

THESIS

EMBRACE: THE JOURNEY TO EMPATHY AND COMPASSION

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### EMBRACE: THE JOURNEY TO EMPATHY AND COMPASSION

The world right now faces a continual gap in opportunities and access to benefits between different social groups. Oppression and Marginalization are not just driven by income, but also by gender, ethnicity and culture, race, sexual orientation, class, and religion. There is a need to accept these social boundaries and unleash the humanity's potential to thrive with its boundless creativity, mutual respect and provide people with meaning. Design has the power to convert this noble thought into a movement that creates change, which is the aim for this campaign, "Embrace." I want to use design to reach masses and create a visual language to be adopted at grassroots level, allowing people to build a stable and accepting society. Throughout my graduate studies, I have created awareness about social issues including breastfeeding taboo and maternity leave. This awareness campaign is about a variety of social concerns which will nudge our thoughts towards becoming a more balanced society. Specifically, I have created "Embrace" symbols depicting and creating consciousness about the principles of gender balance, income, racial, ethno-diasporic equality, and family bonding. These symbols, at their core, represent the balance between our intelligence and emotional quotient. By creating a visual communication method through symbols, I want to create an awareness campaign using which, I would like to introduce a path for people to not only be aware but be proud of associating with this campaign. Through this campaign, I also hope to encourage corporations to transform their practices and embrace people of all types in their policies and use my symbols as a badge of acceptance of their socio-economic performance. I want to promote these symbols and this campaign as a representation of human-

centric responsibility among corporations, thus, helping create a more equitable society. In future, I would want to see this campaign added as an 18<sup>th</sup> goal among UN's sustainability and development goals where, embracing emotional intelligence will bind together and enable achievement of all the other 17 goals.

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## CHAPTER I

### EMBRACE: A JOURNEY TO EMPATHY AND COMPASSION

In today's world, design has emerged as a potent instrument for instigating change. Despite prevailing apathy towards societal issues, design possesses a unique ability to capture attention and ignite more crucial conversations. Audrey Lorde's words resonate deeply: 'It's not our differences that divide us, it is our inability to recognize, accept and celebrate those differences' (page 45 (Lorde 1984)). This research aims to create designs that raise awareness about pressing social concerns and employ visual communication techniques that integrate seamlessly into communities, effecting change at the grassroots level.

This research topic is deeply personal to me and is shaped by my experiences throughout my career, culminating in a campaign as part of my MFA degree. These experiences include struggles as a young mother returning from maternity leave, which led to a forced pause in my career and left me with self-doubt. Additionally, traveling with my children through three continents challenged societal norms regarding motherhood and womanhood, particularly concerning the perception of breastfeeding in public in the United States.

Despite these challenges, the inspiration for this campaign came from the immense support and love I received from those who heard my voice and contributed to shaping the project 'EMBRACE.' This journey reinstates the belief that empathy is the key factor towards developing an emotionally intelligent society. Through this initiative, I aim to raise awareness and motivate individuals to take thoughtful action to help generate necessary awareness and positive change.

I have created a visual communication technique using symbols that signify equality among all humans. The main inspiration for me to create these symbols has been the bindi – traditionally

worn by Hindus at the “inner third eye”, which has also adorned my mother’s forehead ever since I have known, and which brings me and all my work that I have ever done into focus. In context of “Embrace”, there needs to be a significant and generational shift in focus and so, the bindi, with its focus, inspired me to create these symbols, and this campaign of awareness and social responsibility. I would want these symbols to generate social awareness, and through this cognizance, help develop a thoughtful environment. This campaign challenges societal inertia towards issues such as parental leave, wage equality, gender discrimination, color discrimination, and ethno-diasporic equality. This research seeks to inspire individuals to envision and strive for a more equitable society rooted in empathy and compassion.

## CHAPTER II

### BREASTFEEDING: TABOO OR CELEBRATION?

Breastfeeding is a physiological concept as old as life itself. It is the best nutrition that an infant can get and it literally has healing powers (O'Reilly 2014).

Yet, when I visited the US with my 9-month-old daughter, I met with strange looks and sometimes disgust when I breastfed in public. I was also asked to go to the restroom multiple times to breastfeed. Imagine having your own food in a restroom. I have traveled the world and lived on 3 continents. Nowhere have I faced such judgment on breastfeeding as I did in the US. It was very surprising that the awareness of breastfeeding lacks so much in a developed country like the US, that it needs a law to prevent it from being classified as an act of public indecency. During the several years following this trip and when I started my MFA, I heard this story again and again. I first came across a Facebook post by Ashley Kaidel (Kaidel 2015) which talks about the openness of breastfeeding and how women need to have a choice of how and where they want to breastfeed. My sister, who has lived in the US for almost 20 years now, also had the same experience when she was breastfeeding. During her travels in Europe, she was never questioned where she breastfeeds, however, within the US, she was asked to go to the restroom to breastfeed (Wadhwa 2023). This got me thinking about the taboos associated with breastfeeding in the US and when I joined my MFA program, exploring the solutions to these taboos and making breastfeeding more acceptable became the first topic of my research.

#### **Literature Review**

Unfortunately, since the mid-19th century, several factors influenced the rise of taboos about breastfeeding. The primary questions I asked during my literature review were:

- Why does a simple natural act like breastfeeding need a law?
- How we can create more awareness regarding breastfeeding to help educate men and women to provide optimal nutrition to their infants through breastmilk?

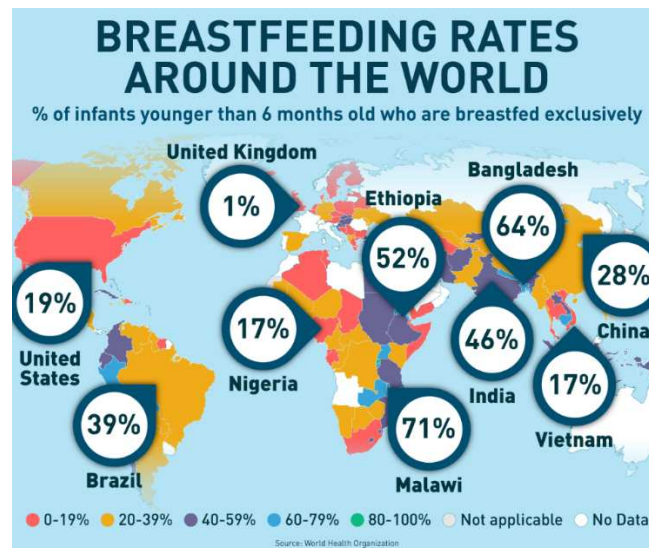
According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, Americans have a very low rate of breastfeeding. This has happened because of a lack of enough resources for the education of the public and assistance to breastfeeding mothers. Data suggests that about 820,000 child deaths can be prevented annually just by increasing breastfeeding rates (Lancet-Editorial 2016).

