The Influence of Celebrity Postpartum Images on Postpartum Women’s Self-Perceptions

Alyssa Dana Adomaitis
Previously pregnancy has been featured in news articles and popular literature. The content of these articles emphasized health-related topics such as:

- pregnancy and weight,

Recently attention has shifted to appearance-related topics including rapid weight loss, exercise regimens, and various tips on food restriction.

For example, Hanafy (2009) noted *US Weekly Magazine* during 2008 featured postpartum celebrity weight loss as their cover story 35 times and made another 61 references to celebrity postpartum weight loss in their articles.
Celebrity women are redefining postpartum appearances

- Elimination of any physical traces of pregnancy seems to be the new ideal
  - Angelina Jolie
  - Nicole Kidman
  - Heidi Klum

- The actual body of many postpartum celebrities is very close to that of her pre-pregnant body

- Various fashion and celebrity magazines highlight these differences and emphasize (even praise) rapid weight loss

- Also noted as a negative is significant weight gain tied to pregnancy
  - Melissa Joan Hart
  - Salma Hayek
  - Milla Jovovich
In an article posted on www.msnbc.com on August 13, 2008, one individual described the impact of viewing thin postpartum celebrity women on her thoughts about herself and her behavior.

“I decided to subscribe right before I had my baby...But then I just got depressed. They’d have all these beautiful pictures of Christina Aguilera and Nicole Richie and how they’d be talking about how they lost all their baby weight. It made me feel bad about myself. So I canceled my subscription” (Mapes, 2008, 1).
Celebrities are creating an ideal image of the post-pregnancy body that is nearly impossible for the typical woman and perhaps even celebrities to achieve. The overall purpose of this study was to investigate how young postpartum women perceived their changing bodies in the context of this notable new ideal.
**DEFINITIONS**

- **Postpartum** — Rubin (1984) defined the postpartum period as “...nine months from childbirth for a woman to feel like herself again: whole, intact, functional, and in goodness of fit of self in the world” (p. 109).

- For this research, postpartum was defined as the period immediately following childbirth and ending two years after giving birth.
DEFINITIONS

- **Social identity**—Identity establishes what and where the person is in social terms... One’s identity is established when others place him as a social object by assigning him the same words of identity that he appropriates for himself or announces” (Stone, 1962, p. 23)
MEDIA INFLUENCES IDEAS CONCERNING BODY IMAGE

Several researchers support the idea that advertising sends powerful messages to young women in general that give shape to expectations concerning how women:

- (1) should look and be looked at,
- (2) should feel and be made to feel, and
- (3) should act

MEDIA IMAGES TIED TO BODY DISSATISFACTION AND LOW SELF-ESTEEM

- Researchers have documented that women link media images of ideal women to their body dissatisfaction

- Additionally, researchers have found that women tie media images to a reduction in their self-esteem and to feeling depressed.
  (Durkin & Paxton, 2002; Durkin, Paxton & Sorbello, 2007; Martin & Kennedy, 1993; 1994b; Patrick et al., 2004; Sloan & Kim, 1999)
In previous research, I led an investigation into how fashion advertisements (apparel and cosmetic) were used by young women. Our questions addressed to what extent young women used women featured in fashion advertisements as a basis for social comparison and to what extent these images were used to shape expectations concerning how these women feel about their appearances and what they think they should look like.

- Women featured in apparel/cosmetic ads
  - Do shape expectations on appearance
  - Stimulate both positive or negative feelings about oneself
  - Concerns about appearance and behaviors of themselves and sometimes even others.
After being exposed to idealized female images, women reported body dissatisfaction and high levels of depression and anxiety.

- “The idealized female images are potent in reducing body satisfaction and sense of wellbeing…”
- In conjunction with hormones, emotional, and physical changes that occur during pregnancy, viewing celebrity slender images could increase postpartum depression.
  -(Durkin & Paxton, 2002)

"People today are far more critical of themselves for not attaining the right weight and look ... appearance, good looks, and fitness are now the meaning of one's social worth,“
  -Psychologist, Judith Rodin (2002)
  University of Pennsylvania
POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION IS A SERIOUS ILLNESS

- Andrea Yates, a Houston resident, drowned her five children following the birth of her daughter. She battled with postpartum depression and had episodes of psychosis

(Education on postpartum mood, 2007).
HOW DO MEDIA IMAGES INFLUENCE INDIVIDUALS SELF-PERCEPTIONS?

- Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) presumed that people have a drive to evaluate themselves.

  - “A persons’ cognition (his opinions and beliefs) about the situation in which he exists and his appraisals of what he is capable of doing (his evaluation of his abilities) will together have bearing on his behavior”.

  ![Festinger's Image](image-url)
HOW DO MEDIA IMAGES INFLUENCE INDIVIDUALS SELF PERCEPTIONS?

