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Using material culture as a method to explore women's experiences of the transition to motherhood: a scoping review

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ABSTRACT

Background: The transition to motherhood is a significant life event affecting the wellbeing of mother and infant. Using material culture as a methodological approach to explore women's experiences of this life event may reduce barriers to research engagement that some marginalised groups experience and support a more inclusive understanding of women's experiences. The aim of this review was to investigate how, and in what ways, existing research has used material culture to explore the transition to motherhood.

Method: Eight databases were searched, MIDIRS, CINAHL, PsycINFO, SocINDEX, Humanities International, Arts & Humanities Database, Sociology Database, and Web of Science. Following screening, six studies met the inclusion criteria. A further study was identified via citation searches and one from expert recommendation. Inclusion criteria were studies which used material culture to explore women's experiences of the transition to motherhood. No methodological, disciplinary, geographical, linguistic, or temporal limitations were imposed, peer-reviewed and grey literature was included. Data were extracted and qualitative descriptive content analysis undertaken.

Results: Studies used material culture to explore a range of women's experiences relating to the transition to motherhood. Underlying these studies were assumptions about the role and importance of material culture in the construction of motherhood in the global north and the value of using material culture as an inclusive way of exploring women's experiences.


Conclusion: Whilst methodological approaches differed in the studies, this review suggests using material culture in research can provide a valuable and inclusive way to understanding women's lived experiences of the transition to motherhood.


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Introduction

Research on material culture, understood as objects shaped by human activity, has grown markedly in the social sciences over the past decade (Carlisle, 2024; Edwards & l'Anson, 2020). This reflects a wider turn toward materiality, sensory experience, emotion, and affect in studies of contemporary life (Buse et al., 2018; Cox & Guillemin, 2018; Peterson, 2022; Willig, 2017), alongside increasing interest in interdisciplinary and creative methodologies, such as photo elicitation, zine making and walking methods (O'Neill & Roberts, 2020; Peterson, 2022; Sheridan & Chamberlain, 2011; Willig, 2017). Using personal, everyday objects in research is argued to generate richer insights into lived experience than traditional research methods, particularly in studies on sensitive issues, such as mental health, dementia, and baby loss, where participants may find it difficult to articulate their experiences verbally (Carlisle, 2024; Cox & Guillemin, 2018; Fleetwood-Smith et al., 2021; Fuller & Kuberska, 2022; Sheridan & Chamberlain, 2011). Sensory engagement with objects can elicit new narratives and modes of reflection and supports expression when verbal communication is limited, whether due to language barriers or the ineffability of certain experiences (Fleetwood-Smith et al., 2021). Moreover, the familiarity of everyday objects can make research more inclusive for individuals and groups who face barriers to participating in conventional research methods, including minoritised communities (Cox & Guillemin, 2018; Peterson, 2022; Sheridan & Chamberlain, 2011; Willig, 2017).

The transition to motherhood is a significant life transition and a period of profound physical, social, and psychological change for women (Hwang et al., 2022), which can have a profound impact on women's wellbeing and that of their infants and families (Hwang et al., 2022, Uriko, 2019; Yopo Díaz, 2018; Kim & Tak, 2015). While many women navigate the transition successfully, other women find this a challenging period, most commonly those who are experiencing marginalisation or multiple disadvantage (Berman et al., 2014; Bollen, 2015; McLeish & Redshaw, 2021). It is also often the case that the experiences of marginalised women are underrepresented in research using more traditional research approaches which at times have failed to adequately reach out to these communities and facilitate their engagement in such research and knowledge production (Goedhart et al., 2021; Kerrigan & Houghton, 2010). To effectively support the wellbeing of all women in this period it is important that we can gain an understanding of women's experiences in a way that ensures that all women's experiences are represented.

