

Study on features that pregnant women find important and desirable when choosing maternity wear

- Focused on British pregnant women in London -

Park , HyeSook * and Lee , JaeJung **

**Doctoral Course. Kookmin University, Graduate School of Techno Design, Dept of Fashion Design*

hsp@hotmail.com

***Professor. Kookmin University, Graduate School of Design, Dept of Fashion Design*

jjl@kookmin.ac.kr

Abstract: Today, many pregnant women also advance up the business ladder and remain very active. They are consequently increasingly aware of the clothes they can wear. Despite these social changes, maternity wear has not been specially designed to satisfy the consumer's demands. From this, the purposes of this study are to investigate the current status of maternity wear and the apparent buying trends of pregnant women through a customers' opinion survey and interviews for the future maternity markets.

In summary, the survey and interviews illustrate some important points which are that:

Firstly, not all pregnant women buy maternity wear.

Some pregnant women said they couldn't find enough difference in maternity wear prices even though they would like to buy some, commenting that maternity clothes were too expensive for such a short period of time. Also some already had maternity wear from a previous pregnancy, or had been passed on from friends and family.

Secondly, on the other hand, many respondents were strongly concerned with style and quality rather than price because they agreed that there were not enough suitable maternity clothes for work and special occasions. Therefore some respondents would buy a maternity outfit for a special occasion. It also indicates that for a particular time, place or occasion like a party, wedding or other celebration, some respondents would buy a special outfit to make themselves feel good.

Finally, according to the survey, the most important design concept is for wearable designs which change with the body during pregnancy; followed closely by designs which are able to be re-used when the pregnancy has finished. Nowadays, as recycling and saving resources are the biggest issues, if maternity manufacturers are encouraged to develop new products incorporating these new design concepts, more maternity markets will be developed to buy maternity wear.

Keywords : *Pregnancy, Maternity Wear, New design concept*

1. Introduction

The definition of pregnancy has changed as society and its values have developed through different periods of history. In the ancient period, from about 24,000 BC the definition of a woman's fertility was <Fig 1, 2>: 'female deities provided fecundity to barren women and barren land, and protected both the pregnant women during the period of gestation and also the land during the time of growth. These goddesses also administered the appropriate ceremonial rituals for conception and childbirth, and for planting and harvesting.'¹

Therefore most ordinary people at that time tried to have as many children as they could <Fig 3>. According to Chicago and Smith, they said that during the middle ages, and in the centuries that immediately followed, one of the few routes to genuine female empowerment was through religion - specifically through becoming a saint, through full recognition of sainthood which could come only after the woman concerned was dead.² For the last 2,000 years, the most conspicuous icon has been "The Virgin Mary with the Infant Christ". Mary was the mother of Jesus Christ and the model for Christian women <Fig 4>. Furthermore over the centuries the image of woman and pregnancy has been changed, 'modern society through education, careers and job opportunities allows many women to be more than just a wife or a mother. Because women now have a choice, it is sensible for them to want to consider and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of childbearing- an event that will change their life.'³ In addition to this, Kitzinger concerned in her publication of the 'Rediscovering Birth' said that in northern post-industrial societies today, when a woman gets pregnant she may be presented with various options. Yet if a woman is having her first baby she has only the vaguest idea of how giving birth really feels and how other women cope.⁴ Giving birth is set apart from the rest of women's lives and accepted as a matter of specialist knowledge. As most women experience pregnancy the topic of this study - *Study on features that pregnant women find important and desirable when choosing maternity wear* - will have implications for many people.

Pregnant women carry heavy burdens physically and mentally because their bodies and minds go through significant changes. Therefore, specially designed clothes are in demand. Maternity wear is worn only temporarily but its design should be specifically concerned with physiological and functional aspects. Today, many pregnant women also advance up the business ladder and remain very active. They are consequently increasingly aware of the clothes they can wear. Despite these social changes, maternity wear has not been specially designed to satisfy the consumer's demands. In addition to this, there were no companies specializing in maternity wear, therefore women bought maternity clothes from companies that were primarily concerned with the manufacture of ordinary day wear. This created a lack of specialization

¹ Diane Apostolos – Cappadona, (1996). *Dictionary of Women in Religious Art* (p151). New York oxford: Oxford University Press.

² Judy Chicago and Edward Lucie-Smith. (1999). *Women and Art - contested territory* (p63). Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd.

