

Looking Beyond the Baby Bump: The Role of Magazine Portrayals of Pregnant and Post-Partum Celebrity Bodies in Social Comparison Processes in Pregnant Women

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The present study contributes to our understanding of how pregnant women engage in social comparison with pregnant celebrities featured in celebrity magazines. Focus groups revealed pregnant women do compare their bodies with those of pregnant celebrities; however, they described it as a distant comparison with little negative influence on body image. More damaging, they asserted, is their engagement in prospective comparisons with recently post-partum celebrities, which sets expectations for how they should look once post-partum.

Recently celebrity magazines have made a lucrative business out of announcing who is pregnant, following celebrities around while pregnant, and being the first to have pictures of celebrities' new babies. According to Matthews and Wexler (2000), "After decades of closeting, the pregnant woman was being represented as most other women in our culture: as an object of the gaze packaged to create and play on the desires of the viewer" (p. 201). These depictions have been brought to the forefront of public consciousness primarily by the "obsessive documentation" of celebrity pregnancy communicated by lifestyle and tabloid magazines (Nash, 2012, p. 6). In a content analysis of this sort of documentation on entertainment magazine websites, Gow, Lydecker, Lamanna, and Mazzeo (2011) found these websites to regularly offer viewers idealized imagery of pregnant and post-partum celebrity bodies. Such imagery sets unrealistic expectations in regard to weight and shape for the average pregnant and recently post-partum woman.

With the proliferation of media coverage of pregnant celebrities and the idealization of these celebrities maintaining thin bodies and/or quickly retaining thin bodies once post-partum, it is important to examine the impact of these portrayals on pregnant women's perceptions of their own bodies. This is particularly important as women's dissatisfaction with their bodies has been found to be related to their likelihood of engaging in breastfeeding, eating/appetite abnormalities, and poorer mental health (Barnes, Stein, Smith, & Pollock, 1997; Gjerdingen, Fontaine, Crow, McGovern, Center, & Miner, 2009). Tiggemann and McGill (2004) assert an important factor involved in the relationship between media exposure and negative effects is social comparison.

Thus, the present analysis seeks to gain a better understanding of the social comparison processes that may be at work when pregnant women view celebrity gossip magazine coverage of pregnant celebrities. The following sections include a review of relevant past research examining women's body image during pregnancy, the impact of messages communicated by celebrity gossip magazines, and the theoretical framework guiding the present study, social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954). Next, the qualitative methodology employed in the present study is presented, followed by a discussion of the findings and implications for future research.

The Pregnant Body

As pregnant women's bodies rapidly undergo outwardly visible changes in regard to weight and shape, the impact these changes have on their experiences of pregnancy needs to be addressed. Indeed, many pregnant women report one of the biggest stressors of pregnancy to be changes in their body image, which may also contribute to depression they experience once post-partum (Crawford & Unger, 2004; Gjerdingen et al., 2009; Walker, Sterling, Guy, & Mahometa, 2013). Research examining how pregnancy may impact a woman's body image indicates that for women who were of normal weight pre-pregnancy, the majority report experiencing a negative change in body image during pregnancy (Fox & Yamaguchi, 1997). The women explained their experiences of negative change in body image as resulting from feeling self-conscious due to a heightened sense of public scrutiny. The researchers attribute the amount of negative change experienced by pregnant women to

the inconsistency between the advanced pregnant body shape and society's accepted idea of the thin-ideal female body. Further, Kazmierczak and Goodwin (2011) found that pregnant women who abide by the cultural standards for gender roles, often displayed by and reinforced in the media, were more susceptible to dissatisfaction with their bodies during pregnancy. Similarly, Nash (2012) found the participants in her qualitative study of Australian pregnant women "felt enormous pressure to conform to contemporary models of femininity which emphasize slimness and 'fitness'" (p. 204).

Studies have also examined how pregnant women's comparisons of their bodies to those of others may impact body-image concerns (Duncombe, Wertheim, Skouteris, Paxton, & Kelly, 2008; Nash, 2012; Skouteris, Carr, Wertheim, Paxton, & Duncombe, 2005). For instance, Skouteris et al. and Duncombe et al. found pregnant women's tendencies to engage in body comparison while in early pregnancy predicted their seeing their weight and shape as being more important than women who did not tend to engage in body comparison. Interestingly, in the Skouteris et al. (2005) study, pregnant women reported that socio-cultural pressures to lose weight from close others and the media led to negative feelings about their bodies.

Celebrity Gossip Magazines

A cultural obsession with celebrities has fueled the media industry to supply consumers with the most current, detailed, and insider information having to do with celebrities' lives. Frequently, popular media focus on the celebrity body as a main site of representation as well as a site for consumers to engage in their own evaluation of celebrities. Thus, female celebrities' bodies in particular are often idealized cultural indicators of what the perfect woman consists of such as: "long legs, slender wrists, ample bust, thin neck, and flat stomach" (Holmes & Redmond, 2006, p. 121). Rather than seeking to discover what really goes on in celebrities' private lives, Wilson (2010) argues current media coverage of celebrities more often invites consumers to engage in an appraisal of celebrities' appearance and lifestyle. This is a consistent theme in one particular form of celebrity media coverage – the celebrity gossip magazine.

In a study including women tabloid readers in London, Johansson (2006) found themes of both reader identification with celebrities as well as distancing, as readers saw celebrities as living a different, more glamorous life, but also recognized commonalities between celebrities' lives and their own. Identification and distancing were accompanied by resentment and frustration on the part of tabloid readers as they often mentioned being jealous and unhappy about their own situation in comparison to those of celebrities. The major appeal of reading tabloids, according to Johansson, is the bashing of celebrities these tabloids engage in, which allows for a lessening of resentment on the part of the reader.