Social Comparison Processes
- explains *how individuals try to re-create themselves in response to viewing advertised images or ideals including those in magazines* (Rudd and Lennon, 1994)

“The central premise is that we use the process of social comparison to continually assess the personal aesthetic value of ourselves and others” (p. 165).
  - *Accept standard; try harder*
  - *Accept standard; quit trying*
  - *Modify personal standard*
  - *Modify cultural standard*
    (Rudd and Lennon, 1994)
Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)

Apart from the “level of self”, an individual has multiple “social identities”. Social identity is the individual’s self-concept derived from perceived membership in social groups (Hogg & Vaughan, 2002). Included in social identity are expectations for appearance. An example of a social identity is work identity.
LITERATURE REVIEW: BODY IMAGE AND PREGNANCY

- Duncome, Wertheim, Skouteris, Paxton and Kelly (2008) most women that have weight concerns prior to pregnancy will continue to do so throughout their pregnancies
  - viewing media images of thin postpartum celebrity mothers could increase frustration and body dissatisfaction of these women.

- Liege and Luyten (2009) investigated personality dimensions of dependency and self-criticism for postpartum depressed mothers compared with non-depressed mothers
  - Postpartum depressed mothers had lower education; Low levels of education were associated with higher depressive symptoms and anxiety. Education level may be a factor in women’s post partum experience.
**Body Image and Pregnancy**

- *Upton and Han (2003)* conducted a qualitative analysis of career-women as they “struggle to reassert and literally regain particular identities after childbirth” (p 671).
  - Data revealed that career women are constantly evaluating, thinking, and working on their bodies in order to maintain the socially accepted ideal appearance for their profession.
  - As women gain one identity (e.g., mother) they may also need to work to regain a work-related identity as a result of having a child:
    - Regain pre-pregnant physique
    - Rethink choice of clothing
Based on review of related literature and the theoretical framework, the following research questions were developed:

- **(1a)** To what extent are postpartum women concerned with their appearance?  
  - **(1b)** How did women manage their appearance after pregnancy?  
  - **(1c)** What were their experiences in appearance management including dressing and grooming post pregnancy?  
  - **(1d)** How did they physically and emotionally feel after the pregnancy?

- **(2)** How are they embracing their identity as “mom”? Has it changed their expectations for their appearance?

- **(3)** What impact, if any, do images of postpartum celebrity bodies have on non-celebrity postpartum mothers? Do images of postpartum celebrities affect non-celebrity mother’s self-perceptions?

- **(4)** What role does education play in the impact of celebrity images on postpartum mothers self perceptions?
**METHODOLOGY**

- **Method**
  - Qualitative to “investigate the description of daily events and experiences”

- **Data Collection - Structured Interviews**
  - 35 Interviews
  - Coded responses, with a second coder
  - **Instrument**
    - Interview questions
    - Demographic questions
Pre-screening Questionnaire

- Before each interview, each potential participant responded to a brief set of pre-screening questions to assess whether or not they read any fashion, style, or celebrity magazines on a regular basis and whether they read the celebrity news contained in the magazines.
- Assumed that women who read fashion magazines are more affected by the images of thin celebrities rather than women who do not read them at all.
- Resulted in 3 individuals not participating in the final interviews due to their lack of interest in fashion and celebrity news.
ANALYSIS OF DATA-DEMOGRAPHICS

- Participant Characteristics:
  - Ages (18-49)
  - Ethnicity (Euro-American (n = 9); Asian (n = 5); African-American (n = 9); Hispanic (n = 4); Other (n = 5); No Reply (n = 3).
  - Marital status (single (n=5), separated (n=2), married (n=22), divorced (n=3), NA (n=3))
  - Education (High school diploma or equivalent / few college courses (n=21), College graduates / Graduate/ Professional degree (n=14)
Most participants read postpartum celebrity news throughout their pregnancy and thereafter. Participants shared that they compared themselves to the media images of the celebrities.
Were These Postpartum Women Concerned with Their Appearance?

- Participants were concerned about their appearance. Issues of concern included weight, being perceived as having an “appropriate” mother-like appearance, and emotional welfare.

- Participant #033 stated, “Oh yes! Oh yes! I brought a beauty bag to the hospital. I wanted to leave looking good.”

- Participant #016 revealed, “Yes I am concerned with my appearance. Physically, I was changed forever.”
(1b) **How did women manage their appearance after pregnancy?**

Participants revealed that they became self-conscious about appearing and wanted to be perceived to be “mother-like.” Participants dressed in demure colors such as black, navy, and dark brown. Almost all participants revealed they got a new hair-cut or hair style and some engaged in wearing makeup daily to look like a mother.

Participant #015 stated, “...I am self-conscious about appearance, my tattoo is not a mom tattoo. It is not a tattoo a mother would have; I need to cover it up as a mom.”

Participant #029 stated, “Yes, I did manage my appearance differently. I was Goth before - I wore chains, black all the time. I didn’t care about my appearance - Oh crap; I didn’t even brush my hair. I wore pajamas to the grocery store and now it’s preppy. However, it was tough to dress to look like a good mom...”
(1c) What were their experiences in appearance management including dressing and grooming post pregnancy?

Some participants revealed that shopping for clothing was difficult after pregnancy, however, many participants engaged in spa services such as hair and nail care to make them feel better after their pregnancy.

