

Design Review

Cook and Cradle

Startup Garage



Jenai Akina | Nikhil Gupta | Alex Nguyen-Phuc | Sara Fares

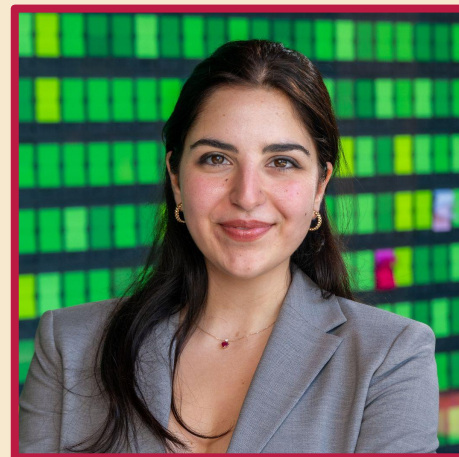
The team



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The [original] problem

Postpartum women in the U.S. struggle with nutrient deficiencies, fatigue, and a loss of intergenerational knowledge, leaving them without the physical, emotional, or cultural support needed to prepare nourishing meals during recovery.

The [original] solution

Customizable, minimal-prep meal kits rooted in pan-Asian traditions—offering broths, fresh ingredient bundles, and lactation-boosting snacks—to help new mothers nourish themselves with ease while embracing a comforting mealtime ritual.



We have loved learning from our interview process!

Interview Type	Mom Interviews	Paid Support Interviews	Total
Needs Finding	37	4	41
Prototype Testing	16	5	21
Total	53	9	62

We uncovered burning problems, checked our assumptions, and iterated with interviewees:

- 10+ prototypes: storyboard, mockup, landing pages (incl. FB ads), physical products
- Sourcing mix: family/friends, asking interviewees for additional contacts, GSB Blast and group chats, Facebook, cold emails, pretending to be a mom with doula agencies

Note: 6 of the moms were re-interviews



We fine-tuned our POV over time with 4 pivots and landed back on nutrition

Hackathon:

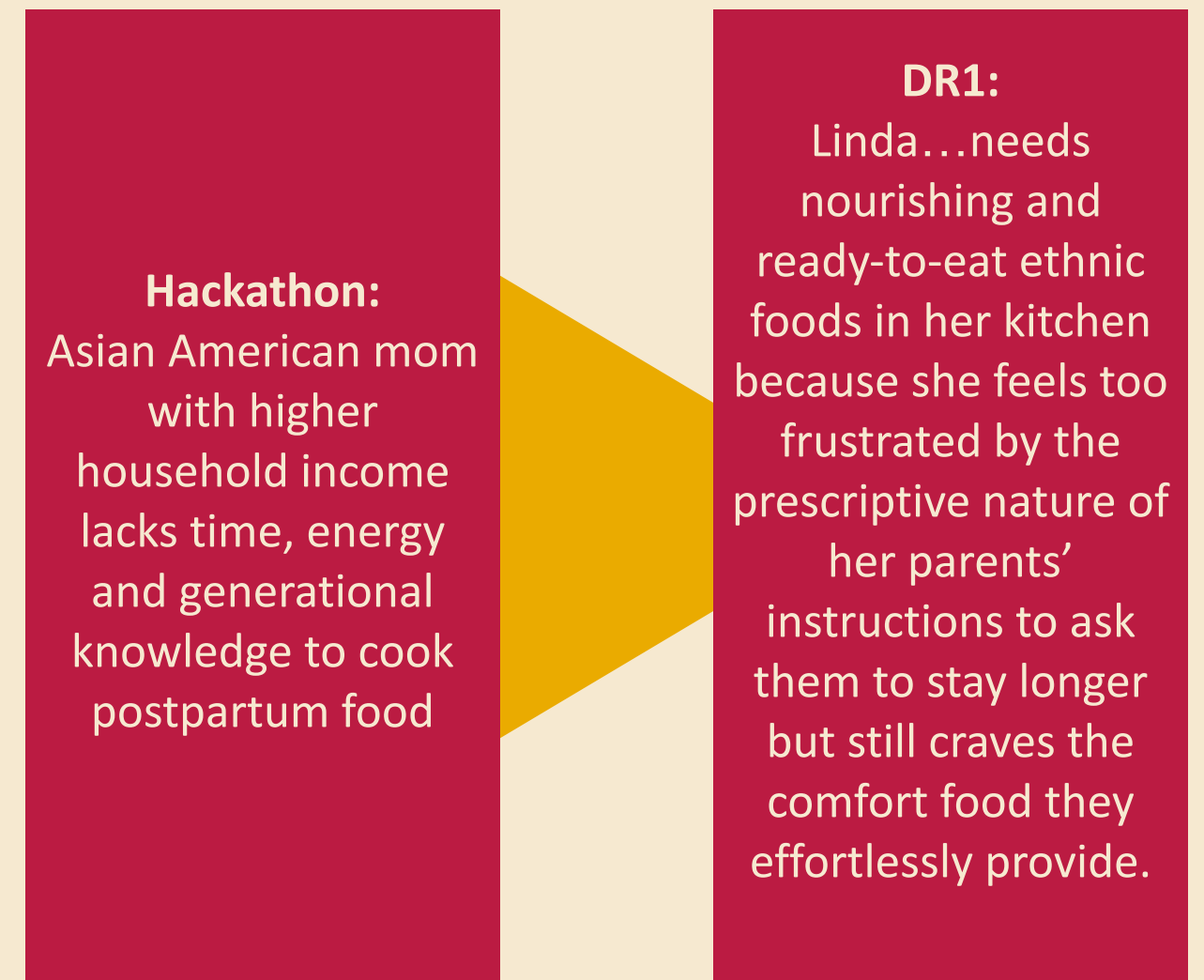
Asian American mom
with higher
household income
lacks time, energy
and generational
knowledge to cook
postpartum food