Miller (2011) drew attention to how the study of different kinds of objects can give insight into becoming and being a mother. Following Miller (2011) the use of objects related to the transition to motherhood may facilitate a more inclusive and collaborative approach to knowledge production, one in which women play a more active role in directing the research, moving away from more traditional researcher-led approaches. Exploring the meanings and significance of objects, as carriers of affective and embodied memories related to motherhood, could support women to reflect upon and share their experiences of how they make sense of becoming a mother, in a way which is accessible to all women. Employing a more inclusive and accessible approach to doing research makes it more likely that a wider range of women's voices are heard, including those whose voices have been silenced or marginalised in existing research, thus providing a richer and fuller evidence base for more equitable policy and practice.

As a way of starting to explore these issues we chose to undertake a scoping review as this approach allows researchers to identify and map evidence relating to a specific phenomenon and identify key aspects of that phenomenon (Munn et al., 2018; Pollock et al., 2023, p. 520). Therefore, the aim of this review was to investigate how and in what ways existing research has used aspects of material culture to explore women's experiences of the transition to motherhood and why this method was chosen in these studies.

The following research questions were used to guide the review and meet the research aims, i) why was material culture chosen in the selected studies and how was it used as a method in these studies ii) how has material culture been used in the previous work which has explored aspects of women's experiences of the transition to motherhood?

Methods

We used the approach developed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) to undertake this scoping review. Following the identification of the research question, a protocol was developed, and a PEO (population, exposure, and outcome) (see Table 1) framework was used to guide the search strategy (Moola et al., 2015). Search terms were identified by members of the review team, and the search strategy was developed with the help of an information specialist and was adapted for each database (for full search strategies for each database see Supplementary file 1).

We undertook a search of the following databases from date of inception to 3 April 2025: Medline (Ovid), Maternity & Infant Care Database (Ovid), CINAHL Complete (EBSCOhost), PsycINFO (EBSCOhost), SocINDEX (EBSCOhost), Humanities International Complete (EBSCOhost), Arts & Humanities Database (ProQuest), Sociology Database (ProQuest), Web of Science (indexes: SCI-EXPANDED 1970-present; AHCI 1975-present; CPCI-S-1990-present; CPCISSH-1990-present; ESCI 2015-present). No date or language restrictions were applied to the search. Duplicate references were removed using both automated and manual methods in EndNote and the deduplicated references were then imported into the Rayyan software for screening. To identify further studies, we checked the reference lists and searched for forward citations (using Web of Science, Scopus and Google Scholar) of included studies. Study authors were not contacted to obtain or verify the data, as the review focused on qualitative mapping and no major discrepancies were identified (Tricco et al., 2018).

The review included any study that used material culture as a research method to explore women's experiences of the transition to motherhood. To capture the full breadth of work in this interdisciplinary field, the inclusion criteria were deliberately broad. Studies employing any methodology, from any discipline, were eligible, including both peer-reviewed publications and grey literature. No geographical, linguistic, or temporal limits

Table 1. PEO.

Population	Women or girls who have experienced becoming a mother or the transition to motherhood, and their families.
Exposure	Material culture as a research method – using objects, maternal objects, baby clothes, visual culture, memories, cultural material, artifacts, physical objects, keepsakes, photographs, documents, visual artifacts, photographs, etc., to generate insights into lived experience.
Outcomes	Experiences, views, perspectives, feelings, beliefs etc., of maternity care, pregnancy or the transition to motherhood.

were applied. Study selection involved two stages. The titles and abstracts of all studies were screened by one reviewer, and any titles and abstracts not in English were translated using Google Translate. Two members of the research team then independently screened the full-text manuscripts of any studies meeting the inclusion criteria. All members of the review team discussed and reviewed the final selection of studies. The study selection process is summarised in the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) flowchart (<http://www.equator-network.org/reporting-guidelines/prisma-scr/>) (see figure 1).

One reviewer initially performed the data extraction, and this was discussed with other members of the team. Following recommendations from the JBI manual for evidence synthesis (Peters et al., 2020; Pollock et al., 2023) a standardised data extraction form was created and used to collect the following data items: author, publication year, location, study aim(s), methodology, discipline, participant numbers and characteristics and key findings. As in most scoping reviews, formal quality assessment was not undertaken, as the purpose of a scoping review was to provide an overview of the studies rather than analyse their formal quality or methodological rigour (Lockwood & Tricco, 2020; Pollock et al., 2022).