³ Roger, V., Clements. (1986). *First Baby After Thirty* (p80). W.H.Smith & S on Limited.

⁴ Sheila Kitzinger. (2000). *Rediscovering Birth* (p8). UK: Little brown and Company.

in maternity wear compared to other women’s fashions. Compared with non-pregnant women’s clothes, the basic research and development of maternity clothes has been insufficient and changes in fashion and styles in this area have occurred relatively slowly.



Fig.1 Venus of Willendorf⁵



Fig. 2 The Venus of Laussel⁶



Fig. 3 Fertility Goddess⁷



Fig. 4 The Virgin and Child⁸



Fig. 5 Maternity dresses of the 19th



Fig. 6 Lane Bryant -Tea Gowns 1913⁹

With this in mind, a survey was conducted with pregnant women in order to obtain feed back on their priorities when buying maternity wear. Some pregnant women strongly stated in this survey their dissatisfaction with their maternity wear and they were really surprised that maternity wear had developed so little.

Other pregnant customers were not interested in the high quality or special designs for them but they expected low prices in the maternity wear market because they believed that the maternity clothes could be used only for that specific temporary purpose and would not be used after childbirth.

The purposes of this study are to investigate the current status of maternity wear in the UK and the apparent buying trends of pregnant women through a customers’ opinion survey and interviews.

2. History of the maternity wear

In the 19th century the “Empire line” was well adapted to pregnancy and became the mode in

⁵ 24,000-22,000 BCE. Oolitic limestone 43/8 inches (11.1 cm) high. Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna

⁶ 25,000-20,000 BCE. Bas relief image from Laussel, France.

⁷ 600 BC. Baked clay. height 8 from shrine A.II.1, Catal Huyuk.

⁸ Leonardo da Vinci. after 1510, Oil on wood, 59.7 x 43.8 cm. The National Gallery, London.

⁹ Lane Bryant, Negligee Tea Gowns Ad Vintage 1913. Source: February 1913 Vogue magazine.

fashionable circles in Europe.¹⁰ The first maternity dresses designed to draw the eye from the bump by a strategically placed elaborate collar or ribbons were made for the upper classes. These gowns were intended to disguise the pregnancy behind pleats and frills. Advertisements at this time, for dresses for the elegant expectant mother appeared in women's magazines <Fig 5>.

In the early 1900s, maternity wear developed into clothing which could also be worn as normal, everyday clothes. In 1904, an American dressmaker designed a pregnancy 'tea gown' for entertaining with elegance at home. It had accordion pleats all the way down from bust to ankle. This was the beginning of the "Lane Bryant" maternity wear store that opened its doors in 1910, advertising clothes that could also be worn out-of-doors so that women could 'go out into the health-giving air and sunshine right up to the day of confinement'¹¹ <Fig 6>.

From 1910, normal maternity clothes started being manufactured for pregnant women and in the 1930s, new styles were developed by designers. After the 2nd World War, were many kinds of maternity wear were introduced such as party wear, trousers, swimsuits and casual wear.

Kitzinger mentioned 'women often tried to adapt their everyday clothes, but had to give up when waistbands on jeans gaped open and zips no longer worked. Then, at the beginning of the 1990s, the pregnant body was displayed in all its naked glory by Demi Moor <Fig7, 8>, and her example was followed by other female celebrities. A new image of motherhood was promoted, the sassy woman in charge of her life who challenged men, even princes, with the physical revelation of pregnancy.'¹²

A new image of glamorous pregnancy was advanced , 'these days, of course, the ideal image of expectant motherhood is no longer the slightly narcotized blonde, deadheading roses in an English country garden...it's a business chick in an elasticated power suit' said Heller.Z in the 'Sunday Times'.¹³



Fig. 7 Pregnant Demi Moor¹⁴



Fig. 8 Demi Moor: cover of 'Vanity Fair' magazine, 1991

¹⁰ Sheila Kitzinger. (2000). *Rediscovering Birth* (p59). UK: Little brown and Company.

¹¹ Mahoney, T., & Slone, L., (1996) *The Grape Merchants* (p249). New York : Harper and Rowe.

¹² Sheila Kitzinger. (2000). *Rediscovering Birth* (p61). UK: little brown and company

¹³ Heller,Z., 'Sunday Times', 13th December 1998

¹⁴ http://premierefois.chez.tiscali.fr/demi_moore.html

In the 21st century, many pregnant women want stylish maternity wear because they are proud and their minds are opened by these aforementioned new icons of birth culture. Do the fashions of the celebrities affect the thinking of the average pregnant woman?

