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Alyssa Dana Adomaitis
New York City College of Technology

Kim K. P. Johnson
University of Minnesota - Twin Cities

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Post-partum celebrity images: Influence on self-thoughts and appearance

management behaviours of post-partum women

Alyssa Dana Adomaitis, The New York City College of Technology,

City University of New York

Kim K. K. P. Johnson, University of Minnesota

Abstract

Within previous decades, opinions about pregnancy and post-partum behaviour featured in various news articles and within popular literature emphasized issues related to pregnancy and liquor; campaigns against teen pregnancy; pregnancy and weight gain; and pregnancy and dieting behaviour. Attention has shifted from these issues to appearance-related topics including rapid weight loss, exercise regimens and food restriction. For example, photographs of celebrities have provided visual evidence that women can gain weight during pregnancy, give birth and within weeks revert to a thin, pre-pregnant body size. A qualitative method was used to explore to what extent, if any, images of post-partum celebrity bodies influenced self-thoughts of non-celebrity post-partum mothers and their appearance management. A total of 35 women completed in-depth interviews. Viewing post-partum celebrity images stirred up emotions of jealousy, anxiety and frustration, often followed by statements of envy or justification. Most participants reported engaging in upward social comparison with images. However, most participants did not behave differently relative to their appearance management (i.e., dieting, exercise or dressing).

Keywords

appearance management celebrity images

post-partum

identity

dress

pregnancy

Body size changes dramatically when women have children. Recommended weight gain ranges between 25 and 35 pounds for the average woman (Hicks 2016). Physicians state that weight loss takes time. Women need to eat healthy, maintain an exercise regime and have patience (Hicks 2016). However, in the past decade, rapid elimination of any physical traces of pregnancy appears to be a physical ideal promoted to women on the covers of popular magazines. The post-partum celebrities featured provide viewers with slender bodies promptly obtained during a few short weeks since giving birth (Bailey 2008; Brown 2008; Heyman 2008), generating ‘public debate [...] around maternal bodies’ (Baraitser and Tyler 2010: 3).

Several researchers support the idea that advertising, in general, and fashion advertising, specifically, sends powerful messages concerning appearance ideals and is a significant influence on the appearance management behaviours (AMBs) of teenagers and young women (Adomaitis and Johnson 2008; Frisby 2004; Groesz et al. 2002; Mann

1994; Martin and Kennedy 1993, 1994b; Ogle and Thornburg 2003; Posavac et al. 1998; Richins 1991; Stephens et al. 1994). The mechanism often identified explaining how this influence occurs is social comparison. For example, Adomaitis and Johnson (2008) sought to assess young women's use of the models featured in fashion advertisements as a basis for social comparison and to what extent viewing the models shaped beliefs about appearance. Participants shared that the fashion models shaped their expectations about how a woman should look, stimulated both positive and negative self-thoughts, and generated concerns about their appearance and abilities to fit in with their peer groups. A similar pattern of influence may be present when post-partum women view the slender post-partum celebrities featured on the covers of magazines. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore to what extent, if any, images of post-partum celebrity bodies influence self-thoughts of non-celebrity post-partum mothers and their appearance management. The research questions addressed were as follows: what are the appearance concerns of post-partum women?; what strategies do post-partum women employ to address their appearance concerns?; and what impact, if any, do images of post-partum celebrity bodies have on post-partum women as they deal with their post-partum body?

Investigating to what extent post-partum women make use of celebrity images of post-pregnancy is an important area to investigate because researchers have documented that exposure to idealized images contributes to women's self-criticism (Vliegen and Luyten 2009); body dissatisfaction (Haedt and Keel 2007); and weight gain (Setse et al. 2008), variables that contribute to post-partum depression.

Review of literature

Several authors use time to define post-partum (Ostbye et al. 2008; Dietz et al. 2008) and describe it as the period after pregnancy ranging from immediately, to just after delivery, a few weeks and up to as much as two years. In contrast, Rubin (1984: 84) defined post-partum as the period of time that it takes 'from childbirth for a woman to feel like herself again: whole, intact, functional, and in goodness of fit of self in the world'. To include women's self-thoughts in defining post-partum is important as not all women bounce back within the same period for a variety of reasons (Soliday and Francher 2010).

Many women during their post-partum period struggle with appearance concerns. Upton and Han (2003), from their interviews and observations of career women who had recently given birth, revealed that these women participated in high levels of self-scrutiny due to their body changes. Participants shared that they struggled with their physiques and experienced an altered self-identity. They reported constantly evaluating, thinking and exercising their bodies to regain an ideal body shape and size. They sought to avoid negative judgements by others concerning clothing and food choices. Participants indicated that they struggled to enact their roles as mother as they worked to regain their former status within the workplace.