Note: User (Linda) hasn't changed so removed those details here for clarity



We fine-tuned our POV over time with 4 pivots and landed back on nutrition

PIVOT 1: ZOOM IN

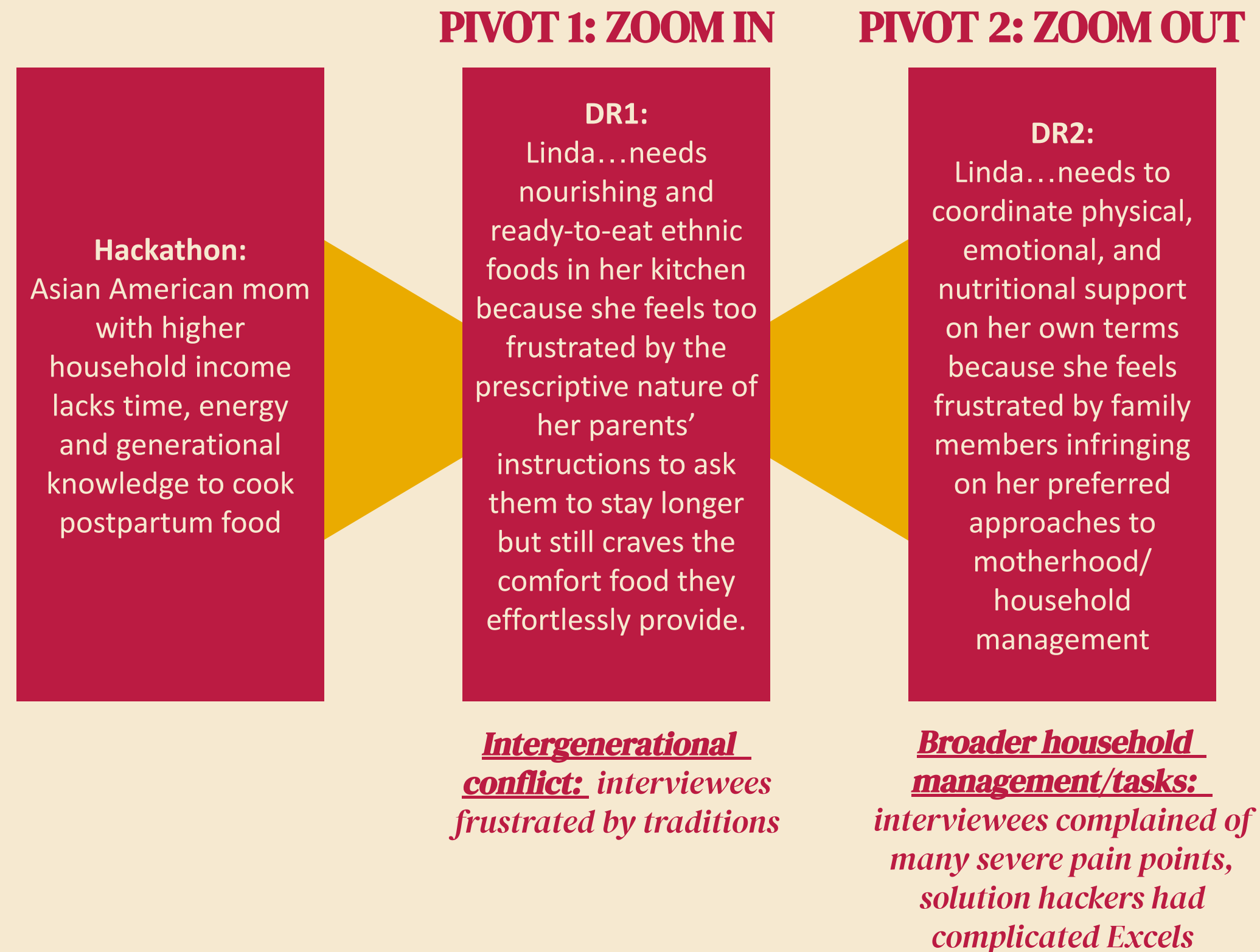


**Intergenerational
conflict:** interviewees
frustrated by traditions

Note: User (Linda) hasn't changed so removed those details here for clarity



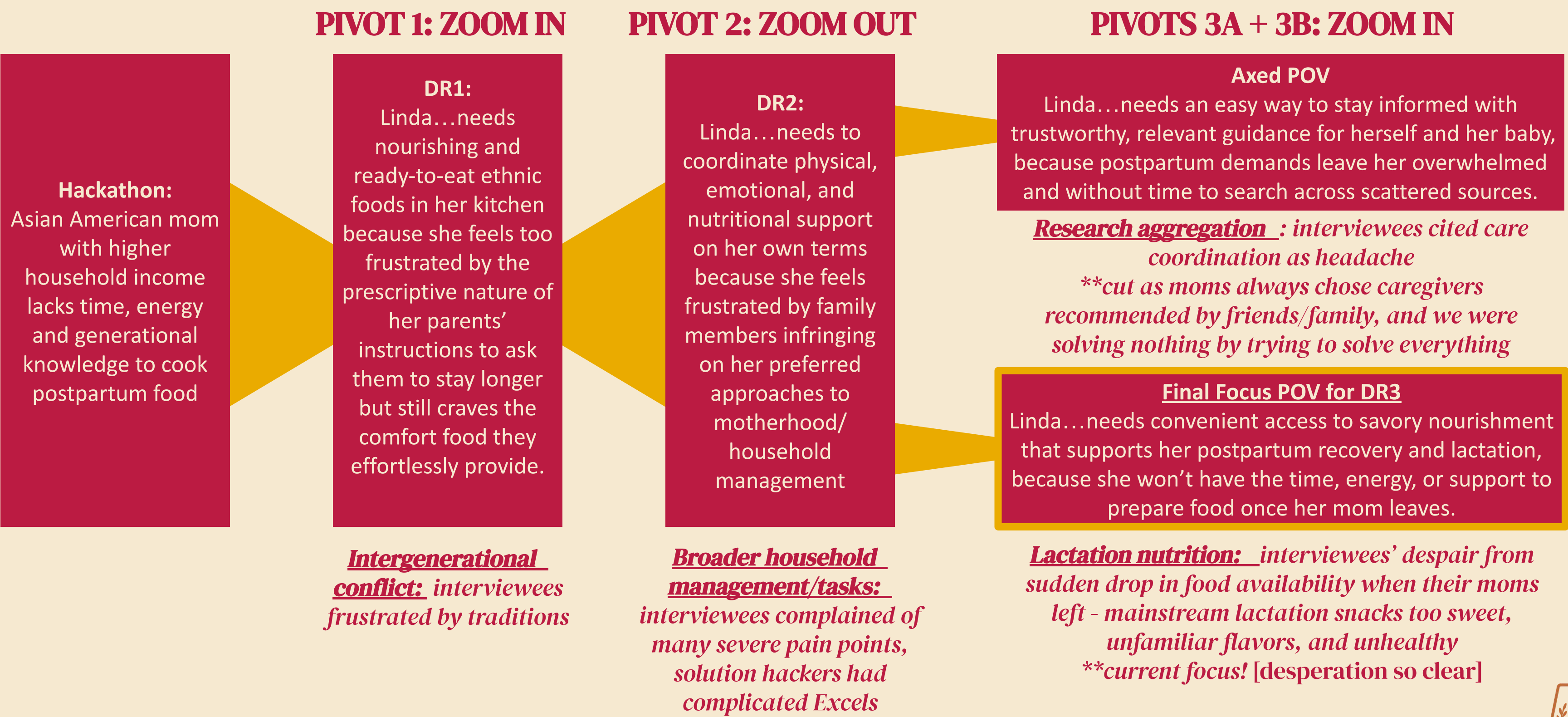
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Key insights: Each pivot was informed by 4 unmet needs

Asian Meal Delivery Service



- “People don’t realize how much the right food can heal—that’s thousands of years of wisdom. In Chinese culture, there’s a whole diet-based system for recovery, but those ingredients aren’t at Trader Joe’s”