When offering up a readily accessible forum for consumers to peek into the lives of celebrities, these magazines heavily encourage consumers to judge female celebrities in regards to their bodies. Considering their relentless barrage of photographic images of gorgeous celebrities as well as instructions for how to dress, diet, and exercise, Wilson (2010) argues celebrity magazines function to advocate unattainable and continually changing standards for what it means to be a female. This in turn, Wilson argues, creates "docile female bodies" who place a great deal of time and effort on the control, surveillance, and improvement of their external appearance in order to fit these standards (p. 30).

Celebrity gossip magazines also devote a great deal of coverage to celebrity pregnancy. As Goldenberg, Goplen, Cox, & Arndt (2007) assert, U.S. media focus a great deal on pregnancy, but mostly with regard to celebrity bodies that present idealistic and unrealistic images of pregnancy. They argue that the idealistic portrayals can enhance the dissatisfaction pregnant women have for their bodies because their bodies do not measure up to the unrealistic images disseminated. Further, Nash (2012) asserts media coverage of pregnant celebrities continuously objectifies women's bodies and idealizes slenderness while communicating "how to 'do' pregnancy well" (p. 47). Thus, it is important to study what impact these images have on pregnant women's thoughts about their bodies.

Theoretical Framework

As indicated in the findings of both Skouteris et al. (2005) and Duncombe et al. (2008), pregnant women's evaluations of their bodies can involve considering how they themselves look in comparison to others. According to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) people come to learn about themselves by comparing their own attributes to the attributes they see others around them to have and by making evaluations of their own attributes based on those comparisons. It is important to examine whether pregnant women engage in social comparison with pregnant celebrities as these comparisons may have an impact on their evaluations of their own pregnant bodies. If women see celebrity women portrayed in the media being primarily valued for their appearance and for their thin bodies, they too may start to value themselves predominately for their appearance and the size and shape of their bodies.

Festinger (1954) also delineates two differing types of comparisons that individuals engage in. During upward comparison, individuals view a better-looking and/or more successful person than they themselves are and then compare themselves to that better off person. The second type is downward comparison whereby individuals look at someone who they perceive to be less good-looking and/or successful and evaluate themselves based on that comparison. Although the media frequently offer up celebrities as sites for upward comparison, at times they do engage in celebrity bashing (Johansson, 2006) allowing for downward comparisons.

Despite being scarce, the findings of qualitative investigations of body image, social comparison, and media influences (Milkie, 1999; Tiggemann, Gardiner, & Slater, 2000; Wertheim, Paxton, Schutz, & Muir, 1997) point to the importance of continuing to employ these methods in future research with expanded populations. For example, participants in all three of the qualitative studies conducted described the media as exerting the strongest pressures on individuals to be thin. However, Tiggemann et al. found when asking adolescent girls to describe in their own words the impact of media messages that these girls were very active consumers of the media and saw media images of women as "unrealistic and manipulated" (p. 655). Similarly, both minority and white adolescent girls in Milkie's study not only viewed magazine models as being unrealistic, but also as artificial. For the white girls however, despite seeing media models as unrealistic, they continued to report engaging in social comparison with the models particularly in regard to physical appearance.

Given the aforementioned rapid changes to the outer appearance of a woman's body that is experienced while pregnant as well as the proliferation of media coverage of pregnant celebrities, it is important to examine how being pregnant may impact the relationship between body image and media exposure. In the only known qualitative study to examine this relationship, Nash (2012) found that Australian pregnant women did engage in some comparison with pregnant celebrities, yet they described their body image being more profoundly impacted when they compared themselves to close others such as their own sisters. Nash's study provides interesting insights into the impact of media exposure on Australian pregnant women's body image; however, the study did not apply the specific constructs of social comparison theory and did not examine the impact on American pregnant women. Thus, the present study seeks to gain a better understanding of the relationship between the social comparison process, body image, and media exposure during pregnancy through American pregnant women's own words. The following research question guided this study: How, if at all, is social comparison involved when pregnant women see celebrity gossip magazine coverage of pregnant celebrities?

Method

Design and Participants

Following project approval by a Midwestern university's Institutional Review Board, nine focus groups were employed in the present study. According to Greenbaum (1987), there is no set number for an appropriate sample size in focus group research; rather, the researcher estimates an appropriate size based on the scope and complexity of the phenomenon under study as well as based on access to participants and the time and monetary resources available for conducting the groups. A main goal of the present study was for each pregnant woman involved to have her voice clearly heard and to never encounter a possibility of being muted in any way, while still feeling as if she were in the

presence of other pregnant women. Thus, although the number of participants in each focus group discussion was small, it allowed for this goal to be achieved and seemed to also provide a cathartic function for the pregnant women. Focus group discussions included 2-4 pregnant women each, with a total of 25 currently pregnant women participating. The majority of the women reported being 18-29 years old (15 women), while the rest reported being 30-39 years old (10 women). In addition, most identified themselves as Caucasian (21), while the remaining four women identified themselves as African American, Asian Pacific-Islander, Hispanic, and Other. The mean week of pregnancy the women were in was 20.8 weeks; and for most, the child they were expecting was going to be their first. The names of all of the participants were changed to ensure the confidentiality of their statements.

Sampling

Availability of participants was limited to the geographic area in which the researcher was located, and thus, convenience sampling was used. In addition, criterion sampling was used as all of the participants had to be at least 18 years of age and currently pregnant. Pregnant women were solicited during their participation in a larger experimental study through which at the end of the study they were offered the opportunity to earn \$20 by taking part in a focus group discussion. Of all of the participants eligible and willing to participate in a focus group, none were turned away even after theoretical saturation was achieved in the hopes of generating a diverse group of participants and a resultant diverse commentary.