Qualitative descriptive content analysis was chosen for the review as the intention of a scoping review is not to provide an in-depth synthesis of outcomes or results but to map out the extent and nature of existing research on a subject or concept (Lockwood & Tricco, 2020; Peterson, 2022; Pollock et al., 2023). This approach consisted of reading and re-reading the selected papers to support familiarisation with the data, coding was undertaken to identify common patterns and ideas, with these codes organised in broader categories. This was followed by the production of a narrative descriptive summary of the key characteristics of all the chosen studies. These initial findings were then reviewed and refined to be presented as the key characteristics presented in the findings. To support rigour, this process was undertaken independently by two members of the team who then discussed the findings and resolved any areas of difference.

The research team are from a range of disciplines including arts and humanities, allied health, midwifery and information science and bring with them a range of personal and professional perspectives on the process of reviewing and on the focus of the review.

Findings

The search identified 6753 results after the removal of duplicates. Following the title and abstract screening, the full texts of 19 studies were then screened, of which six studies met the inclusion criteria. One study was identified through citation searches, and one further source was identified from expert recommendations. A total of eight studies were included in the review. The study selection process is summarised in the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) flowchart (<http://www.equator-network.org/reporting-guidelines/prisma-scr/>) (see figure 1).

The findings of the review are presented below. We initially describe the characteristics of the selected studies, thereby providing an overview of the eight selected studies and their context. Addressing the review questions, we then initially explore the rationale for the choice of material culture as a methodological approach to explore the transition to motherhood and then how the studies conceptualised and used material culture within their work.