The reasons for breastfeeding becoming a taboo have been well recognised. Some of the reasons are:

- Sexualisation of breasts
- Class division
- US lagging in paid maternity leave
- Breastfeeding seen as uncultured (Hingorani 2024)

The US is behind many world countries in breastfeeding rates with US rates as low as 19% (Adam 2016). One of the major factors here was elevation of artificial, marketed commodities like Formula over subsistence goods like breast milk. Capitalism played a huge role in commoditizing alternatives like Formula which then ended up replacing a natural nourishing food like breastmilk for many working women throughout the later half of 20<sup>th</sup> century (Campbell 1984). There was no proof about women needing to begin formula feeding just because they entered workforce. However, because of the capitalist ideologies of big conglomerates like Nestle, and the resulting marketing dollars spent, the 19<sup>th</sup> century capitalist

movement and the closely related 20<sup>th</sup> century imperialism, neocolonialism, and monopolism won out and Formula feeding became the norm (Campbell 1984).



(H6-Blog 2016)

*Figure 1* Breastfeeding rates throughout the world.

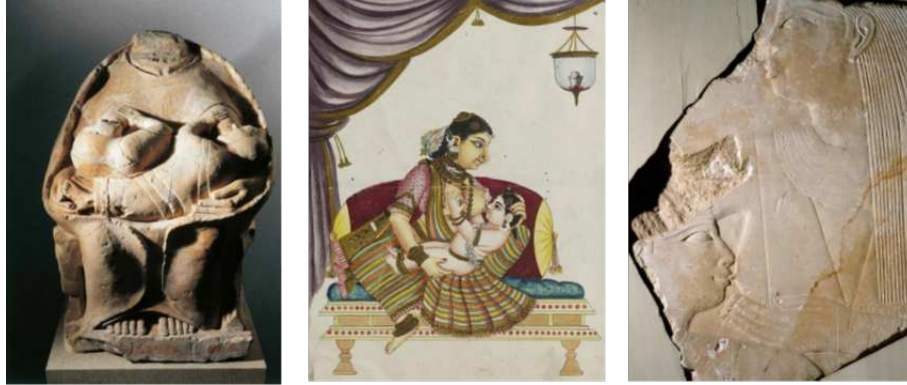
My research also indicated that lack of paid maternity leave is also one of the major factors which lead to women going back to work quicker, which results in a drop in breastfeeding rates (Omer-Salim 2023). This important topic has been discussed for research in the next chapter.

Of note is that breastfeeding has been made taboo recently. Historically, breastmilk has been seen in a positive, almost reverent way. In mythology, breastmilk has been shown to have mythical powers. Numerous artworks show Baby Jesus at the breast of Mother Mary, and even the pope supports breastfeeding in public (Flam 2013). Breastfeeding has never been without cultural commentary. Breast milk is arguably one of the most provocative of bodily fluids—we do not feel as passionate about urine, sweat, snot, or tears—and yet breast milk invokes strong emotions. Since the beginning of time, breast milk has been revered. In Classic Greece, the milk of a Greek goddess

was thought to confer immortality to those who drank it. It was Hera's breastmilk that made Hercules invincible. It was Hera's breastmilk that formed the Milky Way itself (so the story goes) (Pironti et Pirenne-Delforge 2022). The Mother Mary was exempt from sex, pain in childbirth, and perhaps many bodily functions (at least as the story goes) (Marshall 2010) and yet she breastfed. Baby Jesus at the breast of Mary has been one of the most popular and powerful artistic images for millennia. Huffington Post has collected 22 images of goddesses or religious figures breastfeeding. This religious art is a reminder that the image of a woman nursing is not something that should be sexualized or censored. Instead, it's a powerful reminder of the ability of mothers to nourish their children. Similarly, Indian mythology has numerous depictions of Krishna breastfeeding with Yashoda, his foster mother. The bond created by breastfeeding resulted in Yashoda getting equal importance as Krishna's birth mother Devaki which has been often depicted in paintings and sculptures.



(Unknown 12th Century)



(Kuruvilla 2017)

*Figure 2* Breastfeeding imagery from different cultures depicting the celebration that breastfeeding should be.

Normalizing breastfeeding to be a part of our society is a very important step that we need to take as a society to ensure that our kids get optimal nutrition. Women should not be afraid to nurse in public. If people don't see it, they will never become normalized to it. The encouraging fact is that the government initiative of healthy people 2030 has specific breastfeeding objectives and targets towards increasing awareness and occurrence of breastfeeding in the US. So as a society and as designers, what do we need to do to normalize breastfeeding. There are barriers we need to overcome. Community pressures, lack of inclusivity for breastfeeding mothers, healthcare worker shortage, lack of legislation, and inappropriate marketing are some of the major barriers (Health et Human 2011).

In my opinion, creating awareness about breastfeeding is a start towards overcoming these barriers. As a designer, some potential solutions that I can propose are government awareness campaigns, depictions in movies, paintings, sculpture, jewellery, graffiti, street shows, and merchandise can be used to create the necessary awareness among people regarding breastfeeding. In my work, I intend to design a campaign based on these principles and I hope to create awareness for breastfeeding which can eventually benefit our society and specifically our kids. Designers

around the world have often paired up with healthcare companies or social groups to create such awareness campaigns. J. Walter Thompson in Colombia paired up with Abbott Healthcare to come up with the breastfeeding mannequins to create awareness about public breastfeeding in Colombia where it is still a problem. In partnership with fashion malls and brands, the mannequins were strategically placed with a sign demanding that the shopping malls should change their policies towards breastfeeding. This ignited a conversation in different media outlets, both digital and traditional, to create more awareness about the issue (Colombia 2017).

## **Design Process**

The primary image in my mind in creating this campaign was that of a “bindi”, popularly known in slang as the “Indian dot.” The bindi has always adorned my mother’s forehead and that is where my focus initiated as a child. The bindi is not only a dot but it also focuses the mind, focuses the gaze of the viewer, and it is an excellent source of focus and that is where my design journey for this campaign started. It began with poetry in my mother’s honour, and I created a design that celebrates her simplicity, the simplicity that is ever present in my designs, and my simple intentions to create awareness. The poetry goes:

*Wrapped in a sari, Her eyes were kind and bright*

*I felt her silk, but focused on her face, a comforting gaze*

*It is always red and round, A Bindi, not just a dot, my mothers crown*

*A focus, an epistemology, warmth, and love*

*Fierce personality, Who knew It would end up defining my art’s*



I started out with creating a graphic with the Hindi word for mother – Maa, which is shown on the left in figure 6. The bindi is a part of the word which is written in Devanagari script which means mother.



*Figure 4* The power of Bindi



*Figure 5* Initial concept design on how I planned to use bindi as a background/aura.