Research Setting and Procedure

The focus group discussions were held in a conference room at a large Midwestern university. The atmosphere was informal and refreshments were provided at each session. Following brief introductions, the researcher passed around photographs and accompanying captions of pregnant celebrities pulled from popular celebrity gossip magazines (*People*, *Life & Style*, *Us Weekly*). After each woman had a chance to see the photos and captions, participants were given the opportunity to discuss their general opinions about celebrity gossip magazines with each other. The pregnant women were then asked whether women might compare themselves to pregnant celebrities and if they had ever compared themselves to pregnant celebrities. If they indicated they had compared themselves to pregnant celebrities, they were asked to describe how they went about making a comparison. If they indicated they had never compared themselves to pregnant celebrities, they were asked to describe why they thought they refrained from doing so. See Appendix A for the full focus group guide, including all of the questions posed to participants, and Appendix B for examples of the celebrity gossip magazine photos and captions each focus group was shown.

Each focus group discussion lasted anywhere from 1 to 2 hours with the majority lasting 1 hour and 30 minutes. During each session, detailed notes were taken to be able to consult when analyzing the transcripts.

Data Analysis

Prior to analysis and as soon as possible after each focus group discussion, the audio-files were transcribed word for word and compiled in a computer word processing file. Initial analysis of the data involved the use of in-process memos in which any themes or issues that emerged repeatedly in the field notes and transcribed data were concentrated upon.

While continuing to conduct focus groups, transcribe the data, and compile in-process memos, the data were interpreted based on a thematic analysis. The first steps in qualitative data thematic analysis, according to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), involves categorization and coding of the data. Categorization entails labeling units of data with a term that encapsulates items in the data that are similar. Rather than applying preformed theoretical categories in a deductive fashion, the data were categorized inductively. Themes that emerged from the data were categorized by writing them on index cards, noting through the use of codes how these categories related to the data and noting any irregularities within the data as needed. The categorization and coding were largely guided by the research question posed for this study, but more specifically, a search for similarities and differences

in the responses of each focus group discussion, what themes repeatedly surfaced in each discussion, and whether participants appeared to agree with one another in each session.

Validation

After gathering and analyzing the data, several steps advocated by Creswell (2007) were taken to validate and add trustworthiness to the results. First, any researcher biases including personal experiences were reflected upon to see if they impacted interpretations of the data and if so in what way. Next, thick and rich descriptions of the interviews and the research setting were attempted to be provided to give further context for readers. Last, member checks were conducted whereby analyses and interpretations of the data were shared with seven randomly selected participants from differing focus group discussions to ensure representations of their thoughts and feelings were accurate. Six of the seven women responded and all indicated the descriptions were fair and accurate.

Results

The research question guiding this study sought to examine how, if at all, social comparison may be involved when pregnant women see celebrity gossip magazine coverage of pregnant celebrities. Prior to the researcher posing any questions, participants began discussing with each other some of the most prevalent messages contained in the coverage of pregnant celebrities while flipping through the celebrity gossip magazines provided for them. The most prevalent messages, according to all 25 of these women, are messages about celebrities' bodies. Although these women indicated that gossip magazines focused on all female celebrities' bodies, they all expressed how overwhelmingly they felt these magazines focused on the bodies of pregnant celebrities to the exclusion of other important and relevant information.

Within the pregnant women's discussions of celebrity gossip magazine coverage that focused on the bodies of pregnant celebrities, how this coverage impacted their evaluations of their own bodies was brought to light. Specifically, two overarching themes emerged that help to explain their engagement in social comparison while pregnant. The first theme, *Distant Comparison*, illustrates how these pregnant women related celebrity gossip magazine coverage of pregnant celebrity bodies back to their own bodies. This theme includes the three sub-themes of *Up and out*, *Looking down*, and *Closer comparison*. The second theme, *Great Expectations*, addresses the societal pressures to rebound quickly once post-partum these women felt were related to gossip magazine coverage of pregnant celebrities and includes the two sub-themes of *Prospective comparison* and *Unrealistic timeline*. These themes and sub-themes are illustrated in the excerpts from the focus group transcripts presented in the following sections.

Distant Comparison

To examine how these women related celebrity gossip magazine coverage of pregnant celebrities to their own pregnant selves, participants were asked if they ever compared themselves to pregnant celebrities in gossip magazines. Many replied that they did, especially in regard to their bodies, because much of the coverage of pregnant celebrities concerned the body. All 25 of the women in the present study explained comparison of their own bodies to others was something that women did whether pregnant or not and that it was easy to engage in with celebrities because their bodies are so visible in the public eye.

While pregnant, all of these women felt that their own bodies as well of those of pregnant celebrities were subject to a greater public scrutiny. As such, all of the women felt it was only natural to engage in some form of comparison between their own pregnant bodies and those of the celebrities featured in gossip magazines. During the group 6 discussion, participants described engaging in this comparison:

Darla: I think for a majority of women who these [magazines] target, I think there's a little piece in all of us that says 'man, I wish I could look like that, I wish I could have that hair, I wish I could have that body and that nose.' I mean, I think it's just something that women do.

Adrienne: Yeah, exactly.

Jennifer: It's kind of like a dream world that you get a little glimpse into.

As Jennifer alluded to, the majority of participants viewed the depiction of pregnant celebrities in gossip magazines as being a "dream world" or unrealistic. Thus, comparison of their own bodies with those of celebrities was described as a *distant* comparison. For example, when group 4 was asked if they ever engaged in comparison with pregnant celebrities all three of the women indicated that they did and described this comparison as follows:

Sophia: In the very distant...

Marina: in a distant way...

Nancy: Yeah

Sophia: Yeah. Something like there's...because you're not them. You're not a star. You're not in the spotlight. You don't have trainers. You don't have people...