From this, a survey is necessary to find out the pregnant customer's opinions and priorities for the development of maternity wear and it can provide instructive information for the future maternity market.

3. Research methodology

In the research I surveyed 50 pregnant women from the last January to early of May 2005. The survey was conducted with who were checked up for their pregnancy at The West Minster Chelsea Hospital in London. The respondents' ages were 20s to 40s and they were approached with a questionnaire which all of them answered.

Consumers were asked the following questions: Whether they had bought maternity wear, and if so, what the total expenditure had been. They were also asked if they had got much satisfaction from the brand and from which shops or mail order companies they had bought it. A further question they were asked was if they went to maternity clothing shops which are the most important factors which will influence what they choose to buy. They also indicated what the most important design concepts were for them and if they were to use the maternity wear after they were no longer pregnant, which aspect of the development of maternity wear was important to them. To analyze, the data was evaluated by DIMS (Digital Information Management System) program.

4. The result of the customer's opinion survey

In this survey, there were 4 groups of questions, which were *firstly, regarding the respondents' buying patterns for the maternity wear with 9 questions* *secondly, regarding customer's preferences for maternity wear with 6 questions* *thirdly, regarding the respondent's preferences about possible future developments in maternity wear with 5 questions and* *finally, regarding questions about the basic information on each of the respondents with 5 questions.*

In this thesis, the final questions will be discussed first followed by the 1st group, 2nd group and 3rd group.

4.1 From the final group of questions in the survey

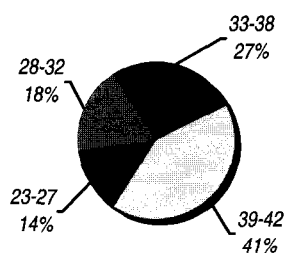


Fig. 9 Respondent's Age

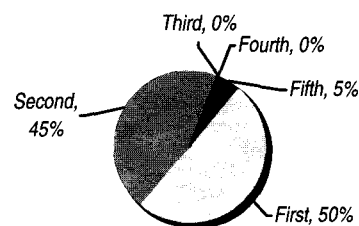


Fig. 10 Respondent's Pregnancies

From this survey's result, 41% of respondents were 39-42 years old, 27% were 33-38 age group, 28-32 and 23-27 age groups follow with 18% and 14% respectively <Fig 9>. It is noticeable that many women's first child-birth is when they were approaching the end of the child-bearing age, possibly because of the upgrade in women's status in society and the expansion in the opportunities for women for both social activities and employment <Fig 11>.

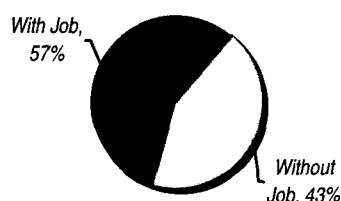


Fig. 11 Respondent's Employment

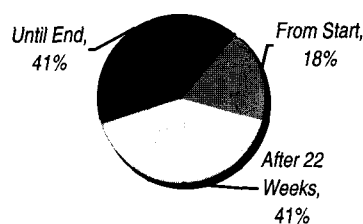


Fig. 12 When Stop Work

In addition to this, the fifty percent of respondents were experiencing their first pregnancy although 68% of the respondents were over 33 years old in this survey. Over 50% of respondents had jobs such as teachers, lecturers, nurses, administrators, chemists, managers, scientists and some of them were students with part time jobs.

Most pregnant women didn't want to stop their work during their pregnancy because it seems they were afraid of the financial situation after childbirth and in the future. Therefore in this survey, over 80% of pregnant women who have a job, they work continually and only 18% of respondents stopped their work at the start of their pregnancy <Fig 12>. Furthermore, according to shop workers' union Usadaw¹⁵, new mothers are returning to work early, because they cannot afford to take their full maternity leave. Women are returning to their workplace on average six weeks before their statutory maternity pay runs out. Two-thirds of those returning to work early are doing so because they cannot afford to stay at home.

4.2 From the first group of questions in the survey

About the respondents' buying patterns for maternity wear, 65% of the respondents answered that they first wore maternity garments during the period of 4-5 months pregnant and only 22% after 1-3 months <Fig 13>. They also answered that 61% women bought new garments during the period of pregnancy. 25% women used pre-maternity garments with coordination.