- “I would’ve definitely used a food service—there’s something powerful about Chinese traditions, where food is medicine. It’s not just washed lettuce—it’s centuries of knowing how to restore the body.

Household/Task Management

- “I wanted to do it all—even with my husband’s help. But after a few weeks, the sleep deprivation hit hard. He took the night shift, the last bottle feed—my mother-in-law stepped in too.”
- “The hidden cost was the immense mental load—especially postpartum. You’re suddenly managing everything from diapers to lactation consultants, all while recovering and figuring it out in real time.”
- “I never resented my husband—but his life didn’t really change like mine did.”

Jet/Lillian Schedule		Stephen Schedule	Nanny Schedule	Mom Schedule
Sample 1	Sample 2			
8:00 AM	Awake		Breakfast	Breakfast
9:00 AM	Awake	Work/Meetings	Jet Shift or break	
10:00 AM	Sleep		Cook Lunch	
11:00 AM	Sleep	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
12:00 PM	Awake	Sleep	Jet Shift or break	Jet Shift or break if Nanny covers
1:00 PM	Awake	Work		Sleep
2:00 PM	Sleep	Dogs & Exercise	Cook Dinner	Dinner
3:00 PM	Awake	Dinner	Break	Dinner
4:00 PM	Sleep	Night Routine	Night Routine	Night Routine
5:00 PM	Awake	Sleep		Sleep
6:00 PM	Sleep	Jet Shift	Sleep	Jet Shift
7:00 PM	Awake	Sleep		Sleep
8:00 PM	Sleep	Jet Shift	Morning Routine	Morning Routine
9:00 PM	Awake	Sleep	Jet Shift	
10:00 PM	Sleep	Sleep	Cook Breakfast	
11:00 PM	Awake	Work/Meetings		
12:00 AM	Sleep			
1:00 AM	Awake			
2:00 AM	Sleep			
3:00 AM	Awake			
4:00 AM	Sleep			
5:00 AM	Awake			
6:00 AM	Sleep			
7:00 AM	Awake			