- Participant #012 stated, "There were so many hardships after pregnancy. Number one, I didn’t fit in clothes, I refused to buy bigger sizes. Then, I had to buy bigger sizes and I let myself go – I am in even bigger sizes now. Oh, my God, bigger sizes don’t fit either."

- Participant #005 stated, “I quit smoking, streaked hair, flat-ironed hair, cut-down on sugar and starches [and] gained 16 pounds - It didn’t bother me.”
(1D) HOW DID THEY PHYSICALLY AND EMOTIONALLY FEEL AFTER THE PREGNANCY?

Most participants said they felt tired, depressed, and had poor sleep after the pregnancy, during the postpartum period.

- Participant #004 stated, “I was tired and frustrated because breastfeeding was stressful... I could barely sleep”.
- Participant #029 stated, “I had severe postpartum depression... I felt extremely exhausted all of the time... just exhausted”.

(2a) How did they relate to their “mom” identity? Has this identity changed their expectations for their appearance?

Participants either had the expectation that their physical body would change (be larger) and embraced that change motherhood or participants expected to challenge the traditional norm of gaining weight. Participants were much more excited about the mental aspects of identifying with mother or mom role rather than the physical changes the body endures during pregnancy to become a mother.
Participant #029 stated, “I kind of just said oh well [exercise] is not for me… I can’t get it back” (physical and embracing).

Participant #034 stated, “Before pregnancy, I was on a strict diet and had lost a lot of weight. I was exercising, dieting, and sleeping… It was my time to shine again. The workout plans were set out in stone for me...” (physical and challenging).

Participant #030 stated, I know what I have to do, but my body took a year to get back to its original size last time, and I slaved in the gym...” (physical and challenging).

“I felt great [to become a mom]. I was too focused on the baby to think about [my figure],” participant #008 stated (mental aspect).
(3) **What impact, if any, did images of post-pregnant celebrity bodies have on these women? Do images of postpartum celebrities affect non-celebrity mother’s self-perception?**

- Outcomes of reading about postpartum celebrity news stirred up emotions of jealousy, anxiety, and frustration which were followed by statements of envy or justification.

- Participant #027 stated, “The impact of reading ummm celebrity news made me feel bad... It made me feel bad because I didn’t look like them [a celebrity]”

- Participant #026 stated, “It made me hate them. I do have an understanding that they [celebrities] have cooks, [personal] trainers, [and] sitters. I am envious.”
The attempt to achieve the physical goal of postpartum celebrity body was preferred by many of the participants especially if their post pregnancy was concurrent with a celebrity mom’s postpartum period, however, it was difficult.

Participant #029 stated, “Some [celebrity] images had a big impact on me and made me feel like a big blob in comparison. It was depressing.”
What role does education play in the impact of celebrity images on postpartum mothers' self-perceptions?

*Liege and Luyten (2009)* identified that lower levels of education were associated with higher depressive symptoms and anxiety.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School / Some College</th>
<th>College Graduated &amp; Graduate School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stay-at-home mother</td>
<td>Planned to return to their career/job</td>
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<tr>
<td>Planned for large family</td>
<td>Intended for one child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idealized images made them depressed and lowered self-esteem</td>
<td>Motivated by idealized images to maintain physical goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identified with the social role of “mother”</td>
<td>Identified with several social roles: mother, wife, professional.</td>
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CONCLUSIONS

- Even though their social role changed, participants continued to be concerned about their appearance throughout the course of pregnancy and postpartum.
- Participants *did* use the media images as a reference point to make social comparisons.
- Majority of social comparisons were upward; women were less happy with their physical selves after reportedly viewing the images.
- Some participants shared they felt depressed after viewing the images, especially if their pregnancy coincided with the trimesters of a celebrity pregnancy.
- Some participants shared they felt motivated after viewing the images to regain their pre-pregnant body.
CONCLUSIONS

- Kamysheva, Skouteris, Wertheim, Paxton, and Milgrom’s (2008)
  - The physical anguish the body endures during pregnancy can contribute to poor sleep, depression, self-esteem, and negative self-perception.

- My findings also support Upton and Han (2003)
  - Women are constantly evaluating, thinking, and working their bodies in order to maintain the socially accepted ideal
LIMITATIONS

- Discussion never revolved around
  1. amount of weight gain during pregnancy
  2. body mass index prior pregnancy
  3. hormonal changes to understand the physical challenges,
  4. mental and emotional state of the participants.
  5. Some participants could have been in a postpartum depression stage during the interview process and not have known it.
SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY

- Conduct the study during the period of pregnancy...to assess how women are adjusting to their changing bodies and their feelings about these changes.
- Add measures of self-esteem, depression, clothing deprivation to begin to address role that apparel could play in maintaining self-esteem.
- Conduct a qualitative study to investigate the underlying physical issues of a postpartum mother when viewing the actual celebrity images.
- Conduct a comparative study between immediate postpartum and a five-years interval concerning impact of media images.
WORKS CITED