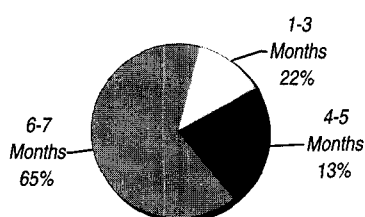


Fig. 13 First Wear MW

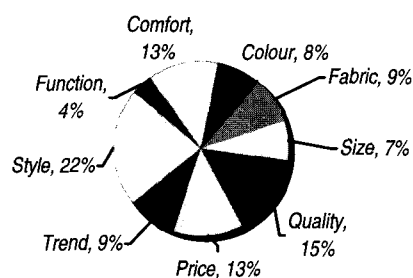


Fig. 14 Respondent's Preferential Importance

¹⁵ Mintel International Group Limited: Changing work pattern -UK- August 2003

51% respondents replied that they bought 4-6 new garments during the period of pregnancy. 33% women bought only 1-3 new ones. Concerning their total expenditure on maternity wear, 45% women spent about £101-150 on their maternity garments. 17% each of the respondents answered for both categories £151-200 and under £50. In this case, most pregnant women commented about price. Some of them considered that they would buy maternity wear if the price were reasonable in comparison with normal wear. Furthermore, they said that they couldn't find any difference in maternity wear prices as much as they would like to purchase some, commenting that they were too expensive for such a short period of time.

In addition to this, 'Mintel' report¹⁶ showed that maternity clothes are too expensive although they have a fairly high level of agreement that it is not worth spending a lot of money on clothes that will be worn for only a few months. Through out this survey, the highest number of women chose their local high street store for their preferred place. The major department or specialist designer's store follow after. In according to this, and from Mintel's research¹⁷, maternity specialists and fashion multiples remain the key sources of maternity clothing. The increased market share taken by fashion multiples is due to the presence of local high street stores.

According to the survey, observationally, style is 22% of the respondents' most important criteria when buying maternity wear. Secondly, 15% said that they would care about quality. Comfort and price follow after, and only 4% of respondents answered that function would be most important <Fig 14>. As to how satisfied the respondents were with their maternity wear, the proportions of respondents were all very similar. In first place were style and fabric with 14% and followed by colour at 13%, function, trend, size and quality each with 12% in third place. The lowest place is comfort with only 1% .

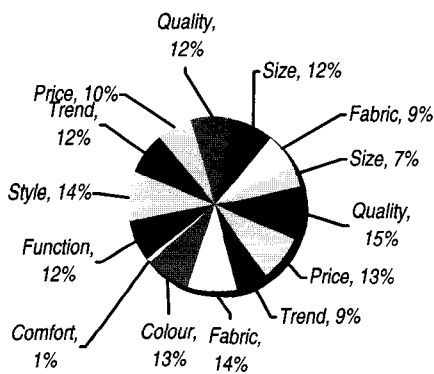


Fig. 15 Satisfaction of MW

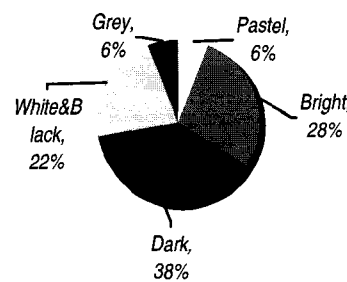


Fig. 16 Preferred Colour

From this, we can realize that the most pregnant customer wouldn't prefer function but in fact, they are satisfied that the function of their maternity wear is highly linked in second place. As one expects from

¹⁶ Mintel International Group Limited: Maternity Clothing -UK - October 2003

¹⁷ Mintel International Group Limited: Womenswear Mainstream Retailing - UK

the previous answer, style and fabric got the first place at 14% each <Fig 15>.

The highest number of women preferred dark colours at 38%. Bright colours and white & black follow after <Fig 16>. The reason for this answer was that they thought when they are pregnant their body shapes change every month therefore they want to be seen as slim and stylish rather than stand out conspicuously to other people. 'I am not worrying about how to look sexy but I really want to be stylish!' said Rankin, who is a language lecturer at the University of Arts London. Also she mentioned people assume that natural colours and dark colours within natural fabrics are more suitable for pregnant women. According to the result of survey, most respondents said their preferred fabrics which were soft natural fabrics such as cotton, cotton blend, wool and jersey rather than synthetic fabrics of artificial fibers for both the summer and winter season.