Marina: Styling their hair or makeup or clothes.

Although these women admitted to comparing themselves to pregnant celebrities, this comparison was distant because, as indicated in the quotes above, these women felt little similarity with pregnant celebrities and realized they were not on the same level. Outside of the fact that they shared being currently pregnant with these celebrities, they mainly dis-identified with those celebrities realizing they had very different lifestyles. This was also illustrated in the following discussion engaged in by members of group 5:

Anna: They haven't, they don't have a real life. I mean this is not our lives. We're not...this is the...this is [points to a celebrity] like 1% of the population. It's not, it's not real. That's why you have to take it with a grain of salt.

Olivia: Yeah you just have to kinda roll your eyes at it.

Financial status was also brought up frequently in these pregnant women's discussions of the differences between their own lifestyles and that of celebrities whose pregnancies they felt were largely glamorized in celebrity gossip magazines.

Adrienne: You just see pretty pictures. They don't show you what real women go through. Like, hey, we have to find a daycare provider, we actually have to budget financially and let alone you are actually someone who is doing it on your own. You know single moms out there and whatever their case is. They don't show all of those things. They make it look all glamorous and beautiful not realizing that your body is going through a lot. Your emotions are...

Jennifer: Like one minute you are happy and the next minute you're crying...

Adrienne: Yeah and the next minute you want ice cream.

Here Adrienne discusses how she recognizes the gap between her income and responsibilities as a pregnant woman and future mom and those of a celebrity. This recognition also allows her to understand that the glamorous and beautiful pregnancy scene she sees depicted in celebrity gossip magazines is unrealistic for her and many other women.

The fact that celebrities have the financial wherewithal to have personal trainers and chefs, hair and makeup artists, stylists as well as full-time nannies to help make them look glamorous and their lives appear perfect was also asserted as evidence of the unrealistic nature of these magazines.

Fifteen of the pregnant women described how the financial bracket they were situated in did not allow for such excesses and therefore they acknowledged it was ridiculous to want to be like these celebrities because that was unrealistic for them. Therefore, any comparison they engaged in with celebrities was deemed distant.

Up and out. As discussed previously, according to social comparison theory when individuals engage in comparison, they evaluate their own attributes based on the attributes they see others to have. Within the discussion of engaging in a distant comparison, 18 of the women in this study described the upward comparison they took part in with pregnant celebrity bodies and the negative thoughts about their own bodies that resulted from such comparisons. Despite the initial negative impact these comparisons had, the women indicated they did not feel this impact long-term. Resentment and jealousy were often present in the women's descriptions of their upward comparisons with pregnant celebrities. However, these upward comparisons were also described as quickly being pushed aside as illustrated in the following quote:

Amelia: I mean I think it's a fleeting thought of what I wished my upper arms looked like [laughs]. But again I don't use that as sort of like a normal barometer and like you said [points to Gloria] you have no idea how touched up or whatever that might be. So again, it's nothing really to dwell on. And again it's sort of like a land of reality and a land of Hollywood.

Similarly, Leigh and Paula described their upward comparison as fleeting and only in terms of appearance but not in terms of personality.

Leigh: For me it's just wishful thinking. You know. I was like oh she looks cute, oh she looks good. Look at her skin while I have Irish pale skin and they are all tan and healthy looking and I was like alright that is never going to happen for me. But knowing the person they actually are though, I would never want to be like them.

Paula: I would have to say I agree with that. I don't ever want to be like them. It's not that anybody wants to be them, it's just like that would be nice to have that money and what I wouldn't give to lay in a tanning bed right now!

In describing her upward comparison with pregnant celebrities, Corey discussed how she realized how ridiculous engaging in comparison with pregnant and recently post-partum celebrities' bodies is.

Corey: Yeah I mean part of it I'm like ugh how come they're so thin and pregnant. Ugh. But then it's like oh whatever that's their job to be thin and that's not my job and um. You know but also I'm like oh they totally were able to take that weight off so I totally am going to be able to too. So I find it, I mean, it is somehow making me think that I could become really thin after having a baby um which is not at all likely because there is no way I have that much time or that much energy. But yeah, I think, you know, I do definitely compare myself even though I do know at the same time that it's absurd.

Looking down. Ten out of the 25 participants, also indicated engaging in downward comparison with pregnant celebrity bodies at times. As much as these women criticized celebrity magazines for focusing on the weight of pregnant celebrities, they also took some pleasure in recognizing how their weight gain was not as substantial as some celebrities.

Nancy: I mean when you hear of somebody who gains 50 pounds during their pregnancy, you know, and you only gain 25, that'd make me feel a little bit better about yourself.

Marina: Yeah.

Nancy: You know especially when you know what they look like to start with and then you know...

Sophia: That would make you feel better about it all...

Further, in group 3, Hannah described how she simultaneously engages in both upward and downward comparison with pregnant celebrities.

Hannah: Yeah I initially probably do but then I don't dwell on it. Like I looked at a picture of her [points to Kendra Wilkinson on the cover of *Us Weekly*] and I was like she's 7 months and so then I was like okay so she's only like 4 weeks more than I am and I'm not quite as bulgy. I think it's something I think about at first and yeah I will say ehh they're a lot thinner but I don't think it's something I constantly am thinking about you know ...

One of the more appealing features of viewing pregnant celebrities in gossip magazines, according to many of the women, was seeing some of the celebrities deviate from their normally "perfect" bodies. For example, the women in group 2 described deriving pleasure from seeing pregnant celebrities gain weight and have trouble losing that weight post-pregnancy because it made the celebrities, and themselves by comparison, seem more "normal."