With the bindi in mind, I began the campaign by documenting images which showed my journey, and the journey of those close to me. I took silhouettes and images from my memories documented pictures and drew images for posters in Illustrator. In choosing colors, I chose red and blue inspired by the US flag, and I chose yellow to represent the sun. The sun is universal, as is the concept of breastfeeding, and hence, yellow. To bring the focus to the environment, I put the main image in

the foreground with the aura being the bindi. The bond between mother and child is celebrated here with the bindi.



*Figure 6* My sister's breastfeeding image in public became an inspiration for my poster design.  
(Reproduced with permission from Ritambhara Wadhwa, Personal archives)

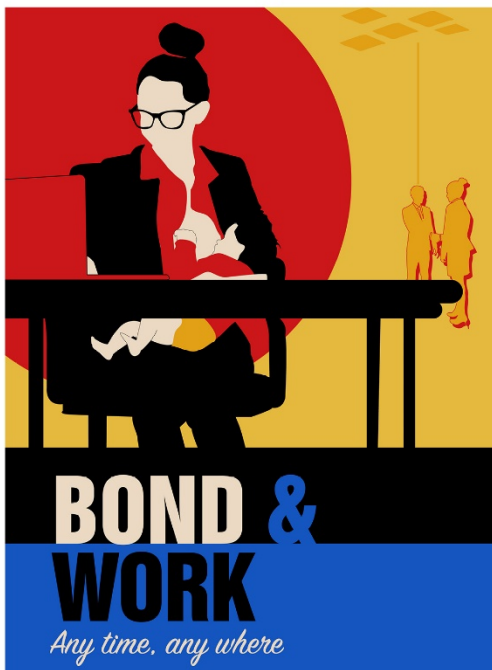


Figure 7 Poster Designs

The act of breastfeeding is brought into focus in these poster designs. The bond between mother and child enjoying the environment, the mother and child bond being one with the existing

situation they are in is being celebrated here. Breastfeeding mothers do not generally have institutional support for breastfeeding outside of the home, which makes it challenging for them to continue breastfeeding if they take the baby out of the home (O'Reilly 2014). The idea is to depict the ideal thought process where the intimacy is in focus and the other problems with breastfeeding can be brought into awareness by showing the good things about breastfeeding. Another thing that I found is that breastfeeding is taboo mainly in upper- and middle-class women who can afford alternative approaches to children's nutrition. The alternatives in modern day are formula, in the past, alternatives included a nursing maid. Lower-income people cannot afford formula, so breastfeeding is a better option for them anyway. The target of the awareness campaign was higher income level people which is why I focused on the images that seem like higher income group women who have the power to travel, work, and explore the world while still breastfeeding.

Another part of the campaign was a fiber sculpture that I designed using the Jain and Buddhist symbol of "ahimsa" which means "non-violence." The hand also depicts a blessing that is often given, especially in Hindu culture, when someone touches your feet. I have superimposed various mammals breastfeeding and included a human breastfeeding image in the hand symbol as well. This is to show how we suddenly become judgmental when it comes to human breastfeeding, however, animals nursing their mothers is an image which we associate with the love and the bond that the mother and child have with each other. Again, the red color of the bindi has been used as a backdrop to make sure these images get the right attention. The images were created in wooden blocks and then screen-printing of the blocks was done in red color on fibers.



*Figure 8* Invasion of natural breastfeeding with workplace capitalism. My daughter enjoying the creation of the sculpture.



*Figure 9* Wooden block designs for the fiber sculpture

The reason I chose fibers as my sculpture medium is aptly described by Kassia St. Clair in the book “The Golden Thread” which says “we live surrounded by cloth. We are swaddled in it at birth and shrouds are drawn over our faces in death.” (St. Clair 2019). Following screen-printing, the fiber sculpture was built in a way that each image gets multiple looks from all sides for maximum visibility, which can induce awareness in the viewer. Creating the sculpture was not only enjoyed by me, but also by my daughter. It is inspiration like this for our younger generation that creates awareness about breastfeeding and its benefits, that will create a generational mindset change going forward.

This research culminated in my poster that I presented in the GradShow 2021 at Colorado State University, which was selected for VPR fellowship application, and for CSU Speaks.

Breastfeeding is a fundamental act of care. It is the healthiest and most complete form of nutrition for infants, and according to the US department of health and human services, Americans have a very low rate of breastfeeding. Not enough resources for assistance and education for breastfeeding being made readily available and promoted to the public in ways other than literature.

My aim through my artwork is to create awareness and understanding for the benefits of breastfeeding and the normalness of a fundamental act like breastfeeding and to celebrate the natural act of breastfeeding among masses through my field of applied art.

HOW IT BECAME A TABOO

America's distaste for public breast-feeding has its roots in midcentury racism and the rise of the commercial food industry.

- Sexualization of breasts = loss of functionality
- Breasts seen more within the purview of men as sexual objects and less as domain of infants and source of food
- Sexual implication meant breasts were for men and sex not as mammary glands for mammals that we are
- Resulting transformation led to breastfeeding in public less common and more taboo



ROLE OF RELIGION AND CULTURE

- Culturally, breast milk is one of the most provocative of bodily fluids
- In mythology and religion, breast milk has been revered - milk of a greek goddess conferred immortality to those who drank it, it was Hera's breast milk that made Hercules invincible
- As the story goes, Mother Mary was exempt from sex, pain of childbirth, and may be other bodily functions, yet she has been regularly shown to be breast feeding. Baby Jesus at the breast of Mother Mary is one of the most popular and powerful artistic images
- Religious art has commonly depicted breastfeeding - this should be a powerful reminder that a woman nursing is not something that should be sexualized or censored, rather it should be celebrated for the ability of a mother to nourish their children



MAJOR BARRIERS TO BREASTFEEDING

SaveTheChildren.org identifies four major barriers to breastfeeding

- Community and cultural pressures
- Health care worker shortage
- Lack of maternity legislation
- Inappropriate marketing of breast milk substitutes

US LAGGING BEHIND

BREASTFEEDING RATES AROUND THE WORLD

% of infants younger than 6 months old who are breastfed exclusively

- Breastfeeding seen negatively in US and Canada and being considered an uncultured practice
- Marketing and sales of infant formula supplemented this negative perception since 1940s which has continued into 2000s
- Result is that US has among the lowest breastfeeding rates in the world

MAKING PAID MATERNITY LEAVE

- Lack of paid maternity leave plays a big role in mothers feeling insecure and not paying attention to breastfeeding as shown by map of paid maternity leave data

In high-income countries, more than 1 in 5 babies are never breastfed

In low- and middle-income countries, almost all babies are breastfed

About 820,000 child deaths could be prevented annually (about 13 percent of all under-5 child deaths) by improving breastfeeding rates, in addition to the lives already saved by current breastfeeding practices.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Films, introducing breastfeeding concept in education system, making it a matter of pride through different media- jewelry painting installation, ad campaign, government awareness campaign, Sculpture, merchandise, street shows & graffiti

- Film helps encouraging breastfeeding through one of the paintings
- A popular dialogue from Indian cinema translates to 'if you have seen that mother's breast milk, come forward and fight'
- Indian jewelry containing breastfeeding awareness
- Depiction of a proud mother breastfeeding in a mainstream Indian movie

Figure 10 Poster at GradShow 2021

Link to my talk from the VPR 3 minute challenge:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KsZb7VD0Na8&list=PLoXrIvKjigP3p8ghkGRJuI2bamX5Ta5Tl&index=4>

In the end, I would like to say that Learning to create our minds the way we want, is the basis of creating the world the way we want and creating awareness through art is the principle that I work with to try and open the minds of my audience.

