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Representations of Celebrities' Weight and Shape during Pregnancy and Postpartum: A Content Analysis of Three Entertainment Magazine Websites

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Abstract

Entertainment magazine websites provide a continuous stream of celebrity news accessed by over 13 million unique viewers each month. Celebrities' experiences of pregnancy and new motherhood appear to be popular topics within these media outlets; however, little research has investigated the content of this coverage. In this study, investigators coded articles ($N = 387$) published between August 1, 2007 and August 1, 2008 on three popular entertainment magazine websites. Relatively few articles about celebrities' pregnancies discussed weight (13%) or shape (30%), and an even smaller proportion (6.2%) included any discussion of postpartum body dissatisfaction. This suggests a gap between portrayal of celebrities' pregnancies and postpartum experiences and those of non-celebrity women. This disparity is concerning as it might lead to unrealistic expectations about pregnancy and postpartum for both pregnant readers and a more general audience. This study provides important initial information about the messages these media provide regarding pregnancy-related appearance.

Keywords

entertainment magazines; celebrity; objectification; pregnancy; postpartum; thin ideal

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) posited that women are socialized to view themselves as sexual objects which are evaluated by others on the basis of appearance. Self-objectification is the internalization of this outsider's standard of attractiveness, and often manifests as continuous body surveillance. Self-objectification is also associated with disordered eating and shame about appearance and bodily functions including menstruation and breastfeeding (Moradi & Huang, 2008). High levels of self-objectification might also be associated with negative attitudes towards the physical changes associated with pregnancy, including weight gain, although research has not formally evaluated this relation.

Image-focused media exposure is linked with thin-ideal internalization, which, in turn, is associated with self-objectification and body dissatisfaction (e.g., Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Moradi & Huang, 2008). Recently, image-focused

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media appear to have paid significant attention to celebrities' experiences of pregnancy and new motherhood. However, most studies of media's impact on women's body dissatisfaction have evaluated images of models in fashion magazines rather than images of celebrities in entertainment magazines, and no investigations have examined media messages about celebrities' appearance during pregnancy and postpartum. Research suggests that many women experience dissatisfaction with their weight and shape postpartum (Rallis, Skouteris, Wertheim, & Paxton, 2007); however, few studies have examined factors associated with body dissatisfaction within this population.

It seems especially important to understand more about depictions of celebrities during pregnancy and postpartum, because the tendency to make upward social comparisons (i.e., with others perceived as more attractive) is associated with both body dissatisfaction and negative coping strategies (Groesz et al., 2002). Pregnant celebrities featured in entertainment media are likely targets for physical comparison among women experiencing the weight and shape changes of pregnancy and postpartum because many specific details (e.g., due dates, babies' birth dates) are readily accessible to readers. Women undergoing pregnancy-related changes in their body shape might seek out information regarding pregnancy ideals to evaluate and process their own experiences. Online entertainment magazines provide constantly accessible, detailed information that readers can seek out and view in private settings. Moreover, given celebrities' popularity, these reports are likely to influence the general public's expectations of what is "normal" or ideal during pregnancy or postpartum. Thus, the impact of these popular magazine articles is not limited to pregnant or postpartum women.

Given recent interest in celebrity pregnancies and the potential for these media portrayals to influence women's self-evaluations as well as the judgments of observers, the purpose of this study was to evaluate depictions of celebrities' weight and shape throughout pregnancy and postpartum. This exploratory study should be considered a first step in understanding factors that potentially influence body dissatisfaction during pregnancy and postpartum. Websites were evaluated because they provide a more accessible route for women seeking information about celebrities' pregnancies than print formats and because readers view online media more frequently than traditional print media (Galarneau, 2009). As this study was exploratory, no specific hypotheses were proposed.