4.3 From the second group of questions in the survey

In this survey the popular brands were 'Formes', 'Blooming Marvellous', 'H&M', 'Dorothy Perkins, Mothercare', 'Mamas and Papas' and 'Next'. Most women have little choice of maternity clothing where they usually go shopping and this also limits spending on such clothing.

However, some of them said there is also a market for second-hand maternity clothes, which they found to be the cheapest market for them. A high number of pregnant women purchased their garments by visiting the shops themselves. Also they learnt from advertising in the media however, there was very little exposure in comparison with all other women's wear <Fig 17>. From the 'Mintel' research¹⁸, advertising on maternity wear has risen considerably since 1999. This coincides with a range of far more stylish and presentable maternity clothing. The period 2000-2002 has seen considerably more advertising.

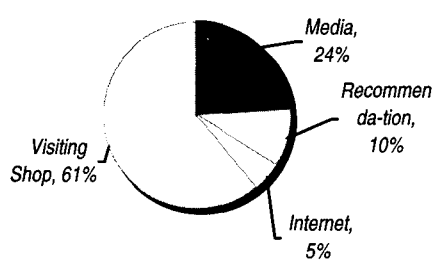


Fig. 17 Source of Information

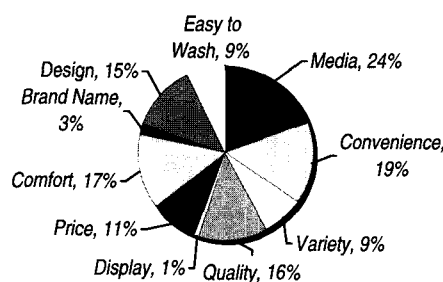


Fig. 18 Prefer Brand's Reason

Respondents gave their reasons for preferring different brands for maternity wear but their percentage answers were all very similar. Convenience was at 19%, comfort at 17%, quality 16%, design at 15% and price, easy to wash or variety follow after <Fig 18>. However, the largest percentage of respondents said their spend on different items was very low as 62% spent only under £ 50. Moreover,

¹⁸ Mintel International Group Limited: Maternity Clothing -UK - October 2003

they considered buying new garments could be a waste of money because they needed the maternity clothing just for a few months and they could not use it after childbirth. 'I don't want to keep the maternity wear after childbirth because most of them are of low quality and price,' said Rankin who was having her first experience of pregnancy. 'But I'll keep those for my next pregnancy which are of better quality and really expensive ones because I do like them so much.'

4.4 From the third group of questions in the survey

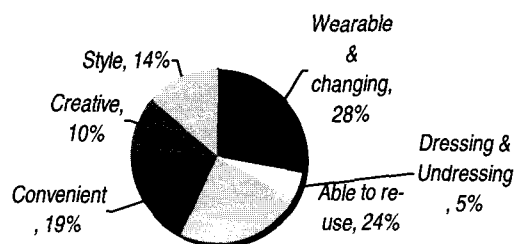


Fig. 19 Important Design Concept

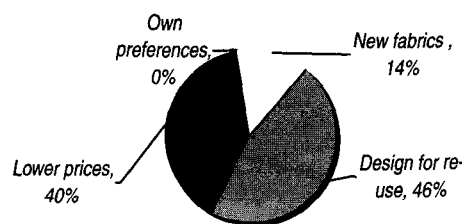


Fig. 20 Customer's Preference

The respondent's preferences for possible future developments in maternity wear showed that 28% of respondents thought the most important design concept was for wearable designs which change with the body during pregnancy. Second place was for designs which were able to be re-used when they are no longer pregnant, as most pregnant women complained about the expenditure being wasteful and very expensive for such a temporary use <Fig 19>. After childbirth, 50% of respondents would keep their maternity clothing for their next pregnancy; 22% of women would give to charity shops or friends and some of them would use for normal wear or just throw away.

The most important criterion for the respondents for the development of maternity wear in the future was the design for re-use after childbirth at 46%. However, lower prices were at 40% and new fabrics followed after. Further more if they could re-use it after childbirth, the most important thing was adaptable shape for normal wear at 64%, with 24% of them favoring being able to carry your child <Fig 20>.

5. Findings and discussion

In analysis, the survey and interviews illustrate one important point which is that not all pregnant women buy maternity wear. Some are prepared to make do by themselves because they cannot afford well-fitting maternity wear, or because they already have maternity clothes from a previous pregnancy, or passed on from friends and family. Many women have few options as to where they can buy their maternity clothing if there is no convenient shop close to where they live or work so their opportunities for purchases on maternity clothing are limited. Frequently, the second-hand maternity market fills the gap.