## CHAPTER III

### MATERNITY LEAVE: NOT A VACATION, BUT A NECESSITY

The inspiration for this campaign came to me when I thought about a similar problem that I faced in my own career. Back in 2006, during my tenure as an Art Director, I felt my pregnancy was held against me and my temp job was not made permanent. This was surprising since before my supervisors found out that I was pregnant, I had won 3 best cover awards for the company even as a temp. I fought for my position and eventually, the HR was kind enough and supported me and my job was made permanent. However, all the obstacles thrown in my path meant that I was unable to take care of my child, due to which I had to quit my job after 2 years and take a sabbatical. This made me realize that not all women get a supportive HR or can fight like this and even in a country like India where maternity leave is a right by law, I had to face issues. This made me think about what happens to women in the US where maternity leave is not considered a right but a benefit.

America has a long and proud history of exceptionalism. Many things are inherently different in the US which makes it such a wonderful mosaic of the world. However, the US is the only developed nation to not have a federal law that mandates maternity leave, which makes companies offering maternity leave as a perk and not as a right. Even North Korea and Iran have a law for paid maternity leave (ILO 2011; Da-min 2023). So, why is that? I think there are several reasons for that. First is that when Europe was recovering from World War 2, they needed to boost their workforce so, they promoted population growth by making it easier for mothers and providing maternity leave as a right. The US, on the other hand, went the individualist way and relied on the market creating maternity leave as a benefit. Employers and lawmakers in the US saw maternity leave as an entitlement which went against the “hard work” principle. Several other factors that were responsible for this decision were individualist cultural mindset, “entitlement perception”, or

simply fear of being labelled as a socialist country. This decision several decades ago has led us to a dire situation right now. 42% of women in the US are sole breadwinners and an additional 22.5% are co-breadwinners (Glynn 2016). Women represent 47% of the total workforce, contributing to \$7.6 trillion (DeWolf 2017). However, 88% of the women working in the US do not have access to paid maternity leave which presents a significant problem (Warner, Ellmann, et Boesch 2018).



(Christine Chapman 2016)

*Figure 11* Infographic showing the length of maternity leave in different countries compared to the US.

However, there is significant evidence that larger-scale social support for families like paid maternity leave makes economic output, growth, and social outcomes substantially better (Burtle et Bezruchka 2016). Through my travels across the world, I have experienced how societies and countries have benefited from women empowerment policies like paid maternity leave and I want to create a campaign that raises awareness towards the perils of not having paid maternity leave in the US. It helps mothers recover better from pregnancy which leads to lower social problems, higher productivity when they return to work, lower women employee turnover, and overall

betterment of the society. For the child, it has clear health benefits that come from longer breastfeeding and enhanced attachment to the mother, and this leads to a much lower socioeconomic burden and a better economy. A lot of people argue that maternity leave creates an economic burden but in fact, it is beneficial for the economy. We know we need female workers, and they can add \$5.8B to the market. studies show that women are 93% more likely to stay within the job after taking maternity leave (Family 2018) and this leads to a more stable economy. When employees leave their jobs the “great resignation”, how much trouble it creates for the economy. Also, there is a significantly lower burden on public benefits if maternity leave is provided. Studies have shown that women receiving maternity leave are 40% less likely to rely on food stamps or public benefits (Lenhart 2021).

Jessica Shortall, in her TED talk, collected the voices of many such women who have suffered in their workplace because of absence of a mandated length of maternity leave. Following quotes are from her talk which describes the plight of many working women who had either lost their jobs after pregnancy, or had to go back to work too soon and faced the consequences (Shortall 2015).

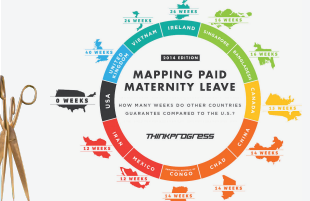
"I was an active duty service member at a federal prison. I returned to work after the maximum allowed eight weeks for my C-section. A male coworker was annoyed that I had been out on 'vacation,' so he intentionally opened the door on me while I was pumping breast milk and stood in the doorway with inmates in the hallway."

A woman wrote to Shortall to say, "I gave birth to twins and went back to work after seven unpaid weeks. Emotionally, I was a wreck. Physically, I had a severe hemorrhage during labor, and major tearing, so I could barely get up, sit or walk. My employer told me I wasn't allowed to use my available vacation days because it was budget season."

"I feel tremendous grief and rage that I lost an essential, irreplaceable and formative time with my son. Labor and delivery left me feeling absolutely broken. For months, all I remember is the screaming: colic, they said. On the inside, I was drowning. Every morning, I asked myself how much longer I could do it. I was allowed to bring my baby to work. I closed my office door while I rocked and shushed and begged him to stop screaming so I wouldn't get in trouble. I hid behind that office door every damn day and cried while he screamed. I cried in the bathroom while I washed out the pump equipment. Every day, I cried all the way to work and all the way home again. I promised my boss that the work I didn't get done during the day, I'd make up at night from home. I thought, there's just something wrong with me that I can't swing this."(Shortall 2015)

Maternity leave has so many benefits that it makes good sense for us to create awareness about this and help our country and society move towards making it a right. In my opinion, it is a generational thought process that needs to be changed which can happen if we normalize it and create awareness in our younger generation about maternity leave and women's rights in general. This work was displayed as a poster in the CSU GradShow in 2022 for which it again won an award.

America has a long and proud history of exceptionalism. There are many things that are inherently different in US that make it such a wonderful mosaic of the world. However, USA is also exceptionally only one of 9 countries in the world that don't offer paid maternal leave. This social right is not made fundamental even though it is a recognized medical necessity.



**WHERE ARE WE?**

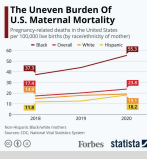
42 % of mothers in the United States were breadwinners, and an additional **22.4 % were co-breadwinners**

Women's unpaid work amounts to about \$10 trillion per year, or **about 13 %** of global GDP

Women represents more than **47% of the total workforce** and women's labor contributes **\$7.6 trillion** to the nation's GDP each year

Women provide **43.8 percent** of all labor hours in the U.S. economy.