Results from subsequent quantitative research reinforce the idea that pregnancy contributes to appearance concerns in women. Syneron and Velashape (2008), in their research with 500 women, reported that 71 per cent felt less physically desirable after delivery and 88 per cent could not achieve their pre-baby stomach. Duncombe et al. (2008) found that women who initially felt good about their body continued to do so throughout their pregnancy. However, participants who did not initially feel good about

their body worried about weight gain throughout their pregnancy. These concerns occurred early in their pregnancies rather than later.

Reactions to media images

Articles in the popular press note that some women are weary of media that emphasize celebrity weight loss after pregnancy and yet such images can exert an influence on self-thoughts. The results of a survey by the

San Francisco-based website babycenter.com indicated that moms felt angry over images of tone, svelte mom celebrities. One mother, Elaine Schoch shared '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)

One researcher (Chae, 2014) studying Korean women has also documented a connection between images of celebrities' post-baby bodies and women's self-thoughts after childbirth. Data from an online questionnaire completed by 345 Korean women who were within one year of their delivery dates indicated that participants compared their post-partum body to those of celebrity mothers. The reported results of this comparison included increases in body dissatisfaction and a drive for thinness.

Other researchers have reported that post-partum celebrity images may have limited or no impact on women's self-thoughts and appearance management. Fern et al. (2012) recruited eight middle-class mothers from the city of Staffordshire in England

who were members of a breast-feeding support group at the time of the research. Some of the participants stated that pressure to lose weight came from family members, partners and friends rather than from viewing celebrity media images.

Theoretical framework: Social comparison theory

Festinger (1954) contended that people engage in social comparison in situations wherein they want to assess their attributes and abilities, and where objective information is not available. Comparison to another individual is one way to estimate self-worth within social and professional environments. Attributes compared can include assessment of the quality of what one is wearing, one's body or one's physical attractiveness among other qualities. In situations where other people are unavailable, models featured in magazines can also serve as comparison targets.

Comparisons can be upward, wherein an individual is comparing himself or herself to another that has superior attributes or downward where individuals compare to others who have inferior attributes. Wills (1981) explained that downward social comparisons are likely to result in people feeling better about themselves than previously while upward social comparisons are likely to motivate individuals.

Rudd and Lennon (1994) explained how individuals use social comparison to try to recreate themselves in response to viewing advertised images, and possible outcomes linked to engaging in that process. Rudd and Lennon suggest that when individuals compare themselves to an ideal and come close to achieving it, their esteem level can increase, resulting in a strong social identity. However, if a woman compares herself to an image and is far off from achieving that image she may choose a coping strategy (i.e., makes purchases, eat less, exercise), experience a decrease in self-esteem or experience a

transition in personal identity. Applying the process of social comparison to post-partum celebrities and post-partum women, exposure of post-partum women to images of slender post-partum celebrities could result in new and renewed appearance concerns, resulting in changes to appearance management strategies to address those appearance concerns.

Some of these strategies could put these women at risk of developing risky AMBs (e.g., binging, purging).

Method

A qualitative study was designed to meet the research objectives. Using a semi-structured interview enables researchers to ask participants the 'same series of pre-established questions with a limited set of response categories' (Denzin and Lincoln 2000: 649). Thus, an interview schedule was developed to collect the data.

The interview schedule consisted of three parts. First, each participant responded to a brief set of pre-screening questions to assess whether they read any fashion, style or celebrity magazines on a regular basis and whether they read the celebrity news contained in the magazines. The second part of the interview schedule contained fifteen open-ended questions. These questions were designed to explore the appearance concerns of post-partum women, the strategies employed to address these appearance concerns and to what extent viewing images of post-partum celebrity bodies had any perceived influence on self-thoughts and these appearance concerns. Sample questions designed to explore appearance concerns included the following: what was it like for you to get dressed after pregnancy? What, if any, hardships did you experience related to your appearance or clothing after your pregnancy? Sample questions designed to explore strategies employed to address these appearance concerns included the following: what, if

any, AMBs did you engage in? What differences were there, if any, between how you managed your appearance before and after your pregnancy? Sample questions designed to explore relationships between exposure to post-partum celebrity bodies and appearance concerns included the following: what impact, if any, did viewing images of post-pregnancy celebrity bodies have on you? How did viewing these images make you feel? Did you alter how you managed your appearance after viewing these images or reading these articles?

The third part of the schedule contained demographic questions. Participants indicated their age, ethnic origin and years of formal education.