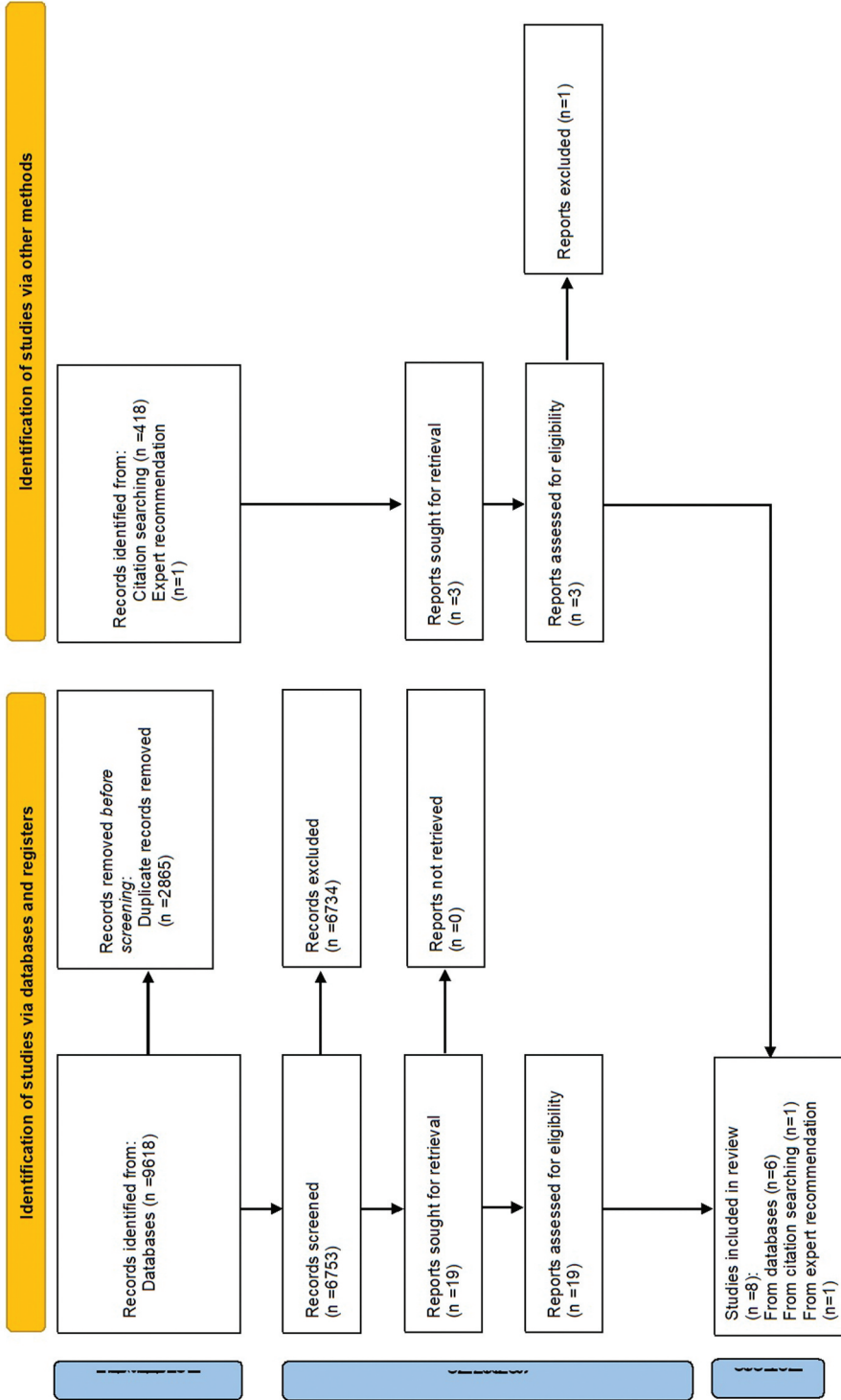


Figure 1. Prisma.

Characteristics of the selected studies

The eight included studies were published between 2000 and 2022. The papers were based on work undertaken in a range of high-income European and global north contexts including the UK ($n = 4$), USA ($n = 2$), Worldwide and Australia (global collections survey and Australian interviews) ($n = 1$), Germany ($n = 1$). The study participants were all mothers, although two studies (Fuller & Kuberska, 2022; Mannay et al., 2018) included some family members alongside mothers, acknowledging the relational nature of motherhood. The participants were recruited from a range of populations including bereaved parents (Fuller & Kuberska, 2022; Geddes, 2021; Layne, 2000), young mothers (Lustig, 2004; Ponsford, 2011), mothers from deprived communities (Mannay et al., 2018), women seeking asylum (Suerbaum, 2022) as well as wider groups of mothers (Pascoe Leahy, 2021). The number of participants in the studies ranged from 4 to 36, although several studies did not specify the number of participants. The studies were all qualitative in design and used a range of methods of data collection in association with aspects of material culture, including elicitation interviews related to objects (Fuller & Kuberska, 2022; Geddes, 2021; Layne, 2000; Lustig, 2004; Mannay et al., 2018; Pascoe Leahy, 2021; Suerbaum, 2022), participant observation (Lustig, 2004; Suerbaum, 2022), photo-elicitation (Ponsford, 2011), visual ethnography (Mannay et al., 2018), personal reflection, and textual analysis (Layne, 2000) and interrogation of objects/catalogues (Pascoe Leahy, 2021). The studies were located within a range of disciplinary areas including heritage studies, youth and childhood studies, migration studies, studies of consumption, bereavement studies, material culture, and ethnography. See Table 2 for the characteristics of the included studies.

The rationale for the use of material culture as a methodological approach

Certain common assumptions underpinned the choice made by authors to use material culture as a methodological approach in all the selected papers. In some papers, such as Mannay (2028), Pascoe Leahy (2021) and Suerbaum (2022) these are explicitly stated, while in others they, and other theoretical and methodological issues, are less clearly identified (Fuller & Kuberska, 2022; Geddes, 2021; Layne, 2000; Lustig, 2004; Ponsford, 2011). The first of these is the assertion that material culture plays an intrinsic role in the social construction of contemporary motherhood and how women experience their transition to motherhood. For example, Pascoe Leahy asserts that:

part of the new mother's experience of matrescence and her adoption of a maternal identity is mediated through the material world and ... material culture is central to the co-constitution of the mother and her child, with artefacts used to prepare for, master or memorialise the maternal role. (Pascoe Leahy, 2021. p1007)

Similarly, Suerbaum (2022) suggests that "*maternal subjectivity emerges out of entanglements with more than the human*" (Suerbaum, p. 235). Based on this assumption, the paper explores the ways in which becoming a mother is inextricably linked to and mediated through the acquisition, consumption, and use of material objects.