Method

Search Criteria

Articles were gathered from online versions of three popular entertainment magazines: *People* (People.com), *US Weekly* (Usmagazine.com), and *Star* (Starmagazine.com). These magazines' websites provide frequent celebrity news updates. The authors conducted searches in August 2008 for articles appearing on these sites from August 1, 2007 to August 1, 2008. Each coder entered search terms (new mom, new baby, pregnant) into the websites' internal search engines. Online articles were used instead of print versions because younger women seeking information on celebrity pregnancies were expected to search websites rather than printed magazines, given that online versions are free, provide increased access to late-breaking celebrity news, and allow for faster sorting of articles of interest. For example, People.com (2011) reported 13.2 million unique users per month with a median age of 36 compared to approximately 3.6 million per weekly print issue with the median age of 40. Further, research shows continued declines in overall print magazine usage, while that of magazines' website counterparts increased (Galarneau, 2009).

Exclusion Criteria

Initial searches of the websites yielded 1,306 articles. Following the initial search, articles were excluded because they were: (a) duplicated within a search term within a magazine website; or (b) duplicated between other search terms within a magazine website. During the coding process, articles were excluded if two coders agreed it was irrelevant. For example, articles about celebrity fathers or a colloquial use of the word “baby” were deemed irrelevant. Table 1 outlines retained articles.

Coding of Articles

Coders were the first three authors; the fourth author assisted in developing the coding procedure. Coders were European-American female doctoral students in psychology. Two coders rated pieces of text within each article. The third coder resolved all noted discrepancies.

Codes fell into the following categories: (a) Demographic characteristics of the article's target (i.e., age, race), (b) Pregnancy details (e.g., speculation of pregnancy, pregnancy stage), (c) Weight and weight gain/portrayal of weight, (d) Body dissatisfaction, (e) Pregnancy weight suppression portrayal and methods (e.g., diet and exercise), (f) Body shape/ shape portrayal, (g) Postpartum weight loss (e.g., amount, time to weight loss, methods, effectiveness, health of behaviors), (h) General affect, and (i) Postpartum complications (medical and psychological).

Inter-rater reliability (kappa) was assessed for the items coded. The overall kappa for all variables was .93 (range: .73-1.0). Select individual category kappa statistics were the following: pregnancy weight (1.0), pregnancy weight portrayal (.92), pregnancy shape (1.0), pregnancy shape portrayal (.73), pregnancy body dissatisfaction (.80), pregnancy weight suppression (.94), postpartum weight (1.0), postpartum weight portrayal (.78), postpartum weight loss (1.0), postpartum shape (1.0), postpartum shape portrayal (.87), disordered weight loss behaviors postpartum (1.0), general affect (1.0), and postpartum complications (1.0).

Results

Retained articles ($N = 387$) focused on one of three phases of pregnancy: pre-pregnancy (14.2%; $n = 55$), pregnancy (50.1%; $n = 194$), or postpartum (35.7%; $n = 138$). The average age of females depicted in these articles was 32.1 years; the ethnic/racial breakdown of the celebrities depicted was: 75.2% European American, 9.6% Hispanic, 3.1% African American, 0.3% Asian American, and 11.9% multi-ethnic.

Pregnancy Speculation

Pregnancy speculation, which included questions or rumors about whether a celebrity was pregnant, was mentioned in 14.2% ($n = 45$) of articles. The basis for speculation was most frequently weight or shape (48.8%, $n = 22$), followed by behavior (42.2%, $n = 22$), a combination of weight/shape and behavior (6.6%, $n = 3$), and informant (2.2%, $n = 1$). Behaviors coded as speculation included a celebrity shopping for baby clothes, or perceived attempts to conceal shape or weight. Pre-pregnancy weight was mentioned in one speculation-focused article and was portrayed negatively (e.g., unattractive, overweight, unhealthy).

Pregnancy

Celebrities' pregnancy stage ranged from 11 to 40 weeks. Most articles focused on the second trimester (38.4%, $n = 74$), followed by the third (37.2%, $n = 72$), and first (24.4%, n

= 47) trimesters. Pregnancy *weight gain* was mentioned in 6.5% ($n = 25$) of articles, while absolute weight was mentioned in 2.6% ($n = 10$). Pregnancy weight gain was mentioned more frequently in pregnancy-focused articles (7.7%, $n = 15$) than postpartum (7.2%, $n = 10$). The average amount of reported weight gain during pregnancy was 36.8 pounds (range 20-70lbs). Pregnancy weight was portrayed as negative (44.0%, $n = 4$), positive (12.0%, $n = 1$), or neutral (44.0%, $n = 4$). For example, a comment such as “piling on the pounds” was coded as negative, while a comment describing attempts to eat healthy and exercise to avoid gaining “too much too fast,” was coded positively. Body dissatisfaction during pregnancy was reported in 4.1% ($n = 8$) of pregnancy articles and 0.70% ($n = 1$) of postpartum articles (e.g., referring to self as “huge” or “fat”). Weight suppression methods during pregnancy were mentioned in 5.7% ($n = 11$) of pregnancy and 2.9% ($n = 4$) of postpartum articles.