Purposeful sampling was employed. Participants were recruited from select early day care and child development programmes primarily serving low-income families. Data were collected after approval from a University Institutional Review Board. No incentives were offered for participation. To ensure anonymity for all participants, data from each participant were assigned a number. During the reporting of results, participant quotes are referred to as participant #001, #002 and so forth.

Participants

A total of 35 women participated in an interview. Participants resided in the Houston, TX metro-area and had given birth within the last two years. Their ages ranged from 19 to 41 years. They were employed (71.4%) in several fields including dental assistants, hygienists, elementary school aid, office work, professor, attorney, legal aid and house cleaner. Participants (75%) indicated that their income was under \$50K. Participants indicated their ethnicity as white (non-Hispanic) (26%); Asian (14%); black (26%); Hispanic (11%); Other (14%); and no reply (9%). Participants were single

(14.3%), separated (5.7%), married (62.8%) or divorced (2.8%). The participant's formal education ranged from high school diploma or equivalent (8.8%), some college (34.3%), college graduate (28.6%) and graduate/professional degree (11.4%). Almost all participants were first-time mothers; thus, they were transitioning into a new role.

All participants indicated an interest in fashion, trends and celebrities' lives. Although some participants did not deliberately seek out celebrity news, they indicated that it 'pops up' on their news feeds. Nearly half of the participants (43 per cent) indicated that they were always concerned with their appearance.

Data analyses

After reading over all the participants' responses, Van Manen's (1990) line-by-line method was used to identify major concepts within the data. For reliability purposes, two coders were used to check for consistency in coding responses and for similar interpretation of the data. The researcher and an assistant looked at each response in a reply and related it to the participants' post-partum experience. We grouped similar responses together into a category. Once all responses were placed into a category, we analysed each category to determine the underlying theme(s). For example, every response that related to appearance concerns indicating something about the body (e.g., having a double chin) was placed into the category labelled the physical body. After all responses were placed into a category, each category was examined to determine whether there was an underlying broader theme or smaller themes that best reflected the data. The inter-coder reliability was 0.9309 or 93 per cent.

Findings

Post-partum women and appearance concerns

Participants were concerned about their appearance and shared their appearance-related issues after experiencing childbirth. Appearance issues that were identified as ‘of concern’ to these mothers included weight gain resulting in owning clothing that did not physically fit any longer, presenting a ‘mother-like’ appearance, to self and others, and the emotional appearance of being happy. Comments from participants indicating that they were concerned with their weight focused on a desire for weight loss and the resulting change to their body due to their pregnancy. About a quarter of the participants used the terms overweight, round and plump to describe their physical image at the time of the interviews and emphasized that this image was stressful as it was not the figure that they remembered or desired. Some indicated that it was very hard to lose weight. The shared goal was frequently to return to their pre-pregnancy weight. However, others indicated that they expected to weigh more than they had previously. The following quotes illustrate:

‘My tummy was like blah and big. I will NOT wear a two-piece bathing suit ever again, now that I am a mom as it would be awful to look like that’. (Participant #017emphasis by participant)

‘[...] I wanted to get back to pre-pregnancy weight’. (Participant #001)

‘I was concerned about my appearance because I had to gain a lot of weight and didn’t look the same as before’. (Participant #025)

‘Clothes don’t fit anymore cause of weight gained’. (Participant #019)

‘Overweight, and I look still pregnant [...] very depressing and stressful. I couldn’t get back to clothes as I had hoped’. (Participant #002)

‘A mother should be glowing still, because she [is] [*sic*] and the baby are healthy, happy with her new change, she should be chubby because she has bought a human being into the world’. (Participant #030)

Several participants revealed that that they became self-conscious about appearing like a ‘mom’. They indicated they believed that their pre-pregnancy appearance was inconsistent with their new role as a mother and that they needed to take steps to modify their appearance. Modifications to their appearance included no longer wearing certain items of dress, covering up existing body modifications so that they could not be seen and, in one instance, taking an entirely different approach to their appearance. Most women appeared to be working from some internal ideal they had of what a ‘mom-after-child-birth’ should look like; however, their comments did not reveal where this image came from. The following quotes illustrate appearance concerns related to transitioning to the role of mother.

‘I am self- conscious about appearance; my tattoo is not a mom tattoo. A mother would not have this tattoo; I need to cover-it-up as a mom’. (Participant #015)

‘[...] [wearing] Darker clothes make me more mom-like’. (Participant #014)

‘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 pjs to the grocery store and now it is preppy and clean. It was tough to dress to look like a good mom [...] little things give me the strength and courage to think you can do it’. (Participant #029)

‘Yes. Now I’m a little more proper, wearing longer skirts [...] to be a bit more formal’. (Participant #021)

All the participants shared that they experienced happiness once they completed their childbirth experience. These women shared that they had a desire to appear ‘physically’ happy. In this context, feeling happy meant looking good. The following quote illustrates this category of responses.