Certainly a pregnancy is a great expense, and buying maternity clothes is just one of them. In addition to this, in an interview with a pregnant woman, who was in her first pregnancy at that moment and she was living in London, it was discovered that she had to plan for the birth of the baby, buy nursery equipment and even decorate the baby's room in preparation for the new child, all of which incurred extra costs. Furthermore, clothes that are worn during pregnancy may be worn for a short time following the birth of the baby while the mother is losing weight and getting back her shape, but will be wanted only for a few months at a time.

As the survey showed, they may well be kept for the next pregnancy. This confirms the view that many women are very conscious of their limited monetary resources and will limit their expenditure on maternity wear. From the survey, it seems that if this pregnancy is expected to be their last, some of the women would give such clothes to a charity shop or friend and some of them would use it for normal wear and some would throw them away. This last group did this because they said the maternity wear was nothing special for them and did not object to the expenditure as they spent comparatively less on maternity wear. They stand in contrast to most pregnant women who complained about the expenditure being wasteful with clothes being very expensive for such temporary use.

On the other hand, many respondents were strongly concerned with style and quality rather than price because they agreed that there were not enough suitable maternity clothes for work and special occasions. Therefore some respondents would buy a maternity outfit for a special occasion. It also indicates that for a particular time, place or occasion like a party, wedding or other celebration, some respondents would buy a special outfit to make themselves feel good. In this case, style and quality or colours were more important than price. In addition to this, the survey showed how satisfied the respondents were with the different brands of maternity wear and they rated style and fabric together as the most important factors, followed by colour, function, trend, size and quality as of equal importance and lastly they cited price.

Moreover, although many pregnant women have different priorities, the effect of the celebrity pregnancies is already leading to increased awareness of the potential to look beautiful and good during pregnancy. Instead of hiding the belly, pregnant women may well celebrate their pregnancies by dressing well and looking good. Therefore, the spending of pregnant women on maternity wear will continually grow and could be a huge market because some of the women's wear and nursing equipment market is moving into the maternity clothing market. For instance, from the report of the 'Drapers Record' (2005)¹⁹: 'Boots' is to launch a maternity clothing line and 'Mothercare' has already launched a new posh Moda

¹⁹ Mintel Reports: Maternity retailer enters UK market, Drapers Record 09-04- 2005

label in 2005.²⁰ According to 'Mintel' report, 'Mothercare' believes that their customers will be encouraged to buy higher quality with greater availability of maternity wear.²¹

6. Conclusion

The experience of the pregnancy is one of the most memorable times in women's lives, instead of a heavy physical and mental burden. It was able to realize that through this study, most of the women were content and felt they were becoming real women with their first pregnancy. Consequently if they satisfied with their maternity wear they would keep them for the next pregnancy or they would hand over their maternity garments to their daughter or daughter in law, as they would a wedding dress.

I understand that there is much new research into the medical changes effecting pregnant women but only a small number of this is linked or is useful to changes in their buying patterns. For instance, some interviewees strongly complained that their body size has changed at different times and it seems it depends on the figure of each person. Therefore, the majority of women when asked about the future development of maternity wear in the future commented that the most important design concept was a wearable design which changes with the body during pregnancy. Following this, unless there is an appropriate development of maternity wear, the market for maternity wear will be adversely affected by the customer's dissatisfaction with priorities. Consequently, it is my opinion that for the future, the most important design concept is for wearable designs which change with the body during pregnancy. Follow closely by designs which are able to be re-used when the pregnancy has finished.

Furthermore, if they can re-use it when they are no longer pregnant, the most important thing was a design which could adapt to normal wear and could provide the ability to actually be used to carry the child. As nowadays, recycling and saving resources are some of the biggest issues, if maternity manufacturers are encouraged to develop new products incorporating these new design concepts, more pregnant women will be encouraged and vitalized to purchase maternity wear.

Finally, this study focused on British pregnant women in London and, small sample size limits the conclusions reached by this study, but the results suggest the value of further study using a larger sample. Also this study would give marketers a better understanding of what factors should be used to promote their products to the consumer.

²⁰ Mintel Reports: Boots to launch maternity range, Drapers Record 16-04-2005

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