**88%** of working mothers do not have access to Paid Maternity Leave



Only **17%** of U.S. private-sector workers have access to paid family leave through their employers

In 2013, nearly two-thirds of families relied entirely or in part on a mother's income, and 45 million children lived with a mother who was in the labor force.

**WHY & HOW STARTED**



**PAID LEAVE IS VIEWED AS A BENEFIT NOT A RIGHT - MARKET**

deological differences - Europe suffered through Fascism so broad political support for a welfare state as a tool to create the social and economic stability and solidarity needed to support democracy. US has individualist cultural mindset

fundamentalism - mindset of less governmental influence and more market settling for itself, starkly different from other rich nations

Biggest reason - post World War II needs - US did not need to boost workforce

US saw it as entitlement. Did not fit the "hardwork" culture



**SOLUTIONS**

need to influence not only current generation but also next generation - sweden has gender equality while maintaining women's rights

Ethnic symbols depicting equality and women empowerment - making it a current trend and introduce it in to today's fashion. Merchandise, jewelry, and branding campaign will make people more aware. Universal symbols to be made which can be portrayed with pride

children's books, stories, toys can introduce family values, bonding, nurturing, and women's rights. will be able to get the next generation thinking about these burning issues

**BENEFITS**

BENEFITS FOR MOTHER	BENEFITS FOR BABY	BENEFITS FOR ECONOMY
Lower postpartum depression	Lower infant mortality rate	Need female workers - can add \$5.87B in global stock market
Lower social problems	Enhanced development because of attachment to mother	Lower turnover and higher employee retention - increases maternal employment by 25%
Wage stability - more productivity	Higher chances of breastfeeding - excellent health	Happier workers - 15% higher number of hours after maternity leave, 5% boost in incomes
Overall happiness contributes to betterment of society	Better health - lower socioeconomic burden	Lower burden on public benefits - 40% less likely to depend on food stamps/public benefits

Figure 12 Poster at GradShow 2022

Link to my talk from the VPR 3 minute challenge:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KsZb7VD0Na8&list=PLoXrIvKjigP3p8ghkGRJuI2bamX5Ta5Tl&index=4>

During my research, I found that even a basic issue like maternity leave affects different people differently. I found that black and Hispanic workers have almost a 2-3 times higher chance that they are not paid anything during their maternity leave(Goodman, Williams, et Dow 2021) compared to white and Asian races. Upon looking deeper, I found that racial inequities in wealth access and accumulation are exacerbated by the limited availability of paid family and medical

leave benefits. Furthermore, disparities in accessing other economic assistance programs heighten the financial strain for families of color when confronted with significant family or medical crises. People of color in the US often encounter inferior healthcare services and endure poorer health consequences compared to their white counterparts, intensifying the urgency for comprehensive paid family and medical leave provisions. Persistent racial discrimination in employment perpetuates job instability and amplifies the obstacles to financial stability and progression for individuals of color. Among these inequalities and hurdles, women of color bear the heaviest burden, grappling with the compounded effects of systemic disparities and socioeconomic challenges (Unknown 2018).

All this points to a very deep-rooted problem with society in general which needs to be brought to the forefront. In my opinion, these issues are not limited to maternity leave or racial inequality but transcend race, ethnicity, and gender differences. Through this work, I realized how these differences can be addressed, first by bringing awareness, and then by bringing recognition to those who follow the principles of equality and equity, who display the emotional intelligence to understand that the differences among each other unite us, and in the process, make us better. With that thought in mind, and with the contribution of my work on maternity leave, my EMBRACE campaign was started which culminates in this thesis. The EMBRACE campaign started with a few rough sketches of the symbols which were then refined to turn it in to the campaign.

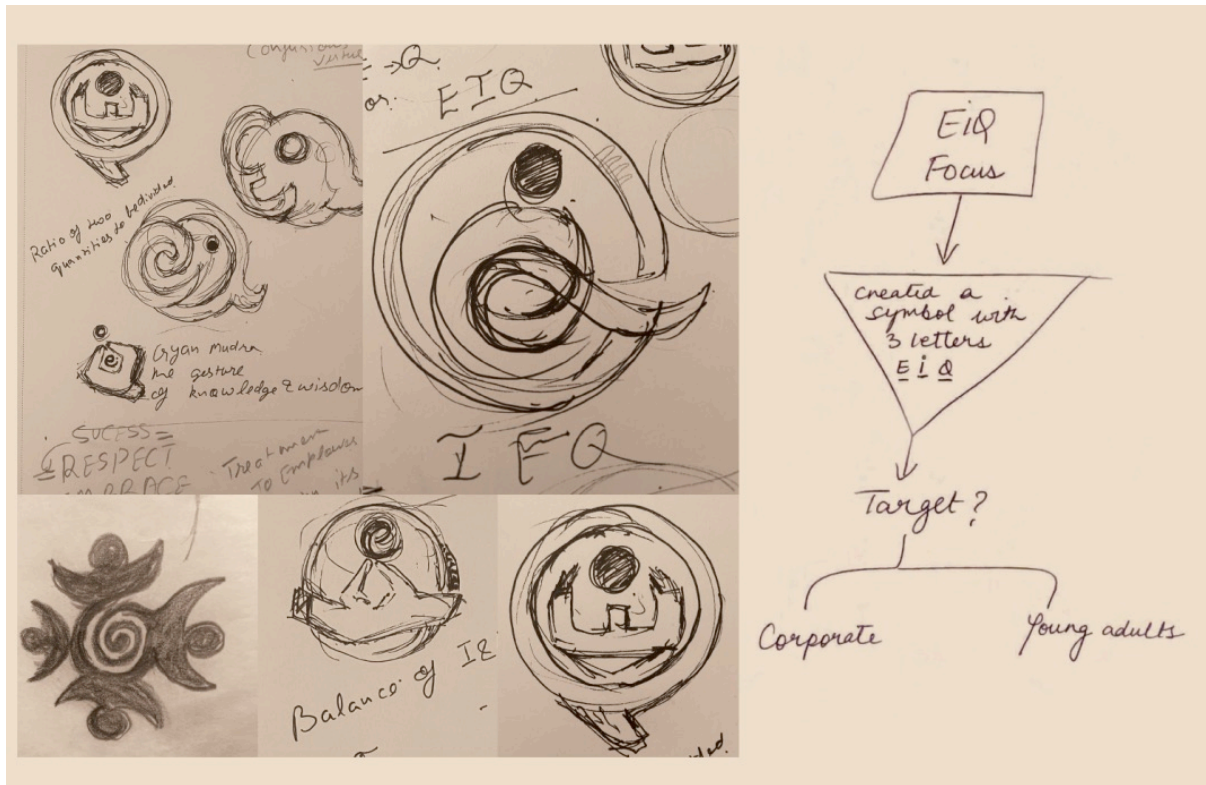


Figure 13 Initial schematic sketches for EMBRACE campaign.

