No Fat Moms! Celebrity Mothers’ Weight-Loss Narratives in *People* Magazine

Emma Bedor, State University of New York, Geneseo
emma.bedor@gmail.com

Atsushi Tajima, State University of New York, Geneseo
tajima@geneseo.edu

**Abstract**

This article critically examines how *People* magazine uses celebrity mothers’ postpartum weight loss as a primary tool in assessing motherhood competency. While the pregnant body might be a symbol of pride, residual weight after childbirth is perceived as undesirable and unattractive. Hence, an emerging fitness narrative in the popular media places the postpartum body among other anti-fat discourses demanding weight loss. Popular media texts indicate the increased pressure on new mothers to regain their pre-pregnancy bodies, as well as the growing use of celebrities to perpetuate this difficult-to-emulate ideology. Not only do these narratives encourage reader identification with media figures, but they are also unique in that their popularity is generated more so by a shared cultural preference for thinness than by similar pregnancy and post-pregnancy experiences.

**Keywords:** celebrities, identification, new mothers, *People*, postpartum, pregnancy, thinness

**Introduction**

Paralleling the growth of medical research on obesity is the scholarly interest in women’s motivations to modify their bodies, particularly through weight loss. Evidence from various disciplines indicates that women’s dissatisfaction with their bodies and weight continues to be widespread (Tiggemann, Polivy, & Hargreaves, 2009). Adding new insight to this well-documented phenomenon are the experiences of pregnant and postpartum women, which are beginning to receive attention.

As life stages, pregnancy and post-pregnancy provide unique perspectives and insights into the examination of weight dissatisfaction (e.g., Astrachan-Fletcher, Veldhuis, Lively, Fowler, &
Celebrity Mothers’ Weight-Loss Narratives

Marcks, 2008; Dworkin & Wachs, 2004; Fox, Heffernan, & Nicolson, 2009). As stated by Dworkin and Wachs (2004), “getting your body back” after pregnancy has become the latest aspiration of new mothers (p. 610). Not only how women lose weight, but also how quickly they try to lose weight reflects mothers’ perceptions and internalizations of sociocultural expectations. Thus, a number of scholars argue for the importance of including this growing trend in broader discussions of thinness and diet practices (e.g., Currie, 2004; Fox, Heffernan, & Nicolson, 2009; Jordan, Copdevila, & Johnson, 2005).

This study critically analyzes the weight-loss narratives of postpartum women from a critical media studies and feminist perspective. While other disciplines acknowledge the effects that media narratives might have on new mothers, they still hesitate to treat the media as more than suspect (e.g., Jones, Housman, & McAleese, 2010). To contextualize the authors’ claims about the broad implications of these narratives, this study examines People, one of America’s most popular magazines. The analysis emphasizes what information celebrity mothers’ weight-loss narratives disseminate and the sociocultural values they reflect.

Employing a critical feminist approach aids in conceptualizing “fat” in contemporary Western discourses and the ways in which the current standard affects imaginings of the ideal motherhood body. Subsequently, we synthesize the claim that a popular discourse has emerged, condemning the postpartum body as fat and thus undesirable. This is evidenced by the consistent prominence and acceptance of a popular media ideology suggesting that women engage in body modification after childbirth until they return to pre-pregnancy form. Such a narrative speaks to the growing normalcy of the expectation that even the newest of mothers should work to align their physicality with cultural standards of beauty, particularly thinness.

While narratives of this kind dramatize the experiences of the postpartum population, they also maintain a far more extensive appeal. Unlike more generic weight-loss narratives, those of celebrity mothers emphasize similarities in the experiences of celebrities and of readers, which may foster reader identification with featured media figures. Yet these narratives also appeal to a more general population—and not just because of the long-standing public interest in reproduction (Yeo, 2005). Popular media covering celebrity mothers’ pregnancies and postpartum experiences involve the general population as their weight watchers. As a result, body scrutiny becomes normalized among the general population. With increasing numbers of women returning to the workforce after pregnancy and doing so after steadily decreasing amounts of time, post-pregnancy weight loss speaks to women’s concerns about how to appear professional and controlled after being unable to control their bodies during pregnancy (e.g., D’Enbeau & Buzanell, 2010; Riad, 2007).