Research Aggregation Platform

- “Having to navigate complex insurance, find providers and see if they’re good; and some of it can be done before but you don’t know what you need until it happens”
- “There’s no shortage of apps listing specialists—but what’s missing is one that actually helps you find the right ones, aligned with your insurance, your doctors, your needs. I had to manage it all across multiple platforms. Every mom has BabyCenter and Babylist, but we need something smarter—something that truly pulls it all together.”
- “Breastfeeding, body recovery, baby milestones—we need one trusted source that helps moms say, ‘Okay, this is normal. I’ve got this.’

Ready-made Lactation Rice Balls

- “Once the confinement nanny left, everything got more erratic—some days I only had two meals. I was so tired I couldn’t even make breakfast. That whole season is a blur, but I remember one thing clearly: I was hungry all the time.”
- “I personally love soups—I’d drink them out of a mug with one hand while holding the baby with the other. It was the easiest way to make sure I actually got three meals a day.”
- “When I’m starving, I’d rather grab a packaged rice ball than wait for someone to coordinate and drop off a meal. With meal trains, I never know when food’s coming, if I’ll be awake, or even in the mood to eat it.”



Our persona has persisted throughout the pivots



Linda, 30-y/o, SF-based,
values independence



Torn between
tradition and
modern parenting



Seeking
reassurance she is
doing okay



Deciding how to
move forward as
parents go home



Value Proposition

Target Customer

For AAPI, upper middle class, postpartum moms

Need / Problem

who struggle to find convenient, enjoyable nourishment that supports recovery and lactation,

Product

“Mama Fuel”

Benefits / Value

offers ready-made rice balls that serve as “single hand” mini meals packed with organic, filling ingredients that promote healing and lactation support.

Existing Alternatives

Unlike typical American lactation snacks which are sweet, heavy, and processed

Point of Difference

Mama Fuel rice balls are savory and delicious, pulling from familiar Asian flavors.



We ran a robust prototyping process to test our key hypothesis coming out of our last decision round

Pivot: Zoom *back* in to focus on lactation-improving quick meals

Hypothesis:
Moms are dissatisfied with sugary, processed lactation snacks and prefer a quick savory bite if it's convenient, “real” food that leads to better milk production.



Interviews informed design requirements for food prototypes

Contains natural, nourishing ingredients

“I stayed away from anything that sounded **weird and synthetic.**”

“My mom made me seaweed soup every day because that’s what Koreans believe helps postpartum moms **heal.**”

Increases lactation and milk supply

“I used to keep a box of Aussie bites at my bedside and eat them in the **middle of the night.**”

Middle of the night, ‘one-handed’ convenience

“I would pour soups into a mug and sip them because I only had **one hand** to eat with. My other arm had a baby in it.”

“It’s hard to sit and eat meals, even at home. You want to **pop it in your mouth.**”

Feels familiar in cultural context

“I ate so many oat power bars, but I missed flavors that felt familiar and reminiscent of cultural heritage.”

“It was amazing to have my mom cook for me, not because she’s an amazing cook, but because of having familiar **comfort food.**”



Several heavier snacks were of interest to some moms...



...But onigiri-type foods garnered most excitement across AAPI cultures



We then played with fusion filling options and packaging modifications



One soft-spoken, Hindu vegetarian mom stopped mid-sentence and screamed “OOOO!” when she saw this prototype

One Chinese mom made it clear: even with a familiar format, not all fusion flavors hit



Van Westendorp helped us benchmark the price of a rice ball

At what price is a rice ball....

<i>a bargain?</i>	\$2.50
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<i>expensive?</i>	\$5.00
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<i>prohibitively expensive?</i>	\$6.00
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<i>so cheap that you'd worry?</i>	\$1.50
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Moms anchored pricing on TJ's rice ball

“Having babies is expensive—it’s a crisis in America. On the other hand, it’s a huge demographic of people in **survival mode, throwing money at every problem.** We’re not traveling, drinking or spending money on anything else.”