## CHAPTER IV

### EMBRACE: VOICE FOR SOME, LANGUAGE FOR ALL

In the intricate tapestry of social responsibility and design innovation, my project, the “Embrace” campaign, stands out as an example of creativity and purpose. As a graphic designer with a keen eye for societal impact, I have created the Embrace symbol which is drawn from the inspiration of the Emotional Intelligence Quotient and emerges as a powerful visual representation of a commitment to fostering a more equitable society. It includes human-centric criteria representing gender balance, income equality, racial and ethos-diasporic harmony, and family bonding. It is not just a design; it's a catalyst for conversations, a spark that ignites awareness about the pressing issues of our time.

My mission is to reach both individuals, especially young adults, and the corporate realm, particularly Human Resources. Through a dedicated website, the Embrace symbol becomes not only a visual centerpiece but a warm invitation for others to join this transformative narrative.

**For the individual** Embrace, the symbols seamlessly integrate into the form of social media, textiles, jewellery, merchandise, emojis, stickers, wallpaper, paintings etc. It becomes a visual language that speaks volumes, inviting individuals to embrace the values of compassion, empathy, gratitude & lateral thinking.

**In the corporate landscape**, the Embrace symbol aligns with the B Corp concept, adding a layer of strategic brilliance. It's not just a design; it's a visual commitment, a badge of honour for companies choosing to balance profit and purpose, contributing to a more inclusive and sustainable economy. John C. Maxwell said it best: "Leadership is not just about how much you know, but about how much you care" (Mecham 2024).

As the Embrace symbol continues its journey, crafting mock-ups and refining its vision, it goes beyond being just a design. It's a call to action, a movement waiting to be embraced. Through the Embrace campaign, the symbol is not just created; it shapes a future where design and social responsibility intertwine to create lasting change. It's a narrative that captivates hearts and inspires minds, and the profound impact of this symbol on our society is eagerly awaited.

In today's world, it's not just a desire but a requirement. The current generation often lacks lateral thinking, and the Embrace symbol serves as a visual reminder of our surroundings and daily-use products. It encourages us to practice gratitude, compassion, equality, and fair justice not only through logical thinking but also through lateral thinking—a crucial element missing in today's landscape. The goal is to make this symbol a lasting moment for generations to come.

### **Research and Design Process**

The idea for Embrace was born out of a heated argument that I had with my teenage son, who disagreed with the concept of maternity leave. The differences in philosophies made me realize that biases and self-centric thinking have been a part of generational thinking, and if a meaningful change to biases must be made, it needs to begin with changing the thought process of individuals, particularly our youth. So, the project started out creating designs which not only incorporated awareness elements, but ones that would also aesthetically appeal to different generations. Adults and kids alike respond most to current trends and my idea is to make this visual story to not only become a current trend but also change the generational mindset regarding these sensitive issues. I intend to create symbols that can go on merchandise, jewelry, posters, wallpapers, and different media. Mock-ups of how the symbols can appear on these media are provided later in this thesis.

At this point, I had been working on female-centric topics like breastfeeding and maternity leave inequalities. So, the first design was inspired by the Adinkra symbol of femininity (Adinkra

Unknown) which is a comb. A comb is typically used to organize hair and it also represents touch and stimulation. It has been used since a long time for domestic purposes, and I was inspired by the ubiquitousness of the comb to create a maze. It also represents the domestic woman. As an experimental exercise, I hand drew a maze using a comb which is a metaphorical representation of how a woman must go through a maze of obstacles to realize her potential in life. I used coffee as the paint to honor the African tradition of using natural colors.

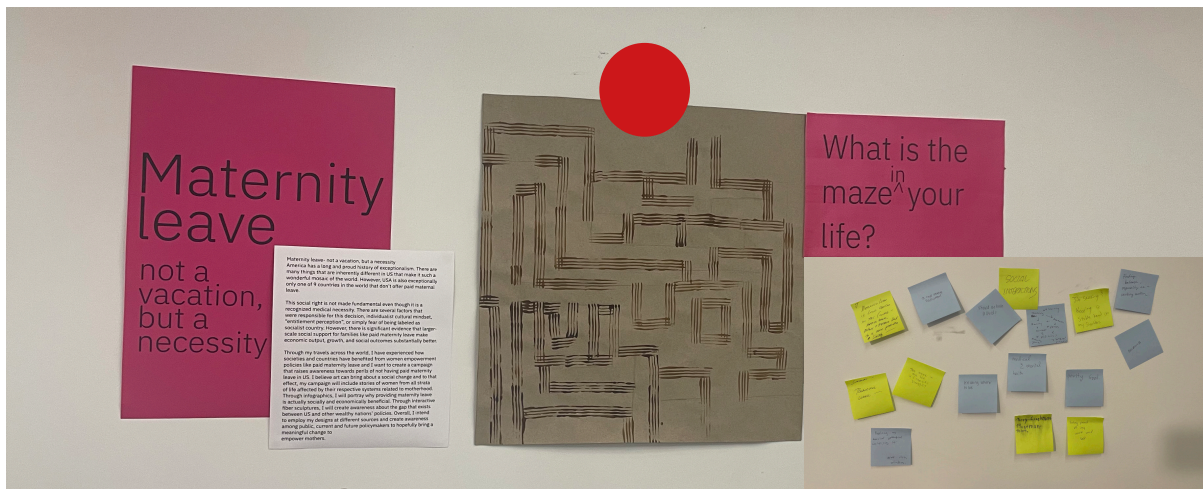
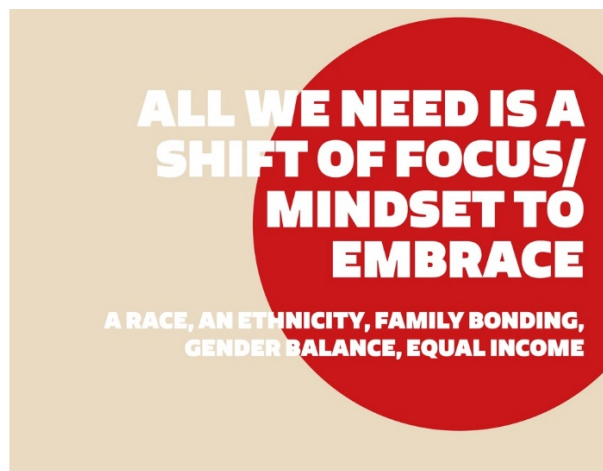


Figure 14 “Maze” – drawn using a comb

Following the work on “Maze” and discussions with my colleagues around the world, I realized that the experiences felt by my fellow contemporaries transcend just gender or race or ethnicity or nationality. Addressing that means adding to the emotional intelligence quotient (EIQ) of individuals which would not only create an awareness of the problem but also acceptance of different individuals to truly create a united world. The experiences that I had gone through during my pregnancy and breastfeeding were not the only challenges faced by people in their personal and professional life, but only a part of it and how beneficial would it be if people had a way to know whether they will be supported at their workplace with these challenges. This led to the

creation of the “Embrace” symbol which has the potential to become the face of the campaign, and become a stamp of approval for organizations who have best practices that support individuals through these challenges. The motto and primary objective of this campaign is to shift the focus to a more human centric approach and shift the mindset to embrace differences of race, gender, ethnicity, income, and family.