In several papers (Geddes, 2021; Layne, 2000; Pascoe Leahy, 2021) the choice to use material culture comes from a belief that objects play a crucial role in transmitting

Table 2. Characteristics of the included studies.

Author	Discipline	Focus of paper	setting	population	sample size	Methodology	Method of data collection
Fuller & Kuberska (2022)	Bereavement	Experiences of baby loss & bereavement – and use of material objects particularly memory boxes	England	Bereaved mothers & family members	31 women & 5 friends/partners	Qualitative Narrative	Semi structured interviews
Geddes (2021)	Social Work	Experiences of motherhood and loss associated with non-consensual adoption	England	Women who have experienced non-consensual adoption	17 mothers	Qualitative	Interviews
Lustig (2004)	Material culture	Role/use/meaning of formal photographs (objects & consumption) in poverty	USA	Teenage mothers	participant-observation -numbers not reported. 78 interviews mothers	Ethnography	participant observation & interviews
Layne (2000)	Childhood	Experience of bereavement (& the construction of motherhood & “neonatal personhood”	USA	Bereaved mothers	Not reported	Qualitative	Personal experience, observation, interviews & textual analysis
Pascoe Leahy (2021)	Heritage studies	Material objects within personal & public collections to explore historical aspects of mothering	Worldwide	Mothers – different generations	Number for this study not reported, notes that 60 women in the wider study	Qualitative	Interviews & interrogation of objects in collections and catalogues
Mannay et al. (2018)	Ethnography	Intergenerational infant feeding practises & the role of visual methods within ethnography	Wales	Mothers & grandmothers deprived communities in South Wales	6 mothers & 6 grandmothers	Ethnography	Observation & interviews
Ponsford (2011)	Youth Studies	Consumption practices and construction of maternal identity amongst young mums in a UK city.	England	Young mothers	13 women in MBU & PRU	Mixed methods	Photo elicitation
Suerbaum (2022)	Migration studies	Experience of motherhood amongst migrants with precarious immigration status in Berlin	Germany	Immigrant mothers with precarious immigration status	4 women	Ethnography	Participant observation & semi-structured interviews to create ethnographic vignettes

emotions, and that it is this quality which makes them a powerful and valuable way of engaging with women's experiences of such an important life transition. They suggested that using material culture in the form of physical objects in research allows experiences and emotions to be accessed in a way that is more powerful than the use of traditional purely verbal or written research methods. For them, it is the *"irrefutable realness of physical things"* (Layne, 2000, p. 324) that have power beyond words, hold memories, emotions and feelings and are experienced at an experiential and deeper level. As Geddes asserts:

With the passage of time and as children grow and change, particular objects identified as holding special meaning are commonly retained for safekeeping, having become "imbued with mnemonic value. (Geddes, 2021, p. 815)

Pascoe Leahy also identified the way in which objects' ability to hold emotions have the capacity to:

transport us to a time, a place and a feeling, and anchor our emotions associated with that experience. (Pascoe Leahy, 2021, p. 1007)

These objects, which women have chosen to keep as significant, such as toys, clothing, blankets, by their physical presence act to connect women back to the emotions and experiences of that time, a time which has past, but which continues to resonate in the present (Fuller & Kuberska, 2022; Geddes, 2021; Layne, 2000; Pascoe Leahy, 2021). In other studies (Lustig, 2004; Ponsford, 2011; Suerbaum, 2022). The objects which have meaning are items which are in daily usage whose links are not to the past, but to contemporary experiences, as symbols and signifiers of motherhood. In this context, the use of material objects allows insight into the experiences of women as they experience them, from a contemporary rather than historical perspective. For example, for Suerbaum observing the refugee women she worked with led her to believe that a key object for women was the pram, and that the pram acted as *"a carrier of meaning, signifying parenthood and symbolising care"* for women as they navigated Berlin as new mothers in a new country (Suerbaum, 2022, p. 257). In this way, the form of the object, as well as its role and nature is a way of exploring women's lived experience.