Moms' reactions gave us conviction in lactation *and* postpartum healing food pivot

Moms want to feel *seen*

- “There’s really not much out there that’s made for new moms. I love that these products are focused partially on lactation and partially just on postpartum nutrition.”
- “I was focused on how do I help my body recover... but I don’t like Western flavors.”

Differentiate from lactation tea and cookies/bars

- “I was so sick of the smell of fenugreek tea. I just wanted to feel nourished without forcing something down.”
- “I’m so tired of bars...I can’t eat Clif or KIND bars anymore”

Emphasize organic and natural ingredients

- “Making these specifically organic and heavy metal-free would be great way to differentiate from a Ranch 99 rice ball.”
- “I subsist off the Trader Joe’s version, but wish they had actual organic meat instead of plant-based additives.”

Design requirements not previously considered

- “Avoid loud packaging when tearing and avoid crunching because you don’t want to wake a baby.”
- “I’m hesitant about the amount of protein versus carbs.”
- “Moringa, fenugreek and red date all feel foreign—postpartum I’m looking for comfort, not newness.”
- “Is this scientifically backed?”



Physical prototype V0 - ready for you TODAY!



Preliminary testing with Google ads hints at customer preferences

Ad
 Postpartum S... Postpartum sn... Made for new ... View asset details +3 images
 Postpartum M... Postpartum m... Made for new ... View asset details +1 image
 Postpartum A... Postpartum A... Made for new ... View asset details +5 images
 Postpartum A... Postpartum A... Made for new ... View asset details +4 images

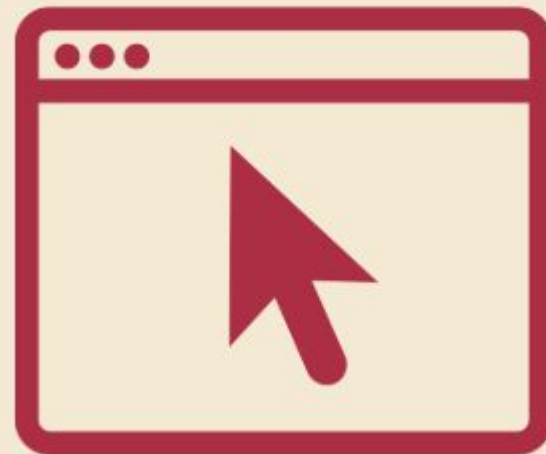
A/B Test	CTRs	Statistically significant?	Takeaways	Next steps
 Rice Ball vs. Soup	Rice ball: 4.03% Soup: 1.58%	Yes (p=.0001)	Rice ball has a higher CTR (153% higher), maybe because of the fact that it's a more substantive and filling food	Test different rice ball formats and messaging (e.g., healing, warm, drinkable packaging) to understand why it beats soup - is it volume of food, number of calories, protein content, associations with Asian flavors?
 Heat-and-Drink Cup vs. Pouch Packaging	Cup: 6.09% Pouch: 2.35%	Yes (p=.0001)	Strong preference for the cup format (160% higher), maybe because of handheld / convenience	Test other packaging variations, pressure test the heat-and-drink cup and understand the reasons moms like it (convenience? handheld?), understand costs to create this packaging
 Snack vs. Meal	Snack: 4.08% Meal: 3.50%	No (p=.195)	Snack marginally outperformed meal; not statistically significant	Re-test with more impressions; test using different variations; run a survey to better uncover new moms' preferences
 Frozen vs. Shelf Stable	Frozen: 1.16% Shelf-stable: 0.50%	No (p=.251)	Frozen has resonated more so far, sample size too small; not statistically significant	More testing including verbiage around convenience/shelf stability vs freshness with the frozen packaging to clarify consumer priorities

Note: statistical significance measured at the 95% confidence level



Our channel strategy reaches moms where comfort meets convenience

DTC Site



We aim to deliver directly to new moms through an **online store**, offering seamless ordering and fast shipping. This channel ensures that moms can get nourishing meals without leaving home—perfect for their recovery and busy schedules.