*Figure 15* Initial thought poster depicting the primary objective for Embrace campaign.

### **Embrace symbol**

The embrace symbol was designed keeping in mind thoughts on how to balance emotional intelligence, and how that will practically benefit individuals and corporations. For individuals, it will benefit them personally and professionally, while for corporations, it benefits them immensely by having loyal high performing employees which fuel their growth. Eventually, high performing individuals and corporations combine to create overall growth of economy and betterment of the society.

The symbol is designed with the letters e, I, and q in mind representing emotional and intelligence quotient. The inner circle represents the letter “e”, the dot represents the bindi, which signifies

shifting of focus, while also representing the dot in the letter ‘I’ and the outer circle represents the letter ‘q.’ I have purposely kept the outer circle open to depict openness and to show the embrace from the inside going to the outer world. The Embrace symbol was created with its purpose in mind. One of the purposes was to make it aesthetically pleasing, a compact, yet powerful symbol that can easily be put on merchandise, jewellery, clothes, wallpapers, print, bags.

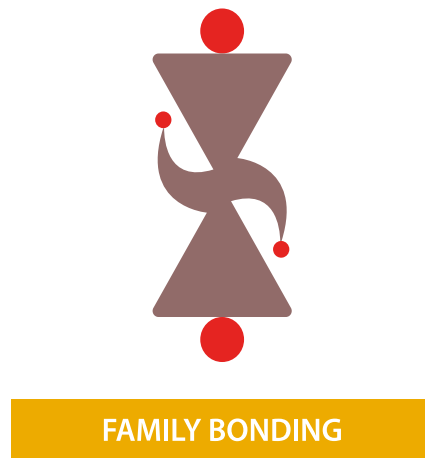


**EMBRACE**

*Figure 16* The Embrace symbol

After designing the embrace symbol, different symbols were designed for each of the 5 criteria that I have listed under the “embrace” umbrella.

The symbol or family bonding was visually inspired by the adinkra symbol for recognition. I saw continuation and playfulness in the adinkra symbol and those were the aspects that I wanted to portray in the family bonding symbol. The two triangles represent parents, but they are created equal to symbolize gender neutrality. This symbol is for all families whether they have same gender or different gender parents. The side lines represent children of those parents. Overall, this symbol signifies the support for families and family bonding leaves that corporations should provide and it is one of the criteria for gaining the embrace symbol.



*Figure 17* Symbol for family bonding.

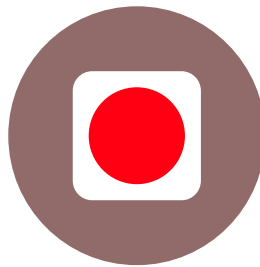
The adinkra symbol for justice was the visual inspiration for the symbol for racial equality. The adinkra symbol is an amalgamation of two shapes – triangle and circle. My symbol for racial equality is a balance of different shapes – circle and triangle are joined together by an open square. The different shapes in “bindi” red color depict different races and the square represents equality. The openness of the square shows the need to be open to provide racial equality.



RACIAL EQUALITY

*Figure 18* Symbol for racial equality.

The symbol for income equality is inspired by an ancient Chinese coin which was an open square inside a circular coin. The outer circle represents the coin which depicts money. The square inside the circle again represents equality while the dot (bindi) inside here represents zero as a mathematical term. The bindi is again representative of the shift of focus needed to achieve income equality.

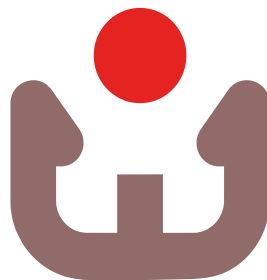


INCOME EQUALITY

*Figure 19* Symbol for income equality.

The ardh-narishwar or the half-man half-woman form of Lord Shiva holds one of the most provocative symbolisms within Hinduism. Shiva is the destroyer, all powerful, alpha-male personality who has all the powers in the world. However, in this form, he is shown to also contain

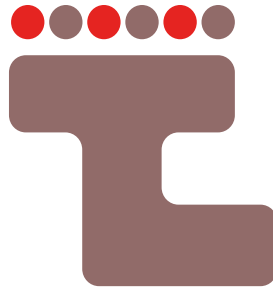
the empathy, kindness, nurture, and compassion of a female, along with the strength, courage, and assertiveness of a male. It has been an inspiration for many an artist and it was an inspiration for me to create the symbol for gender balance. Shiva's weapon is the trident which is the shape of the symbol. Moreover, the arms of the trident represent the 3 genders – male, female, and non-binary. The bindi again shows the need for a shift of focus on to the balance of all genders and equality of all genders in all aspects.



GENDER BALANCE

*Figure 20* Symbol for gender balance.

The overall shape of the adinkra symbol for devotion to god was the visual inspiration for the symbol for ethno-diasporic equality. The shape that I have created in my symbol is of a supporting structure that props up different dots of different colors. The dots represent different ethnicities depicted by different colors. Every ethnic art – tribal art, folk art, Asian art, the dot has a role to play in all ethnic arts. So it seemed appropriate that the dot represents all the ethnicities in this symbol which are uplifted by the solid support structure of ethno-diasporic equality.



## ETHNO-DIASPORIC EQUALITY

*Figure 21* Symbol for ethno-diasporic equality.

As a designer, I have tried to elegantly integrate all these different aspects into my work in a way that I can describe a story through my design. A design that is meaningful, has a purpose, and that leads to a change by shift in thought process or ideology. I have visualized this shift in the form of “Bindi” or a dot that has now become an integral essence in all my designs. The “Bindi” serves as an essential element of all my designs that facilitates the transition of focus within my designs from the superficial to the true and meaningful, which eventually has the power to generate conscious thinking that can drive social change. Working with mixed media, utilizing the Bindi allows me to capture the vastness of my design and present it in a succinct form. All these designs are simplistic on purpose and the aim of creating simplistic designs is the people of all demographics should be able to relate to my symbols, thus creating the inspiration and awareness that is my campaign’s objective.