Leigh: When you get your normal [celebrities] like Jennifer Garner who has taken a while to lose the [pregnancy] weight. Or Melissa Joan Hart, who I think I just saw a picture of, and she was another one who came back and she wasn't tiny like she was before [pregnancy]. You see them and you're like, 'okay, you're normal.'

Paula: Yeah, I have to agree. And I will say that I saw something on TV the other day about Kendra Wilkinson and she's still pretty chunky after her baby and I was just like 'good, you're semi-normal because you don't wake up and it's gone.'

Although the downward comparisons described above were not engaged in as frequently as the upward comparisons, they were used as coping mechanisms by these women. By finding ways to feel as if their pregnant bodies were not as bad as they could be, these women felt they were better able to deal with the changes they were experiencing in their bodies. However, all 25 of the women agreed that celebrity gossip magazines presented more opportunities for upward comparison than downward.

Closer comparison. To further illustrate how distant their comparison was with pregnant celebrities, the women in this study described how more useful and realistic comparison targets were people they knew personally. For 22 of the participants, more suitable comparison targets included friends, family members, and co-workers who were currently or who had once been pregnant. For example, Terry and Sara indicated that they compared themselves more often with close others because they felt the comparison was more valid when it was engaged in with someone who was normal like they were and whose attitudes and behaviors were similar to their own.

Teri: I think I compare myself more to um...the people that I work with. The two girls that are pregnant at work.

Sara: And friends who have been or who are pregnant too...

Teri: Versus someone in a magazine that I don't know. Because the girls at my work are real. They sit next to me. They sit at a desk like I do every day. That's real to me. A friend, or a co-worker, or a relative to base myself like where I feel I should be versus someone I don't even know.

Sara: Plus their situation tends to be a little more closely...their lifestyle is closer to my own than celebrities.

More specifically, group 1 participants noted how they attempted to predict how their bodies would look both while pregnant and once post-partum by comparing themselves to family and friends.

Jan: My sister is really very thin and I mean she could eat a whole pan of brownies and it doesn't touch her at all. I remember after her first son was born and we went to the lake and she had a six-pack again and I was like 'okay, maybe that will happen to me...NOT!'

Jan, Amber, and Mary: laughing in unison.

Mary: I felt the same thing about a friend of mine who has had two kids and she's got a six-pack. But I didn't really have a six-pack to start with so I'm not so optimistic (laughs).

A very similar discussion occurred in group 6, in which the participants described speculating about how their own bodies would respond to pregnancy by comparing themselves to close friends.

Jennifer: I know one of my friends, she just gained weight all over. I mean her nose got big. So, I'm like 'is that going to happen to me?' Or, I don't know, I find myself thinking about those things and wondering am I going to go this way [points outward from her belly] or this way [points outward from her backside].

Darla: I've done that too. That's what I do with my girlfriend who did the watermelon thing and just spread out across and because she's a bigger woman you couldn't really tell she was pregnant. So, I do definitely compare myself to that.

These comparisons had the potential to be both more harmful and more pleasing than comparing to celebrities because, the women explained, they felt more camaraderie with friends and family members and thus felt it was more realistic to expect similar shape and appearance outcomes.

Further, the issue of the gap in lifestyles between these women and celebrities was again mentioned as a reason for valuing comparison with close others. Friends, family members, and co-workers were more likely to belong to the same economic class as these women and therefore had similar resources.

Marina: They're [celebrities] not in our financial bracket to even compare us to. Because their financial bracket is so far above ours that we cannot afford to do what they do and look the way that they do. They need – we need to be down with real people in our own blue-collar world to compare ourselves with, I think.

These women appear to realize that in many cases pregnant celebrities' bodies are more desirable than their own; however, they are more willing to brush those feelings aside because they understand that financially they cannot compete with the lengths celebrities go to in order to keep their pregnant bodies as toned and thin as possible.

However fleeting and distant these pregnant women described their engagement in comparison with pregnant celebrities' bodies to be, all of the participants were well aware of the expectations gossip magazine coverage of celebrity bodies set for all women. These expectations both fed into and out of the social pressures these women felt to live up to the physical ideals for women. Although these women largely condemned celebrity gossip magazines for focusing on the bodies of pregnant and recently post-partum celebrities, they were still very aware of the ideals for the female body set forth by these magazines. The next section discusses how celebrity gossip magazines impacted participants' feelings about what expectations they and others held for their bodies once they gave birth to the children they were carrying.

Great Expectations

The expectations the participants felt from their families, friends, co-workers, and the public in general, were described in many of the comments made during the focus group discussions. Most often, the women described feeling pressure to look a certain way while pregnant and to not surpass by too far the normalized boundaries of the female body. Although the participants indicated that the pressures they felt as women to live up to physical ideals was something they felt whether they were pregnant or not, they did feel a greater scrutiny of their bodies while pregnant. The pregnant women in group 1 described this scrutiny in the following conversation:

Amber: Maybe because people feel it's acceptable to comment on your body and weight while you're pregnant that it happens so much. When other people notice that I've gained weight and feel like they have to comment I wonder why people think it's okay to comment on it when I'm pregnant when it really isn't okay to do that when you're not pregnant.

Mary: Yeah, it's like your body is more public so your life is more public and maybe the celebrity coverage has made people... You know they see the media criticizing people so they think that is okay to do that.

Jan: Well and people feel free to criticize whether you are doing the right thing for your baby. You know like 'oh you're gaining too much weight, you're not supposed to gain too much, you might get gestational diabetes' or something like that. People feel free to criticize pregnant women's bodies.

All of the women indicated how surprised they were with the sexualization of the changes their pregnant bodies were going through. Amelia (group 3), explained this sexualization in the following quote:

Amelia: It's hard because you want to still feel attractive and yet your goal I think is I don't want to be a sex pot you know and that's hard. There's some tension with that in terms of wanting to still feel attractive and realizing there's a baby inside. I don't want another person to particularly find me uber-hot [laughing] when I'm 9 months pregnant. I don't know.