Social Media Marketing



Target new mom groups, prenatal classes, and AAPI-focused online communities through **social media and digital partnerships**. By sharing recipes, postpartum wellness tips, and real mom testimonials, we build trust and engage with moms where they already seek support.

Physical Presence in Grocery Stores



We partner with **specialty grocery stores**, **Asian supermarkets**, and **community centers** to meet moms in places they trust for quality and cultural authenticity. Our presence here makes Mama Fuel rice balls accessible and part of the local support system.



We are excited to begin building our MVP!

We have identified and validated a need and a prototype that resonates with customers, so we have a strong-enough prototype (rice balls)

We are filling a whitespace for moms

- *When asked about lactation snacks:* “The only lactation suggestions I got were drink Mother’s milk tea and drink water”
- *After seeing one of the prototypes with fenugreek listed:* “It’s amazing to have something original to help consume fenugreek. I was so sick of the smell of fenugreek tea”
- *After seeing various prototypes of postpartum meals/snacks:* “I love love love these. I love the soups. I love the rice balls and kibbeh. I love this idea. There’s not a lot out there for this”

We are replicating grandma’s love through Asian flavors

- “It was a dire situation when my mom left - I struggled to eat in her absence”
- “After my mom left, we started using this food service because we needed something nourishing and easy”
- “My mom cooked for me, everything home-cooked. She didn’t even buy broths. When she left, that all stopped”
- “It was wonderful to be nourished by my own mother, but I wish I had something that felt like that after she left”

We have conviction in frozen food

- “Shelf stable food needs preservatives. Frozen doesn’t need preservatives, which I care about, and it tastes better”
- “We used a healthy chef service that delivered meals in an ice chest every Monday”
- *From Chef & CPG expert:* “Cold chain technology is evolving quickly. Chobani’s acquisition of Daily Harvest increases confidence in the space”
- *From Google Ads testing:* higher CTR for frozen foods, though not yet statistically significant



Our BMC guides us as we hedge against key risks

Problem Need a burst of healthy calories in the middle of the night while breastfeeding or pumping Experience a sudden drop in the availability of familiar flavors once their own moms stop being their primary support a few months post-childbirth Experience anxiety around breastfeeding and consume lactations teas and cookies to supplement supply, yet deprioritize own physical healing post-birth	Customer / Stakeholder segments For which target customers/ stakeholders are you creating value? Exhausted, AAPI, upper-middle class mom in postpartum period	Unique value proposition Unlike American lactation snacks which are too sugary, and Asian savory snacks which are too greasy/low in nutrients	Solution Our rice balls deliver a ready-made, “single hand” snack with balanced nutrition that promotes healing and supports lactation Channels - DTC online site - Social media marketing to new mom groups, prenatal classes and yoga communities - Physical shelf space in specialty grocery stores, cultural community centers (e.g., Indian corner store)	Revenue streams Customers are willing to pay to: - Save time and have less dishes to wash - Feel full and satiated - Improve their lactation All revenues are on a per unit sold basis
Cost structure (in descending order of expected spend): 1. Marketing/ad spend and influencer partnerships (commissions for content creation, etc.) 2. Ingredient sourcing, cooking, and fulfillment 3. Packaging and shipping		Key metrics What key numbers tell you whether your venture is succeeding? - CAC (Customer Acquisition Cost) – particularly from paid ads and influencer content - LTV (Customer Lifetime Value) – average spend over postpartum period - Margin – Per unit cost, especially with high value and harder to source ingredients like moringa, and maintaining organic sourcing - Referral or NPS – how likely new moms are to recommend the product		Unfair advantage - Bridges the gap between ancestral traditions and millennial lifestyle, created by and for AAPI women (unlike TJ’s etc) - Culturally specific niche focus in an underserved segment (Asian American postpartum wellness) - First-mover advantage: no savory postpartum lactation support on the market (it’s all cookies!) - Expert-backed recipes developed with doulas, nutritionists, and moms - Potential for strong community flywheel through content, storytelling, and shared experiences

Risk 1: Are we addressing the problem with the right solution?