The use of material culture as a methodology

While all the papers assert that the use of material culture is a valuable way of exploring aspects of women's transition to motherhood, the extent to which they used this method and the part it plays within their overall methodological approach varies, as does the direct input of women and the presence or absence of the physical objects. In this section, we explore the different ways in which material culture was used in these studies, highlighting commonalities and differences.

In four of the papers (Geddes, 2021; Mannay et al., 2018; Ponsford, 2011; Suerbaum, 2022) physical objects (or in Ponsford, images of the objects) were central to the methodological approach where the research is led by the material objects. In Geddes (2021) work on motherhood in the face of the loss of children to non-consent adoption, women were asked to choose objects related to this loss as the starting point from which they could explore motherhood in the face of such maternal loss. Mannay et al. (2018) used a

similarly object-led approach in which women were asked to show objects connected to their experiences of mothering through infant feeding practices. Again, it was the objects which women had chosen to keep and share which were the basis of the research interactions. Mannay argued that this approach, where women selected significant objects to reflect lived experience, allowed women more agency in directing the research and in the co-construction of knowledge than in more traditional researcher-led methods. Mannay explained how:

participants brought the expected objects, bottles, baby formula, and breast pumps, but they also brought other items of significance such as baby books, photograph albums, or cards that generated new stories that were beyond the interview themes envisaged by the researchers. (Mannay et al., 2018, p. 764)

They felt that as such this facilitated new insights that:

move beyond the prescriptive format of the interview guide enabling participants to introduce what they felt was worth talking about rather than fixing them within the defined structure of set interview questions. (Mannay et al., 2018, p. 766)

Mannay believed that through working in this way, new spaces and areas of knowledge can be explored and can:

allow more nuanced insights into the private and public spaces of pregnancy and parenting (Mannay et al., 2018, p. 760).

Ponsford's work also made objects chosen by women central to her exploration of the role of consumption in the construction of young motherhood. In her work:

a focus on the social, cultural and affective role of objects provides an innovative way of understanding something of the everyday lives, experiences and struggles of a group of young mothers in the UK. (Ponsford, 2011, p. 542)

Her work explored how the chosen objects shed light on the ways in which young women worked to establish their identities as mothers. In this work, while using photographs of the objects of significance, Ponsford stressed it was the physical objects within the photographs, not the photographs themselves, which were the basis of analysis and the central focus of the work.

Suerbaum (2022) focused on three objects in her work, owned by the forced migrant women she worked with: the pram, the plastic bag, and the notebook, which she believed, from her ethnographic observations, were of significance and provided insight into their experiences of becoming and being a mother, when they have a precarious immigration status in Germany. These objects were chosen by the author through her observations of the women's daily lives, observations which were then explored further through interviews with women. This contrasts with all the other selected papers in that these objects were not ones which the women themselves identified as being significant to them in their daily lives and were not ones which had been saved as precious or emotionally valuable.

In other papers (Fuller & Kuberska & Kuberska, 2022; Layne, 2000; Lustig, 2004; Pascoe Leahy, 2021), while objects and their nature and function, were the focus of the research, the physical objects did not form the central part of the approach, and they were additional to other aspects of the research approach. In three papers, Pascoe

Leahy (2021), Lustig (2004) and Fuller & Kuberska (2022), objects were used to deepen understanding or add to existing research approaches rather than providing the primary method. Pascoe Leahy (2021) used objects women had saved, but these were used as an adjunct to the wider life histories she was employing to explore women's transition to motherhood within their larger biography/life story. In her work, women were only asked if they had "*saved any objects, photos or writings to remember becoming a mother*" (p. 944) and that they might want to share when the interviews had been underway for some time.

