience and adaptability.
- User engagement should remain at the center—solutions must continuously evolve to better serve user needs.

By applying iterative changes based on feedback, we ensured that our final product was not only functional but also effective in providing emotional support to postpartum mothers.

12.6.Conclusion

The Design Thinking process was a transformative learning experience. It helped us go beyond traditional problem-solving by incorporating human-centered insights, creativity, prototyping, and iterative refinement. We learned how to empathize with users, analyze problems deeply, generate innovative ideas, build prototypes, gather feedback, and continuously improve our design.

Most importantly, we realized that Design Thinking is not just about creating products—it's about creating meaningful, impactful solutions that truly address user needs. This mindset will remain valuable in future projects, research, and real-world applications, ensuring that technology and design work hand-in-hand to improve lives.

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