Literature Review

Critical Feminist Perspective

The changing body of motherhood. The pressure to be thin is experienced by women both within and beyond the celebrity community. Yet it has long been understood that the identity of the pregnant woman is unlike that of the normal woman, as pregnancy brings freedom from the pressure
to conform to the expectation of thinness (Granberg, 2006; Young, 1990). During pregnancy, as Earle (2003) argues, the body protests the “tyranny of slenderness” and creates a space in which women can “enjoy a more embodied, subjective, and maternal state” (p. 250). Here, a growing belly becomes a symbol of pride, a “confirmation of adult womanhood,” and representative of achievement (Bailey, 2001, p. 116).

In their cross-generational interviews with women who were either pregnant or already mothers, Fox, Heffernan, and Nicolson (2009) noted that earlier generations of mothers “claimed that they were not concerned about their weight during and after pregnancy and that it had not been an issue at the time” (p. 562). Yet mothers today are presented with a new ideology, insisting that they should be aware of their post-pregnancy figures by positing that women can have both babies and beauty without having to choose between the two (Currie, 2004; Jordan, Copdevila, & Johnson, 2005). Thus, the expectation that even the newest of mothers should adhere to the sociocultural expectations of thinness has become normative (Fox, Heffernan, & Nicolson, 2009).

Of particular relevance in examining the development of this ideology are the prominence and widespread popularity of media narratives featuring the rapid weight loss of celebrity mothers. Their stories illustrate how every woman can reclaim her body from the effects of pregnancy, getting it back to what it used to be (Dworkin & Wachs, 2004). Residual pregnancy weight as “fat.” The preeminent justification for the increased scrutiny of the maternal body has been a perceptual shift concerning the social construction of fat. Feminist scholarship, in particular, points to how its contemporary perceptions have expanded beyond the realm of medical assessment and, as a result, are incorporated into popular knowledge and discourses (e.g., Cooper, 2010; Murry, 2008). This shift has significantly facilitated the acceptance of any amount of weight gain, regardless of its cause, as falling under the discursive umbrella of undesirable and unattractive.

The way we conceptualize pregnancy weight gain has also shifted in terms of its historical perception. During the early 20th century, overeating during pregnancy was discouraged because of a shared belief among medical professionals that the difficult deliveries of large babies could be avoided if pregnant mothers refrained from gaining too much weight. However, according to the National Academy of Sciences, “standard clinical practice changed from restricting to encouraging weight gain during gestation,” and consequently the “recommended gestational weight gains have nearly doubled during the past 50 years—from 6.8 kg (15 lb) in the 1930s to a range of 11.4 to 15.9 kg (25 to 35 lb) in the 1980s” (Institute of Medicine, 1990, p. 40). Today the guidelines from the U.S. Institute of Medicine recommend considering the mother’s pre-pregnancy height and weight when determining the optimal range for her weight gain (Olson, 2008). Thus, contemporary mothers are presented with contradictory messages. While in general medical professionals continue to encourage weight gain for maternal and fetal health, media images emphasize the importance of weight loss immediately following pregnancy so as to align oneself with cultural expectations, not only of beauty but also in women’s ability to demonstrate their self-control.
Americans as a whole equate thinness “self-discipline and hard work” and fatness with “laziness, gluttony and lack of willpower” (Hoffman, 2009, para. 31). As Murry (2008) claims, “the discursive constructions of the ‘fat’ female body in Western society are negative and assume a failure of will and bodily ethics” (p. 7). Thus, even residual weight in the case of pregnancy may be perceived as a consequence of personal shortcomings. Earle’s (2003) empirical findings support this view, indicating that even pregnant women are not exempt from sharing in the aforementioned sentiments. In fact, they remain “concerned with issues of fatness and body image throughout the pregnancy process” (Earle, 2003, p. 250). This is especially noteworthy considering that not only are an increasing number of women employed during pregnancy, but they are also returning to work after childbirth more quickly than prior generations of mothers. More specifically, data from the United States Census Bureau indicate that between 2005 and 2007 roughly 64% of women returned to work within a year of giving birth, compared with 39% during the late 1970s and 17% during the early 1960s (Laughlin, 2011). These women must be aware of their workplace presentation, bearing in mind the need to appear professional and controlled (D’Enbeau & Buzanell, 2010; Laughlin, 2011). Post-pregnancy weight loss becomes one way to accomplish this.