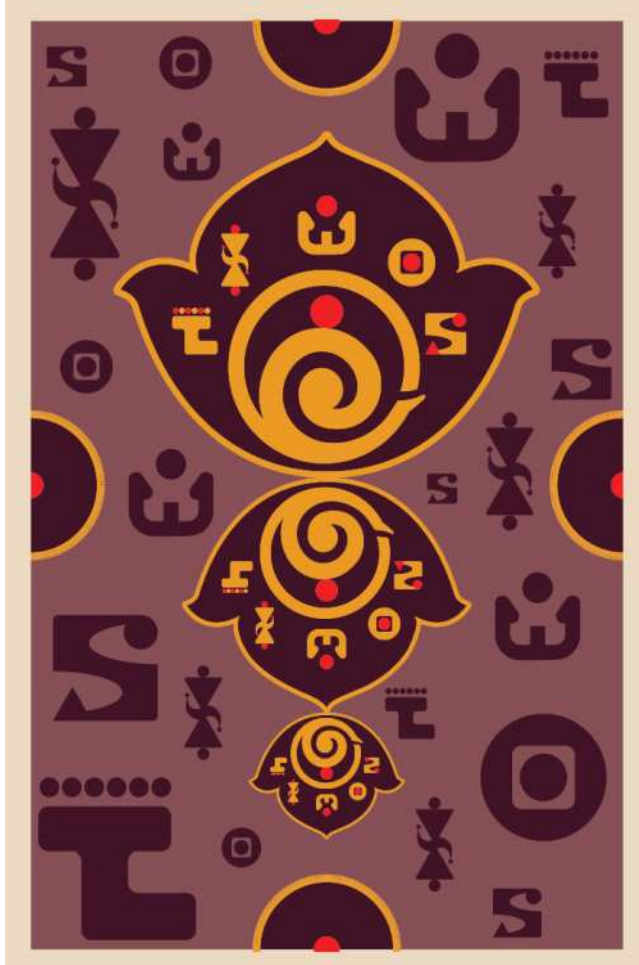
As the next step within my campaign, I have designed a painting portraying the embrace symbol which is hand painted with acrylic paint. The primary object of the painting is the symbol which represents embracing the differences. Each line has its own motion, its own body and when they come together, it becomes a cohesive unit. Psychologically, purple prompts harmony of the mind

and emotions, contributing to mental balance and stability, peace of mind, link between spiritual and physical world between thoughts and activities. Purple is uplifting and calming to the mind (Unknown 2024). Yellow color for high energy, optimism, spontaneity, and sunshine, happiness, and love for learning (Cameron Chapman 2021). Continuous lines represent life cycle, which is inspired by Katchni Style of Madhubani paintings from India (Gaggar 2023).



*Figure 22* The embrace symbol in a painting form. Acrylic on canvas 5ft/ 4ft

Following painting, I have designed mockups of wallpapers where the embrace symbol can be portrayed to create greater awareness and inspiration. The colors used for the wallpaper were like the colors in the painting signifying similar concepts. The concept of putting symbols in wallpapers is an example of how individuals can get inspired if each meaningful symbol is present in your surroundings.



*Figure 23 Digital Wallpaper design 11"/17"*



*Figure 24* Wallpaper mockups of embrace and related symbols.

The symbols can also transform a room and to depict that, I have created a mockup of the nursing room in CSU arts building. Besides nursing room, different relaxation and meditation rooms can also be redesigned with the symbols in mind which can be food for thought while taking a break from work.



*Figure 25* Mockup of the CSU Arts Building nursing room.



*Figure 26* Mockup of a break room/meditation room with the symbols and painting.

The symbols can also be shown on merchandise and their popularity can generate mass awareness about the social messages the symbols stand for.



*Figure 27* Mockup of the symbols on a tote bag, which is representative of different merchandise.



*Figure 28* Poster showing all final symbols.

The goal of this campaign is two-fold: 1) to promote the embrace symbol in merchandise like jewellery, print, clothes, bags, and other objects. The mock-up of the wallpaper is another example of how the embrace symbols can be used in the surroundings to create awareness and inspiration, and 2) to inspire human resources of corporations to accept the embrace criteria in how they operate their businesses and hiring practices. The symbol will then serve as a mark of the fact that these corporations follow the emotional intelligence practices listed in my embrace campaign. Both the goals of this campaign are interrelated. If the symbol is popular among individuals, they will be aware of the significance that it presents. Once the awareness increases, and the symbol is present among hiring practices, prospective employees can make more informed decisions on their

future company's hiring practices and be aware while entering employment. Employers, on the other hand, will be held accountable if they are visibly showing the symbol in their hiring practices. By blending graphic design, fiber, printmaking, and painting, the intention is to introduce a thought to the public, encouraging awareness and a sense of pride in association with this campaign and the potential for bringing about 'change'. Simultaneously, the hope is to encourage corporations to transform their policies by promoting socio-economic performance while embracing these differences through the principles of the symbols that have been created.

### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We discussed earlier how the current generation lacks lateral thinking, which speaks of a need for a shift in generational thinking. The best way to influence generational thinking is when the minds are young and impressionable, and positive guidance needs to be created at that point in their lives. In future, using the principles of the embrace campaign, educational tools can be provided to the youth which educates them on the principles of embrace. Workshops are a great tool to educate young minds, and the future path that I see for my campaign involves educating the youth of today using workshops and awareness activities to make sure they carry these principles in their lives and make a positive difference to society.

Another direction for this campaign is the UN sustainability goals. The 17 goals by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs need an overarching goal for emotional intelligence that ties in all the goals together (UNSDG 2024).

sdgs.un.org

United Nations | Department of Economic and Social Affairs  
Sustainable Development

Home | SDG Knowledge | Intergovernmental Processes | HLPF | SIDS | SDG Actions | Engage | News | About

**THE 17 GOALS** | **169** Targets | **3897** Events | **1348** Publications | **7836** Actions

1 NO POVERTY

2 ZERO HUNGER

3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

4 QUALITY EDUCATION

5 GENDER EQUALITY

6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION

7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES

11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION

13 CLIMATE ACTION

14 LIFE BELOW WATER

15 LIFE ON LAND

16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

See all

Figure 29 UNSDG goals.

## **Proposal for 18<sup>th</sup> UNSDG Goal**

In my opinion, the best way to help people and corporations hear each other and achieve sustainable practices unequivocally is to make them see equality and help them hear each other. Embracing emotional intelligence and creating an equitable environment will lead to a more widespread acceptance of the 17 goals for sustainability. I propose that embrace be the 18<sup>th</sup> goal in sustainable practices that can support and create a favourable environment to achieve the other 17 goals.



*Figure 30 Proposed 18<sup>th</sup> UNSDG goal.*



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