[...] I brought a beauty bag to the hospital. I wanted to leave looking good. Looking good for me is equated to happiness. Oh! I want to look like Posh Spice. Skinny blonde. Katie Holmes. I still want to have a career. (Participant #033)

Concern with appearance and appearance management strategies

Of those participants who identified an appearance concern, as noted previously, many were concerned about weight gain. Correspondingly, appearance management

strategies that evolved were focused on new behaviours designed to assist in weight loss. Other strategies noted included adaptations done to their existing clothing to make them fit (e.g., using safety pins to expand circumference) or shopping for new clothing. One participant was so unhappy with her changing appearance that she adopted the strategy of covering the mirrors in her house. A few participants shared that their adaptive appearance management strategy was to pamper themselves by getting spa treatments. The following quotes illustrate.

‘Oh it’s such a hardship [...] I would safety-pin my regular clothes to add more room. I didn’t want my body to get used to being accommodated in larger clothes. I covered up mirrors in my house for months so I did not have to look at my changed body. I wanted to shop for regular-sized clothes [...] like in misses not bigger sizes’. (Participant #033)

‘It kinda sucked because I couldn’t wear my stuff [...]. I cried when I bought “Not Your Daughter” dark jeans!’ (jeans made for curvy older women). (Participant #015)

‘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. The day after my delivery, I got a manicure/pedicure. 1 week later I got my haircut. Everything made me feel better’. (Participant #012)

Impact of viewing/reading post-partum celebrity images and news

Participants were exposed to and did read post-partum celebrity news throughout their pregnancy and thereafter. Some participants indicated that this information was incidental and not necessarily sought out in and of itself. Participant (#28) described it as, '[...] part of society as one can view on magazines in the grocery store and on login websites such as Yahoo.com and MSN.com [...]'].

More than half of participants revealed that reading post-partum celebrity news and viewing celebrity images of new moms did exert an affective impact on them as it stirred up a range of emotions including jealousy, anxiety and frustration. Participants did make comparisons between these celebrities and self. These comparisons were evidenced by participants' ability to easily recall the names of celebrities they had viewed without being prompted to do so. While some images of celebrities resulted in feelings of jealousy for some participants, for other participants, the images were an inspiration to weight loss efforts and made their goal of returning to their former body size an obtainable reality.

'It made me hate them. I do have an understanding that they [celebrities] have cooks, [personal] trainers, [and] sitters. I am envious'. (Participant #026)

'Jealous [...] Yet, I shake it off [...] Made me wish I could do what they did so I could feel pretty too'. (Participant #014)

‘Some images had a big impact on me and made me feel like a big blob in comparison. It was depressing. Angelina Jolie went to a size zero or one – that does not happen in every day modern life’. (Participant #029)

‘I read about Jennifer Garner and Britney Spears. We had babies around the same time. It made me want to lose weight faster’. (Participant #002)

Most participants who indicated that the images exerted some form of influence on them did not indicate a specific change to their AMBs. There were only a few participants who credited viewing the celebrity images with altering their AMBs. These women shopped for new clothing, added or increased physical exercise, or tried an AMB not practiced previously such as wearing make-up or being more concerned about their overall appearance. Interestingly, participants also shared that viewing these images provided them with the hope that they might also, one day in the future, return to their pre-pregnancy size and shape. The following quotes illustrate.

‘It made me start to think about dieting exercising, but not enough to make any changes’. (Participant #004)

(Shaking Head left-to-right indicating a ‘no’)

Trying to go to the gym more. To feel better about my body image. (Participant #26)

As I lost weight, I did. Tried to imitate to look skinnier like a celebrity.

(Participant #33)

‘Shopping – that would make me feel better [...] more attractive than what I am’.

(Participant #001)

‘Yes [...] for the first time in my life, I tried make up’. (Participant #014)

‘[...] The impact of reading [...] uhmmm celebrity news made me feel bad and good. t made me feel bad because I didn’t look like them [a celebrity] – and good because I know it, having a slender body again, can happen’. (Participant #027)

Participants also distanced themselves from the celebrities featured in the images. They noted that a celebrity had the needed financial resources to get the assistance needed (e.g., trainers, nutritionists, physicians) that enabled a fast return to a pre-pregnancy size and shape.