Comments on women’s shape during pregnancy were included in 20.0% ($n = 11$) of speculation articles, 34.5% ($n = 67$) of pregnancy articles, and 6.5% ($n = 9$) of postpartum articles. Portrayal of pregnancy shape was predominantly neutral (51.6%) with negative and positive portrayals evenly split (24.2%). A positive portrayal of shape included descriptors such as “cute bump,” while negative comments included “scared of how much bigger I’m going to get.”

Postpartum

The time period postpartum ranged from day of delivery to three years. Postpartum weight was mentioned in 3.9% ($n = 15$) of articles and was portrayed mostly positively (46.7%, $n = 7$), with fewer articles portraying this period neutrally (40.0%, $n = 6$) or negatively (13.3%, $n = 2$). For example, phrases such as “10 pounds from pre-baby weight” were coded neutrally, “ballooning to 300 pounds” coded negatively, and “amazing” referencing current weight coded positively. Postpartum weight loss was included in 18.3% ($n = 25$); exact weight loss ($M = 27.42$, range 20-40) was mentioned in 24.0% ($n = 6$) of postpartum articles. Weight loss method was included in 18.3% ($n = 25$) of articles; most articles identified a combination of methods used by celebrities. The effects of these weight loss methods were included in 16 articles that discussed weight loss with 47.1% ($n = 8$) losing some weight, but not reaching their goal weight; 41.2% ($n = 7$) meeting their goal weight, and 5.9% ($n = 1$) losing no weight. Weight loss behaviors were portrayed as positive (72.4%, $n = 21$), negative (6.9%, $n = 2$) or neutral (20.7%, $n = 6$). Phrases such as “baby bulge gone” and “body bounce back” appeared in articles portraying positive post-baby celebrity bodies. One article (0.7%) included weight loss behavior that was coded as disordered (i.e., rigid dieting and overexercise); negative consequences were mentioned once in that same article.

Body shape was included in 21.7% ($n = 30$) of postpartum articles. Specific body parts were mentioned in 9.4% ($n = 13$) of postpartum articles. Body parts mentioned were arms ($n = 1$), chest ($n = 3$), stomach/waist ($n = 3$), buttocks ($n = 1$), and feet ($n = 2$). Clothing size was mentioned in six (4.3%) postpartum articles.

Eight articles (6.2%) noted celebrities were dissatisfied with their postpartum bodies. For example, a celebrity was quoted: “I’m definitely not pleased when I look in the mirror.” Postpartum affect was mentioned in 37.0% ($n = 51$) of articles and was described as positive in 94.1% ($n = 48$) and negative in 5.9% ($n = 3$).

Among postpartum articles, 2.9% ($n = 4$) mentioned medical complications of one particular celebrity. With regard to psychological complications, 1.4% ($n = 2$) of articles mentioned postpartum psychological problems.

Discussion

Celebrity pregnancies appear to be a frequent topic in popular entertainment media. It is important to understand more about these depictions of celebrity pregnancy and new motherhood, as previous research has identified an association between thin-ideal media and body dissatisfaction among women in general (e.g., Groesz et al., 2002). This study investigated portrayals of celebrity pregnancy and postpartum weight and shape changes on entertainment magazine websites. Results confirmed that celebrity pregnancy is a prevalent topic on these sites; however, contrary to expectations, relatively few articles explicitly discussed weight (13%) with more focusing on shape (30%). Among articles that referenced celebrities' weight, pregnancy *weight gain* was mentioned more often than pregnancy *weight*. Similarly, postpartum *weight loss* was discussed more frequently than actual postpartum *weight*. Thus, changes in weight status received more attention than absolute weight. Weight change references typically included specific details about pregnancy stage or the baby's age which provide a timeline of celebrities' shape changes and postpartum weight loss. These timelines are likely unrealistic for the average reader. The fact that relatively few articles explicitly discussed actual weight could be considered positive as it might de-emphasize the thin ideal. However, almost every article was accompanied by a celebrity photograph, which likely sends an implicit message about what the ideal pregnant and postpartum woman looks like.