Solution

Our rice balls deliver a ready-made, “single hand” snack with balanced nutrition that promotes healing and supports lactation

Do moms want a snack or complete meal?

If we choose the wrong format, we risk mismatching the product with postpartum eating habits and missing the key use case. This impacts everything from portion size to pricing and customer adoption/ satisfaction.

To de-risk this, we'll continue A/B testing snack- vs. meal-sized prototypes with moms via both ads and more in depth prototype interviews. We'll also use short daily food logs and interviews to understand when and how moms prefer to eat.



Risk 2: How strong is our unfair advantage?

Unfair advantage

Bridges the gap between ancestral traditions and millennial lifestyle, created by and for AAPI women (unlike TJ's etc)

Culturally specific niche focus in an underserved segment (Asian American postpartum wellness)

First-mover advantage: no savory postpartum lactation support on the market (it's all cookies!)

Expert-backed recipes developed with doulas, nutritionists, and moms

Potential for strong community flywheel through content, storytelling, and shared experiences

Do we actually have an unfair advantage here (e.g., can Trader Joe's launch their own lactation-oriented line and wipe us out?)

If our product isn't meaningfully differentiated, we risk being undercut by larger players with better distribution and pricing power.

To de-risk this, we'll test messaging around cultural relevance, expert-backed recipes, and AAPI community authenticity via A/B testing in ads and landing pages. We'll also track willingness to pay and referrals to assess if moms view us as uniquely trustworthy and aligned with their values.



Risk 3: Do our costs align with perceived value?

Cost structure

(in descending order of expected spend):

1. Marketing/ad spend and influencer partnerships (commissions for content creation, etc.)
2. Ingredient sourcing, cooking, and fulfillment
3. Packaging and shipping

Can we deliver the product at a price moms are willing to pay?

If we can't keep ingredient, packaging, and fulfillment costs below what moms are willing to spend, we risk poor margins and an unsustainable business. This is especially critical if we aim to use high-quality or culturally specific ingredients.

To de-risk this, we'll A/B test different pricing tiers alongside variations in portion size and packaging to find the best value-to-cost ratio. We'll also run willingness-to-pay surveys and monitor conversion rates across product formats to identify pricing ceilings.



Speed, storytelling, simplicity, and focus as key learnings

Prototype Quickly: Reactions Speak Louder than Words

Despite moms voicing wanting ways to find more options for paid support, at the end of the day they resorted to referrals from friends/family and were not as enthusiastic about prototypes that expanded their consideration sets

Storytelling Builds Confidence and Clarity

Forcing ourselves to refine and synthesize our story helped us cut through complexity, clarify as we went along, and bring others along for the journey, which was especially useful in mentor meetings and customer interviews.

Simpler Prototypes Drive Better Feedback

Our simplest prototypes (very basic wireframes, AI generated images of food products) got the strongest reactions. Focusing on details was often distracting and made us want to cling to ideas we should otherwise scrap

sooner.

Focus on One Problem, Not All of Them

When we stopped trying to solve everything, though there are so many problems in the space, and zoomed in on food after family support ends, everything started clicking and prototyping became far more fruitful.



Where do we go from here?

*** Most Importantly: Bring on a Nutrition Advisor ***

We plan to reach out to Impact1 and other campus resources to find an expert who can validate our formulation and support evidence-based product development.

Refine Postpartum Ingredient Formulation for Use Across Multiple SKUs

To ensure nutritional impact and consistency, we'll work toward a core formula that supports both postpartum recovery and lactation.

Team Members Committed to Advancing Mama Fuel

Three of us are continuing this summer to run formulation tests, deepen user validation, build an MVP, and explore early GTM strategies.

