

Threads of *emotion*

Weaving mothers' stories through The Maternal Quilt

FEEDING A BABY is one of the most personal decisions a mother makes, and it profoundly affects her physical, emotional and mental wellbeing. Yet this decision often comes with immense societal pressure and practical challenges. In the UK, just 1% of mothers manage to exclusively breastfeed for the first six months, as recommended by the World Health Organization – a stark reminder of how complicated these choices can be. Public health campaigns that advocate for breastfeeding can sometimes unintentionally push away mothers who use formula, leaving them with feelings of guilt or failure.

I've worked for the past decade in the research of how mothers feel when they are feeding their babies, but the idea came to me close to the final year of my PhD studies. I was writing up a research report when I mis-spelled the word 'guilt' as 'quilt', so the phrase 'maternal quilt' – which was what my latest project was about – became 'maternal quilt'. As an avid crafter, I'm always knitting, crocheting, stitching and sewing – these are second nature to me and a vital source of stress relief. Yet quilting had always intimidated me, and I'd never attempted it. Still, the idea of a 'maternal quilt' lingered in the back of my mind for nearly eight years, waiting for the right moment to take shape. It wasn't until I met my collaborators that this abstract thought evolved into a tangible, meaningful project – a physical quilt that tells the deeply personal stories of mothers.

I first met Dr Angelika Strohmayer in 2018 during her year at Swansea University, though our connection wasn't through academia but at a local hackerspace, where I ran a bi-monthly stitch club. Angelika attended one session, and we quickly bonded over our shared love of crafts and similar values. She had worked on a community project involving a digitally augmented quilt during her doctoral research, and I shared my idea of exploring the wordplay between 'quilt' and 'guilt'. Although she later became a lecturer in design at Northumbria University, we stayed in touch, often discussing the possibility of collaborating.

Right:
Work in progress.

Below:
Hardwiring the quilt.





A few years later, during the pandemic, I met Dr Gillian McFadyen through a researcher development programme in Wales. A lecturer in International Politics at Aberystwyth University, Gillian focuses on labelling and trauma, particularly among refugees. Like Angelika, she shares a passion for crafts – she runs a political embroidery group at her university – and we found parallels between our researches. Having just welcomed her first baby at the time, Gillian also connected personally with some of my research themes. Together, our shared interests and values naturally set the stage for a collaborative project.

The three of us decided to apply for a small pot of money to help us develop the idea in our heads, which was successful. So we got to work creating a digitally interactive quilt which we envisioned as literally holding the stories of the mothers and how they felt when feeding their babies.

For the project, 12 mums living in Wales shared their stories using baby clothes and voice clips. These materials became a digitally interactive quilt, inspired by the very rich Welsh tradition of quilting. The mums sent a baby garment and a short 1- to 2-minute clip narrating all the heartwarming and heartbreaking ways decisions about feeding their baby made them feel. We were keen to utilise (and re-purpose) the whole of the 12 donated baby-grows, making the material components of the quilt identifiable for those interacting with it. In a way, the baby-grows represent the stories and lives of the families who used the fabric. We started first by cutting the baby-grows literally in half, separating the front from the back, to give us 24 separate pieces of fabric to use as our quilt base.

Above left:
Layering the quilt.



“I mis-spelled
the word ‘guilt’
as ‘quilt’”

Left:
Quilting in spirals.



Left:
The back of the quilt.

Below:
L–R: Angelika Strohmayer, Gillian
McFadyen and Sophia Kominou
holding the assembled quilt.

to create a welcoming and inclusive space. Threaded needles and scissors were readily available, ensuring that mothers (many of whom had little or no crafting experience) could easily participate.

We aimed to foster the atmosphere of a modern quilting bee, where new mothers could come together to share their experiences and build a sense of solidarity. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Many participants expressed interest in future sessions, and several shared that the experience was deeply healing. They appreciated the opportunity to connect with other mothers in a setting that prioritised their own needs and stories, rather than focusing solely on their babies, as traditional baby groups often do.

The original aim of our project was to empower and amplify new mothers' experiences but in a way

We chose to move away from the traditional Welsh quilting style of geometric patchwork, instead embracing the irregularity of a crazy quilt – fabric pieces seemingly strewn in a disorganised fashion. This deliberate irregularity mirrors the chaos, change and disruption inherent in the journey of motherhood. By adopting this fragmented approach, the quilt captures the complexity of motherhood, with the dismantled and messy baby-grows symbolising individual maternal experiences. Adding a digital, interactive element further departs from traditional quilting practice, transforming the quilt into a literal storyteller that brings these emotions and narratives to life.

For the co-creation process, we invited mothers to contribute to the quilt by focusing on stitching the spirals around the embedded audio sensors. The choice of the spiral pattern was intentional, drawing from its prominence in Welsh quilting tradition as a Celtic symbol of everlasting life and longevity. Spirals bring a 'flowing quality' to the quilt, echoing the naturalistic and free-flowing lines often found in early Welsh quilts. Beyond its symbolic resonance, the spiral was also selected for its practicality, adaptability and simplicity, making it an ideal design for participant engagement during our workshops. The quilt features 12 spirals in total, and we began by completing some of the harder-to-reach spirals in the centre, offering examples for the mothers to follow as they added their own contributions to the design.

At each workshop we positioned the quilt at the centre of the room, surrounded by plenty of seating





Above:
The front of the finished quilt.

that departs from dominant discussions around breastfeeding that tends to focus only on positive emotions. We wanted to create space for mothers to express the complex and sometimes difficult emotions they encounter during the early months of deciding how to feed their baby. Through my research I found that more mothers feel those negative emotions than not, yet often those feelings are hidden and overlooked, something that can often lead to feelings of loneliness and fuel postnatal depression.

Since assembling the quilt we have been to different spaces, from maker festivals to midwife meetings, and used it as a conversation starter. Many people recognised the stories embedded in the quilt as echoes of those shared by their friends

and family. To us, this speaks volumes about how universal those stories are, and how many parallels we can draw between our personal experiences and those of a stranger.

In the next phase of this project, we aim to travel across the country, inviting people to interact with the quilt, listen to its stories, and share their own – whether personal or professional. If you know of a space that might be interested in hosting an event where people can engage with the quilt and share their experiences, we'd love to hear from you!

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