Amelia describes the dialectic many of these pregnant women felt between still wanting to meet the cultural ideals of being an attractive female and yet not feeling attractive because of the baby they were carrying.

The public sexualization of the pregnant body specifically engaged in by the media was discussed in group 6 by Darla, Jennifer, and Adrienne.

Darla: It's actually pretty disgusting because if you think about the woman's body and what it does when it's pregnant and how it just knows to do all these things and it's just tremendous and it doesn't get credit. It's only everything else: weight gain, boobs, what the body looks like after...

Jennifer: It gets criticized...

Darla: Yeah. So as a woman it's just frustrating.

Adrienne: I think then you are not getting credit for, okay, you are sustaining life.

In addition to feeling greater scrutiny of their bodies while pregnant, 20 of the women indicated they experienced at least some anxiety over being able to lose any weight left over once they gave birth to their children. The focus on pregnant celebrities' bodies that celebrity gossip magazines engage in was described by these women as factoring in to their anxieties about their own bodies being able to adequately rebound from pregnancy. Specifically, many of the women indicated how

frustrating it was to see celebrity gossip magazines devote a great deal of favorable coverage to recently post-partum celebrities who had been able to return to thin and toned bodies quickly. This coverage, they noted, set expectations in themselves, as well as set expectations they perceived others to have, for how their bodies should look once they gave birth. All of the pregnant women in the focus group discussions agreed that they felt more pressures in terms of their bodies from the coverage of celebrities getting *back* to their pre-baby bodies than from the discussion of weight gain by celebrities *during* their pregnancy.

Prospective comparison. Not only did these women compare the state of their current pregnant bodies to those of pregnant celebrities, they also described engaging in a prospective comparison with recently post-partum celebrities in regard to how their own bodies would look once they gave birth. They described how this prospective comparison had an impact on how they felt about the future state of their bodies. For example, the women in group 6 agreed they experienced the most jealousy when thinking about how their post-partum bodies would look in comparison to recently post-partum celebrities' bodies often featured in gossip magazines. Particularly frustrating for the three of them, as well as eight other participants, was how much time and money celebrities could devote to working on shedding any post-pregnancy baby weight.

Darla: Like recently it was reported that Heidi Klum and Kourtney Kardashian are down like to their [pre-pregnancy] size in like four weeks.

Adrienne: Yeah I think Heidi was back on the runway modeling not too long after she gave birth.

Darla: And I was like well if I had a trainer and a personal chef maybe I could do that too...

Jennifer: Yeah and all you had to do all day was to workout and have somebody else take care of the baby. I've been thinking about how I'll be able to work out again after the baby comes to lose the weight and I don't know about you all but I worry about that and also maintaining my job and spending time with the baby...

Darla: Oh yeah...

Jennifer: And that's where the jealousy of the celebrities who've had babies comes along (laughs).

Darla: Yep, and they can stop working so they can get back to looking perfect.

Jennifer: Yeah, I get more jealous of them afterwards than when they are pregnant because I'm thinking like I'm not going to have that kind of time. I'm just hoping I don't look like a whale afterwards (laughs).

Sara and Terry (group 7) discussed similar frustrations in the following interaction:

Sara: They [celebrity gossip magazines] always seem to jump from pictures like this [points to a picture of a very pregnant celebrity] to pictures of the same people like 6 weeks later and they look like that [points to a picture of a recently post-partum celebrity who has lost all baby weight and is toned]. And like it's...

Terry: It sets an expectation...

Sara: It doesn't mention that they have live-in nannies you know and a personal trainer that comes to work with them you know 6 days a week and...

Terry: And that sets an expectation for you to be back in the same shape you were before in 6 weeks.

In the above discussion, Sara and Terry describe the surveillance of celebrity bodies that celebrity gossip magazines engage in, especially in regard to critiquing recently post-partum celebrities' bodies. By juxtaposing pictures of celebrities when they are in the late stages of pregnancy adjacent to pictures of the same celebrities only a few weeks later but looking toned and thin, Sara and Terry felt expectations for their own quick return to their pre-baby bodies were clearly communicated.

Unrealistic timeline. Largely, these women felt celebrity gossip magazine coverage of recently post-partum celebrities set expectations for an appropriate, yet to all of them unrealistic, timeline for these women to return to their pre-baby bodies.

The members of focus group discussion 5 described in detail how a great deal of coverage was given to recently post-partum celebrities' abilities to rebound once post-partum.

Anna: That is almost what you hear before how well the baby is doing is 'How long did it take for her to lose her weight and get her body back?' And then they show the before and after.

Jeri: Yeah and then Giselle [Bundchen, a supermodel] modeling like just a couple of weeks after she had the baby.

Olivia: And Heidi Klum.

Jeri: Exactly! Yeah!

Anna: I think that sets a really unrealistic expectation.

As communicated by Anna in the above quote, gossip magazines ignore how the baby is doing and immediately begin discussing the state of the newly post-partum celebrity's body.

Further, the pregnant women also discussed how the celebrity gossip magazine coverage focusing on how quickly celebrities could lose excess baby weight after giving birth was not reserved for only recently post-partum celebrities. Rather, this focus began while the celebrities were still pregnant.

Corey: Maybe like a third of, I don't know like most of it [holds up an article about a pregnant Kendra Wilkinson] is all about like how much weight is going on, how she is being positive about 40 pounds of weight, and then how is it going to come off. It's like this whole um plan of exactly how it's going to come off and how she can't wait to show off her new hips and butt. So it's like looking past the whole pregnancy to the post-pregnancy body.