Among the articles focused on weight, pregnancy weight was most frequently portrayed in a negative or neutral manner. However, the average weight gain of celebrities across these articles was within normal limits according to the Institute of Medicine's recommendations (Rasmussen & Yaktine, 2009). Thus, it is concerning that these articles could suggest that a normal amount of pregnancy weight gain is a potentially negative outcome.

In contrast, articles portrayed postpartum weight predominantly positively, which could be interpreted as an implicit endorsement of celebrities' atypical return to pre-pregnancy appearance. Furthermore, celebrities' postpartum body dissatisfaction was presented in few (6.2%) articles. This contrasts with the experience of the average new mother in the U.S., 40% of whom reported weight dissatisfaction (Walker, 1998). A number of factors likely contribute to this discrepancy. First, celebrities have access to personal trainers, chefs, and childcare, which the average woman cannot easily afford. Further, it is, at least in part, celebrities' job to appear attractive; thus, unlike most women, they can dedicate a significant proportion of their time and resources to pursuit of the thin ideal.

Celebrities might also feel pressured to report feeling satisfied with their postpartum bodies, as they are often considered role models for women. In addition, cultural expectations, such as the "motherhood mystique," which posits that motherhood is easy, natural, and enjoyable (Hoffnung, 1989), could contribute to celebrities' denial of postpartum body dissatisfaction. Future studies should explore further the reasons for these discrepancies between the reported experiences of the average postpartum woman and those of celebrities. However, current data indicate that readers of these magazines are frequently presented with an idealized celebrity image that would be extremely difficult for most to achieve.

Also noteworthy was the finding that more articles focused on the later stages of pregnancy than other periods (i.e., speculation stage, or the early pregnancy and postpartum stages). Late pregnancy is the gestational stage associated with the greatest body satisfaction (Rallis et al., 2007). Perhaps this elevated exposure of an isolated, typically positive period of pregnancy, combined with the absence of depictions of celebrities during less satisfactory periods, promotes an unrealistic expectation for the average pregnant woman.

Although this study represents an important first step in our understanding of media's depictions of pregnancy, it has limitations. Specifically, portrayals of celebrities' weight and shape should be interpreted with caution given the small number of relevant articles. Also, celebrity photographs included with the articles were not coded as this study focused on verbal descriptions. Further, unlike print magazines, online magazines cannot be examined from "cover-to-cover." Moreover, readers view cover headlines in print media, while online media changes almost continually and can be encountered through many different original searches. Additionally, this study examined entertainment magazines that, by their nature, differ from magazines focused on pregnancy. Future studies could examine representation of pregnancy weight and shape in other media outlets. Finally, the coders were not blinded to the study aims, which likely contributed to some bias in coding. Despite these limitations, this study provided an initial description of depictions of celebrity body image in pregnancy and postpartum; however, there is a need for future experimental research on the impact of the media's portrayal of the celebrity pregnancy experience on readers, particularly those who are pregnant or postpartum.

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Highlights

- This article explored portrayals of celebrities' pregnancies and new motherhood in three online entertainment magazines.
- This is the first study to examine how pregnancy-related appearance is portrayed within celebrity-focused media.
- Few articles discussed weight or shape.
- Few articles indicated celebrity postpartum body dissatisfaction.
- Thus, a gap appears to exist between celebrities' experiences of pregnancy and new motherhood and those of the average woman.

Table 1
Number of Articles Retained after Each Exclusion

Magazine	Initial Search	1 st exclusion	2 nd exclusion
<i>People</i>	185	154	110
<i>Star</i>	199	128	75
<i>Us Weekly</i>	922	334	202