Lustig's (2004) study of "teen" motherhood in the US focused on professional baby photos as she believed that the acquisition, consumption, and use of these provided insights into aspects of these young women's experience of motherhood. However, she explained that most of her data came from "*participant observation*" and "*semi-structured interviews*" as the starting point and it was in these that the significance of the photographs as objects became apparent and which she then explored. In Fuller & Kuberska's (2022) paper, a crucial part of the exploration of motherhood in the face of baby loss was exploration of the narratives surrounding the memory boxes given to families following bereavement, rather than an exploration of the materiality of the objects themselves. In these sessions, the boxes as objects were not the main focus. The women were not asked to bring the boxes to the sessions and the authors noted that they did not ask specifically about the boxes and objects and that they "*only asked whether we could see the objects when it seemed appropriate rather than as a matter of routine*" (Fuller & Kuberska, 2022 p. 5). In the work of Layne (2000), the physicality of the chosen objects related to the loss of an infant is of central concern, but her work does not include the physical objects themselves or one-to-one interactions with women and their chosen objects. Layne (2000) instead looked at the representation of the objects within women's narratives. She explored narratives from pregnancy loss support organisations in the US through her personal interaction within the groups as a user and observer and through textual analysis of the newsletters from these groups.

Discussion

The purpose of this review was to consider how and in what ways existing research has used aspects of material culture to explore women's experiences of the transition to motherhood and why this methodology was chosen in these studies. Eight studies (Fuller & Kuberska, 2002; Geddes, 2021; Layne, 2000; Lustig, 2024; Mannay et al., 2018; Pascoe Leahy, 2021; Ponsford, 2011; Suerbaum, 2022) focused on women's experiences of motherhood within the global north suggesting that research that takes a wider global perspective is needed. While demographic details were limited, and it was therefore hard to ascertain equity-related data, the studies did include women with a range of life situations and from a range of communities, including some from marginalised or seldom heard communities. The studies were done in a range of disciplinary areas predominantly social science and humanities.

The studies demonstrated the significance of the transition to motherhood as a period in women's lived experiences, a finding congruent with wider literature on the impact of the changes taking place at this time on women's physical and psychosocial wellbeing (Hwang et al., 2022; Kim & Tak, 2015; Uriko, 2019; Yopo Díaz, 2018). They

demonstrate the challenges women face as they negotiate a new identity within social constructions of what it means to be a (good) mother and the strategies they use to negotiate, accommodate, or resist these ideas (Baker, 2026; Miller, 2023). The studies also support the assertions of Prinds et al. (2014) and Lorén et al. (2024) on the need to take a holistic view of women's experiences of this time, looking beyond the biomedical to embrace more existential and meaning-making aspects of this period of change and becoming.

We found that the papers used material culture to explore a range of women's experiences of this time, including baby loss, precarious migration status, non-consensual adoption, and infant feeding. This paper shares key assumptions including, the role and importance of material culture in the construction of motherhood in the global north and that the use of material culture, as a research approach provides a valuable way of accessing and supporting women to explore their experiences of this time. The studies used material culture in a variety of ways. For some this was their primary method, whilst for other researchers, it was an extension of other methods, providing a way of adding further insights and depth, and was included alongside more traditional approaches of research into the study of maternal experience.

The use of material culture in the selected studies resonates with the variety of approaches used in the wider literature. In some methodological approaches to using material culture, the role of objects has been to act as a prompt or to elicit memories (Willig, 2017). This approach is often combined with other methods, such as interviews or ethnographic practices, where the use of objects can be seen to enhance the quality of the data collected (Sheridan & Chamberlain, 2011). Other studies which are more object-led have focused on the material properties of objects and sensory engagement and interaction, for example, Layne's focus on the softness of baby things and Cox & Guillemin's emphasis on the sensory qualities of objects (Cox & Guillemin, 2018; Layne, 2000).