Kelly: I think for the celebrities it's like I can do this and be a celebrity. You know what I mean? It's not like about taking time off to be with the baby. It's I can do this and still be a model 2 months later you know and you know that's like they do these super human mom things [laughs].

Marilyn: The time frame thing is a big thing I've seen pushed.

As indicated in the above interaction, Corey felt as if celebrity gossip magazines are quick to skip past the pregnancy and the baby to how the celebrity will look once post-partum. In addition, Kelly describes the lack of focus given to a new mom taking time with her baby. Examples like these and others in celebrity magazine coverage, many women felt, further communicated that the most important thing about pregnancy was a pregnant woman's body.

Seventeen of the pregnant women indicated this coverage led them to ponder exactly how long it would take for them to get back to an appropriate body shape and size. This was illustrated by Amelia in group 3 when she described the expectations that celebrity gossip magazines have for and communicate about recently post-partum celebrities.

Amelia: I think for regular people too you wonder. I mean clearly I'm not going to lose weight and walk on a runway right away but I have already thought about how I am going to get back in shape and will that happen sort of naturally or am I really going to have to work at it.

A similar discussion occurred in group 6 and is illustrated in the following interaction:

Darla: I think about how long it will take.

Jennifer: Oh yeah.

Darla: I think what they do [recently post-partum celebrities] is unrealistic for us in the real world. I mean in 4 weeks to have a runway body like Heidi Klum for Victoria's Secret. I'm like is that even healthy to do that?

Adrienne: Yeah is that even right?

Jennifer: Is she even sleeping?

Darla: But yeah I think it is a worry for sure.

As illustrated in the above quotes, once again these women recognized how unrealistic these portrayals were for normal women. They felt it was unrealistic for themselves to return to their pre-baby bodies as quickly as celebrities did as well as how unrealistic it was for them to hope to have bodies that resembled those of celebrities in the first place. In addition, these women often reconciled their anxieties about their bodies once post-partum by questioning how healthy celebrities were.

Discussion

The present study sought to gain a better understanding of the social comparison processes that may be at work when pregnant women view gossip magazine coverage of pregnant celebrities. Throughout the focus group discussions, the pregnant women in this study indicated that they do relate the messages they read and the images they see regarding pregnant celebrities in gossip magazines back to their own bodies. However, they did not feel that celebrity gossip magazine coverage of celebrity pregnancy encouraged them to feel negatively about their own bodies in the long-term during pregnancy.

In employing qualitative methods, this study allowed for the pregnant women to describe in their own words their ways of critically interpreting and constructing meaning from media images of pregnant celebrities. Evidence of these women engaging in social comparison of their bodies with those of pregnant celebrities featured in these magazines emerged; however, participants described it as a fleeting and distant comparison. This comparison was described as distant because these women largely dis-identified with pregnant celebrities by recognizing the differences in class between

themselves and celebrities. These women discussed how celebrities have access to personal trainers, chefs, and make-up artists, and how they recognized how different their lifestyles are from that of celebrities. The pregnant women in this study recognized the large monetary expense as well as the amount of time it took for a celebrity to look good – money and time that these women did not have. Thus, the present study provided further evidence for qualitative studies (Milkie, 1999; Nash, 2012; Tiggemann et al., 2000) that have found females to be active rather than passive consumers of media that communicate cultural ideals of a thin female form. Rather than passively accepting these messages, the pregnant women in this study described their own engagement in a critical analysis of a media focus on pregnant celebrities' bodies.

A more close and useful comparison target, these women indicated, were the bodies of people they knew personally who were currently or who they could remember being pregnant at one time. Close others in the everyday world were more realistic comparison targets because they typically shared the same lifestyles and class status as these pregnant women. This echoes the findings of Nash (2012) in her study of Australian pregnant women who described their body image as being impacted more so by their relationships with sisters than celebrities who were pregnant. Still, social comparison theory research has shown that individuals' thin ideal internalization and engagement in social comparison were influenced more so by felt pressures from the media than from the dieting behaviors they see their peers engaging in (Goodman, 2005). These women may feel that peers are more realistic comparison targets yet still be affected by their engagement in comparison with celebrities. As Nash argues, although her participants indicated engaging in a form of distancing from pregnant celebrities, they still "felt enormous pressure to conform to contemporary models of femininity which emphasize slimness and 'fitness'" (p. 204). Further, in her qualitative study of the social comparison process in black and white adolescent girls' media use, Milkie (1999) found that although most of the white participants viewed media images as unrealistic, they still wished to look like those females they saw depicted in the media. According to Strahan, Wilson, Cressman, and Buote (2006), simply being aware of cultural norms for female attractiveness may cause women to experience dissatisfaction with their own bodies.

However, engaging in social comparison with pregnant celebrities was not always described as a threatening process. Although social comparison with pregnant celebrities was mostly upward in nature whereby these pregnant women compared themselves to celebrities they thought were better looking, some of the women in this study described engaging in downward comparison. For example, despite criticizing gossip magazines for focusing on the body, at times the discussion of the amount of weight a pregnant celebrity had gained in comparison to their own weight gain was pleasing for these women, especially if their own happened to be less. These findings are in line with Johansson's (2006) argument that the major appeal of reading tabloids is the negative coverage of celebrities these magazines engage in by pointing out celebrity flaws and imperfections because it allows for any resentment and jealousy felt on the part of the reader to be somewhat alleviated. Whereas earlier incarnations of celebrity magazines encouraged readers to admire and seek to identify with Hollywood stars highlighted in their content, Wilson (2010) argues contemporary magazines assess, appraise, and engage in judgment of featured stars. Such judgment may make readers feel better about their own situations when stars are depicted unfavorably, but may still communicate the high standards for physical perfection for females.

