

How Do I Look?

Exploring the Role of Others in Shaping a New Mother's Identity and Appearance

Victoria Brown, Ph.D., High Point University, USA

Nancy Hodges, Ph.D., University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA

Keywords: *appearance, identity, influence, new mothers*

Approximately four million women become mothers every year in the United States alone (CDC, 2013). Becoming a mother is a life-altering event for a woman, with others around her playing a profound role in helping her navigate the postpartum experience. In terms of appearance, changes in beauty routines, body weight, and issues with clothing fit are a few of the challenges that new mothers face. Consequently, new mothers may look to those around them, such as spouses, family and peers, as referents during this transition, and, in turn, these individuals may help to shape how a new mother views her transformed appearance and identity. According to Symbolic Interaction (SI) theory, an individual's identity is shaped through interactions with others, as the process of conveying identity occurs through symbols or objects, such as clothing, and includes appearing, reflecting upon that appearance, and describing one's identity in response to that appearance (Stone, 1962). Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the influence of others on a new mother's appearance and identity development through the lens of SI theory. Although some studies address the importance of spousal relationships during the transition to motherhood (Gjerdingen, Fontaine, Crow, McGovern, Center, & Miner, 2009; Ogle, Tyner & Schofield-Tomschin, 2011), few, if any consider the influence of family and friends in addition to spouses. Peers, especially those who are mothers, may be particularly important, given the number of women who become mothers each year and the major transition in both appearance and identity that a woman experiences during the postpartum period (Gjerdingen, et al., 2009).

A qualitative research approach was employed to address this gap in research. Upon IRB approval from the researchers' university, participants were recruited via a snowball sample starting with members of a motherhood group. In-depth interviews were conducted with 24 women who were mothers for the first time within six months of recruitment. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and lasted between one and two hours. Questions focused on the initial transition to motherhood, the role that others play in how a new mother feels about her appearance, and how a new mother views herself particularly in comparison to other mothers. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed for emergent themes across the responses through the lens of SI theory (Spiggle, 1994). From this iterative process, the three "others" most emphasized by participants were used to structure the interpretation: *My Spouse*, *My Mother*, and *My Friends*.

Although many of the participants indicated that they ask their spouses about how they look, they admitted that spousal responses usually do not carry much weight. However, this does not mean that spousal comments are always ignored, as Keri said, "If he says anything about what I'm wearing, I usually pay attention. He doesn't usually comment, so when he does, there's probably a good reason." Other participants discussed the desire to look nice for their spouses, and a couple of them even indicated that they wanted their spouses to be proud of how they look when

in public. *My mother* reveals that though a spouse's opinion can be important, for many participants, the opinions of their own mothers plays an important role in how they feel about their appearance and identity as new mothers. For example, Emma, whose mother is a fitness instructor, stated, "I have always wanted her to think that I look right, or look like I am healthy. Her opinion definitely matters to me." Similarly, Lily talked about buying a new dress right after having her baby and when she asked her mom if she should wear it, her mother's response signaled to Lily that the dress was not quite the right fit at that time so she did not wear it. However, among participants, it seems that more important than a spouse and even a mother's opinion is that of a peer. *My Friends* reveals the extent of the influence that friends, especially those who are also mothers, can have on a new mother's appearance and identity development. When asked if she was concerned with other's opinions about how she looks, Heather mentioned wanting to look nice for her husband, but said, "It [means] something when my friends say they like what I'm wearing. It makes me feel like I look good." Similarly, Lily responded to the question by saying, "With my friends, I think they look put-together, so I think '*I can do it too!*'" As individuals that a new mother interacts with on a regular basis, peers have influence partly because, as Teresa indicated, "I don't really ask my husband's opinions about what I'm wearing. I mean we dress for other women, right?"

As this study reveals, other people's opinions about how a new mother looks influences her own perceptions of appearance and identity. Whether it is a spouse, mother, or friend who is influencing the new mother, another person's assessment of how she looks is an important part of identifying herself as a new mother. Thus, findings shed additional light on the role of others in shaping identity through appearance (Stone, 1962). From a practical perspective, results indicate that retailers should provide peer-based shopping incentives and advertisements that prompt social comparison. Moreover, given the importance of peer group referents, word-of-mouth advertising would likely be an effective means of marketing clothing and appearance-related products to consumers who are new mothers. Although this study provides insight on dimensions of appearance and identity development during the postpartum period, further research is needed. For example, one important avenue to explore regarding this topic is the influence that celebrities and the media may have on appearance and identity development among new mothers.

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