The studies in this review explored how certain objects function within different research settings, helping to facilitate and explore with women their experiences of the transition to motherhood. The studies emphasise the significance of everyday objects, those things which are embedded in the routines of everyday life and communication with each other, but which are often overlooked and neglected. The interdisciplinary field of material culture has long highlighted the importance of the ordinary and mundane. For example, Turkle (2007) and Miller (2010) argue for the consideration of familiar objects that guide our daily routines and hold our affections.

In addition, many of the studies emphasise how the material, tactile, and sensory aspects of physical objects can act to allow a deeper engagement with an exploration of aspects of experience. This emphasis on tactility resonates with wider research which highlights how the use of material objects can often provide insights which go beyond the verbal, to the unsayable (Cox & Guillemin, 2018; Peterson, 2022; Willig, 2017) and can provide deeper insight into the "*quality & texture*" of the life worlds of those we work with (Willig, 2017, p. 211).

Most of the selected studies worked with groups of women who are frequently marginalised, such as young mothers (Lustig, 2004; Ponsford, 2011) refugees (Suerbaum, 2022), women who were experiencing challenging situations, such as women who have had children removed (Geddes, 2021) and women experiencing baby loss (Fuller & Kuberska, 2022; Layne, 2000). This suggests that using material culture in this way provides a valuable

and inclusive way to explore experiences of the transition to motherhood with women from a diverse variety of backgrounds and settings. These findings resonate with other studies which have found this approach provided both a productive and inclusive way of working with communities, in the global north, who have been often marginalised by traditional research approaches, including migrant women who may experience language barriers (Peterson, 2022), and homeless women (McCarthy, 2020). The studies also reflect wider research which suggests that this is a valuable method to use when exploring sensitive aspects of lived experience such as, mental health (Carlisle, 2023) and end of life experiences (Willig, 2017), which may otherwise be difficult to articulate, as the familiar object can provide a basis for which the participants can build their narrative (Carlisle, 2023; Cox & Guillemin, 2018).

Strengths and limitations

A key strength of this review is that its broad inclusion criteria, encompassing both peer-reviewed and grey literature within a global scope, enabled the integration of research from a wide range of cultural and disciplinary contexts, and present a variety of perspectives, albeit from the global north. This focus, however, does mean that these studies reflect the experiences of women in that location, and suggest that wider research is needed to look beyond this perspective. Additionally, the limited demographics provided limit the ability to explore the characteristics of the women involved in the studies in detail, particularly with regard to equity-related data. A possible limitation was that the review was not registered before publication, which may have improved transparent reporting (Peters et al., 2020). An additional strength of the review has been the multi-disciplinary team which has brought a range of different academic perspectives and experiences to the study.

Conclusion

Evidence from this review suggests that a research approach that encompasses material culture may be one that offers an opportunity to work with women to explore their experiences of a significant life transition as well as wider aspects of lived experiences. It also suggests that it is a particularly valuable way to work with groups commonly marginalised by more traditional research approaches, or for whom traditional approaches are challenging, thereby providing an approach which is more participatory, accessible, and inclusive. Using this approach provides a way of addressing the need to create a deeper and more collaboratively produced understanding of women's experiences of becoming a mother for all, including those who may be traditionally marginalised or seldom heard. It may also provide a useful approach when exploring sensitive topics, such as baby loss, which may be challenging to explore within more traditional research settings. The next step for research would be to explore this methodological approach with women from marginalised or seldom heard communities, including those with language barriers, who face maternal health inequalities. We need to explore if this approach could provide a useful and acceptable way of exploring other aspects of motherhood and maternity care in this population to support improvements in their maternal wellbeing.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Marie-Clare Balaam**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Carole Hunt**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Cath Harris**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – review & editing; **Mel Haith-Cooper**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Pip McKnight**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing.

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Data availability statement

All literature used in this review is publicly available.

Ethic statement

Ethical approval was not required for this review as all literature are publicly available.

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