In addition to engaging in social comparison with currently pregnant celebrities, participants also described thinking about how their own bodies would look once they gave birth in relation to celebrities who were recently post-partum. Celebrity gossip magazines were seen as setting the expectations others in society had for how quickly the participants could and should shed their pregnancy weight and return to wearing normal clothing. Despite these expectations, these women were critical of the messages and indicated they recognized how unrealistic these expectations were for normal, everyday women. These critical interpretations, they felt, allowed for them to protect themselves to an extent from long-term feelings of inadequacy and anxiety over the state of their bodies.

Ultimately, many of the pregnant women in this study indicated they were more concerned with the health of their unborn children rather than how their bodies would look while pregnant. It

may be that women are more protected from the harmful effects of social comparison during pregnancy because of this concern. As such, pregnant women may be more likely to refrain from dietary restraint and/or excessive amounts of exercise during pregnancy for fear of negatively impacting their unborn children, whereas once they have given birth, these behaviors may shift. Thus, future research needs to examine if more negative consequences of social comparison processes emerge once women give birth and the initial health of their children is ensured. This research is especially important in light of the historical upward trend in the amount of weight being retained by women post-pregnancy (Gjerdingen et al., 2009).

Research has indicated that women do experience greater dissatisfaction with their bodies during the year following giving birth to their children than during both pre-pregnancy and later stages of pregnancy with those who more frequently engage in appearance comparison experiencing greater levels of dissatisfaction (Rallis, Skouteris, Wertheim, & Paxton, 2007). Therefore, engagement in comparison with idealized media figures during the post-partum period needs to be investigated in order to ascertain if these idealized images might further exacerbate negative thoughts and behaviors in regard to the body. This is especially needed as the pregnant women involved in the present study clearly described how they had already begun to think about how their bodies might appear once post-partum and were well aware of the expectations the media set forth for how quickly a woman should retain her pre-pregnancy body once giving birth.

Conclusion

The results of this study significantly add to the body of social comparison theory research by providing a better understanding of how the social comparison process works in pregnant women. Specifically, the pregnant women in this study described their comparison with pregnant celebrities as a distant comparison as they realized how different their own lifestyles were from that of celebrities. Because this comparison was distant and fleeting, the participants felt it was less damaging to their body-related perceptions than their social comparison with close others was. Thus, future research utilizing social comparison theory needs to take into account that there may be differing *levels* of comparison (e.g., close, intermediary, distant) in addition to the differing *types* of comparison (e.g., upward and downward). It may be that celebrities are considered to be close comparison targets at certain times in a woman's life and more distant targets at other times.

Further, the pregnant women described the prospective comparison they engage in with recently post-partum celebrities who they often see being applauded by gossip magazines for how quickly they can return to their thin pre-baby bodies. This comparison, they felt, caused more anxiety over the state of their own bodies and how quickly, if at all, they could lose their pregnancy weight once giving birth. Future research into social comparison should examine how individuals may engage in comparison with others in regard to how they may or may not look, or should or should not look, in the future, not just the present.

The present study highlights some potential intervention techniques to help both girls and women escape the negative consequences of engaging in social comparison with celebrities. For one, women appear to be protected from harmful consequences when they realize how different, for better or for worse, they are from celebrities in terms of financial status and lifestyle. By sharing these women's thoughts about portrayals of celebrity bodies in their own words and emphasizing how distant any comparison with celebrities should be, other girls and women may be educated on how to avoid inappropriate comparisons. Further, the pregnant women in this study appeared to be protected from harmful consequences during pregnancy by focusing on the health of their unborn children. In looking to the future and thinking about their bodies once post-partum, however, they appeared to be much more anxious. Thus, it seems efforts at educating women both during pregnancy and shortly after giving birth on how much their own health continues to impact the health of their babies once they are born might help stem any harmful behaviors they might engage in once post-partum.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Guide

I am interested in learning more about how pregnant women interpret celebrity gossip magazine coverage of pregnant women and how this coverage impacts their thoughts and feelings about themselves while pregnant. I have never been pregnant myself, but was struck by how much coverage these magazines devote to pregnant celebrities and therefore wanted to learn more about how these magazines are received by those who are currently pregnant.

I want to assure you that your names will not be attached to any of the comments you make during this meeting and that no one outside of this group will know exactly what you said. During this group discussion, I will ask each of you to look at some photos and photo captions focusing on pregnant celebrities that have appeared in celebrity gossip magazines and to then share your reactions to this coverage. Next, I will ask you about how you as a pregnant woman feel about this coverage in relation to yourself and your own pregnancy.

First, I would like to ask each of you to introduce yourself by telling us how far along you are in your pregnancy, when your estimated due date is, and to share any other information you feel comfortable with about you as a person.

Next, I would like to pass around a couple of photos and photo captions focusing on pregnant celebrities that appeared in celebrity gossip magazines. Take some time to look these over and then we will discuss your reactions as a group.

Now that you have had a chance to look through some of the photos and captions, I would like to ask you a few questions about celebrity gossip magazines.

- 1.) Describe what you saw depicted in the photos and captions I just passed around.
- 2.) Describe how these celebrities look.
- 3.) Tell me about your personal opinions regarding what you saw in the photos and captions.
- 4.) Describe what feelings you experienced when seeing the pregnant celebrities in the magazines?
- 5.) In your opinion, why do women read these magazines?
- 6.) Have you ever compared pregnant celebrities to yourself?
 - a. If so, describe how you go about comparing.
 - b. If not, why do you refrain from comparing?
- 7.) How does celebrity gossip magazine coverage of pregnant celebrities affect how you feel about your own body?
- 8.) Overall, what messages do you think celebrity gossip magazine coverage of these celebrities convey to the public about women and pregnancy?

Appendix B