‘I wish I could do it, have plastic surgery, but my dedication is to my children.

Celebrities have money and personally, I believe they [celebrities] have the willingness to torture themselves because they have so many people judge them. I prefer to put that energy into my children’. (Participant # 030)

‘Well it seems like BAM! [...]. So it seems like if you have money it would be so easy like no big deal [...] Lipo it, tighten it up, trainers, nutritionist. So easy to do [...] like really. (Participant # 034, emphasis by participant)

Discussion and conclusions

These women did have appearance concerns but for most of these women, any change in appearance concern stemmed from their transitioning to the new role of mother. This finding is consistent with Ogle et al. (2013), who also found that role change was often accompanied by a change to appearance when transitioning into the role of a new mother. Similar to participants in this research, Ogle et al. (2013) found participants who went shopping, went to salons or obtained a new hairstyle, when transitioning into motherhood. Consumption of maternity dress assisted with the transition into the new role of mother and the adoption of that identity (Ogle et al. 2013).

When participants identified several appearance concerns, their responses centred on weight gain and accompanying feelings of distress. As women are frequently judged on their physical beauty and body shape in western cultures (Bardo 1993), this concern about weight gain and desire for the body to return to its previous shape is not a surprise (Earle 2003; Nash 2012).

Nash (2012) noted that exposure to social-cultural representations of pregnant and post-partum women is one of the many challenges that women face. Exposure to celebrity women who quickly returned to a pre-pregnancy body size and shape during the post-partum phase of their pregnancy was a challenge for some of these women but not all as a few women used these images as inspiration. Although most of these participants

desired weight loss, none of them shared that they adopted new or risky appearance management strategies to meet their goal, and a few of them reported engaging in active sport or exercise as a weight loss strategy. Rather, it appeared that these participants were expressing desires but had yet to actually act on them.

Reported findings are consistent with the tenets of social comparison theory (Festinger 1954; Wills 1981). Participants reported engaging in upward comparisons with post-partum celebrity images. Supporting the theory, for some participants comparisons served as motivation to improve their appearance through weight loss or through purchasing dress items consistent with their new body size and shape.

Limitations

Limitations to this research include a rather homogenous sample of participants as all were recruited from a single location and reflected a single income level. Participants were mothers who had given birth within the last two years. Two years may not have been sufficient time for participants to respond reflectively on their post-partum experience with dress and appearance management as most or at least some participants could have still been in their post-partum period (Rubin 1984). The outcomes of repeated exposure to idealized images of post-partum celebrities may occur over a longer period of time than the time frame of exposure for these participants.

Suggestions for future study

Suggestions for future research addressing the impact of exposure to idealized celebrity images during and after pregnancy on self-thoughts and appearance management strategies include conducting longitudinal research. Women could be interviewed at different stages of their pregnancy to assess any long-term impacts of

exposure to these images. Women's expectations for appearance change could be identified at various stages of their pregnancy and during their post-partum period and expectations for changes in body image could also be assessed. The goal for such research would be to assist women in developing realistic expectations for weight gain and for weight loss as a result of their pregnancy. For example, as weight gain occurred for a nine-month period, it should be expected that weight loss might occur over a similar time frame. Yet, using celebrity images as data, one might expect that weight loss should occur in a matter days or weeks! Longitudinal data would also uncover any long-term impact of exposure to these images.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Lisette Santisteban from the Department of Nursing at The New York City College of Technology, who clarified working definitions of post-partum. Thanks are also due to the Department of Consumer Science and Merchandising at the University of Houston for funding an undergraduate research assistant, Michelle Rose Jones, to assist in conducting this research. Sincere thanks are due to Amy Cruz, Director of the Montessori Day School in Houston, for assisting with participant recruitment and encouraging post-partum mothers to participate in this research.

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Contributor details

Dr. Alyssa Dana Adomaitis is the Director of The Business and Technology of Fashion Program at the New York City College of Technology, City University of New York (CUNY). Her research area of interest is in the social psychology of dress, beauty injustice, and luxury advertising. She investigates people's perception of dress, impression management, along with advertisings' impact on social behavior.

Contact:

Alyssa Dana Adomaitis, Ph.D., MBA

Director of the Business & Technology of Fashion Program

Department of Business

New York City College of Technology

300 Jay Street; Namm 1025

Brooklyn, N.Y. 11201

USA

E-mail: aadomaitis@citytech.cuny.edu

E-mail: kjohnson@umn.edu

Kim K. P. Johnson is emeritus professor at the University of Minnesota. Her research interests are in the areas of the social psychology of appearance and consumer behavior as it relates to apparel.