Clinical and psychological warnings. The aforementioned pressures are more than a cause for concern. Clinical research indicates that an increasing number of new mothers follow unhealthy diet practices and suffer from eating disorders. Even though weight gain is typically inherent in the pregnancy experience because of increased food intake, hormonal changes, and growth of the fetus, Astrachan-Fletcher et al. (2008) found that more than 40% of new mothers are “dissatisfied with their weight during the postpartum period” (p. 229). Other findings suggest that these women perceive “the external world as more negative and critical about their new maternal selves” (Patel, Lee, Wheatcroft, Barnes, & Stein, 2005, p. 348). Other research corroborates this, suggesting that pregnant and postpartum women are especially vulnerable to eating disorders (e.g., James, 2001; Mazer-Poline & Fornari, 2009) and that mothers who admit to feeling “fat” are more likely to engage in the high-risk behaviors of dieting and smoking during pregnancy (Duncombe, Wertheim, Skouteris, Paxton, & Kelly, 2008). Because of the sizable number of women who suffer from eating disorders (e.g., American Psychiatric Association, 2000), there is reason to believe that many might not gain sufficient weight during pregnancy. Research shows that women to whom this applies are more likely to experience “miscarriage, low birth weight, obstetric complications, and postpartum depression” (Franko & Spurrell, 2000, p. 942).

Women with histories of eating disorders are also at an increased risk of relapse during the postpartum period (Astrachan-Fletcher et al., 2008; Benton-Hardy & Lock, 1998; Crow, Agras, Crosby, Halmi, & Mitchell, 2008). Disordered eating impedes not only the mother’s health but also the development of her child. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2005) claims that breastfeeding is important for children, but research indicates that women with eating disorders do so for significantly shorter amounts of time than other mothers (Larsson & Andersson-Ellström, 2003). In addition, severely restricting caloric intake makes it difficult to produce breast milk (Dewey & McRory, 1994), thus putting these infants at risk for malnutrition (Astrachan-Fletcher et al., 2008).
Motherhood fitness: Liberation or oppression? The pursuit of thinness is thought to be as good as being thin itself; thus, a woman who gains weight is expected to work to modify her body so as to meet the thin ideal (Hoffman, 2009). Even during pregnancy, when the normative assumption is that she will gain weight, she can still demonstrate self-discipline by having a “good and fit pregnant body with a taut, tight ‘bump’” (Nash, 2011, p. 50). Women might falsely believe that losing weight immediately after pregnancy or staying thin throughout are autonomous rejections of the out-of-shape figure embodied by women who sacrifice their looks to care for their families. Yet this view of autonomous decision-making is superficial at best. It fails to consider that women are encouraged to believe that exercise and self-monitoring are independently made decisions. The media promote the idea that being fit liberates women from the constraints and stigmas associated with being overweight, but such is not necessarily the case (e.g., Nash, 2011; Spitzak, 1990).

A body of feminist scholarship, particularly that exploring post-feminism, argues that this assumption is highly problematic (e.g., McRobbie, 2004, 2008, 2009). It falsely encourages feelings of agency in decision making, when in fact many women are reliant upon referential narratives found in the media to guide them. Narratives such as those found in popular magazines provide behavioral guidance and thereby become influential in learning (McRobbie, 2004). Readers of such content may truly believe that they alone make decisions about their own beauty and fitness, yet unknowingly they perpetuate mediated ideals (e.g., Brook, 2008; Markula, 1995). Thus, the so-called liberation of the female form through fitness, intended to free it from the scrutiny brought about by pregnancy’s effects, actually serves to further promote its objectification (Brook, 2008) and normalize harmful sentiments.

Media’s Role

Popular media narratives. Clinical researchers contend that when the media discuss pregnancy and postpartum experiences, catchy, inaccurate information is disseminated at the expense of legitimate medical knowledge. Without regulations for the creation and distribution of such information, often what is presented is misleading, unclear, or incorrect (Jones, Housman, & MacAleese, 2010). Fox, Heffernan, and Nicolson (2009) suggest that the media have failed to foster the distribution of factual information regarding motherhood health; rather, they create “new discourses surrounding pregnancy and body images” (p. 560). One such discourse is ambivalence in differentiation between a “fat” body and a “pregnant” body, epitomized by the media’s role in disseminating an ideology emphasizing losing weight soon after pregnancy and defining “pregnant women’s bodies as particularly unruly and in need of fitness discipline” (Dworkin & Wachs, 2004, p. 611; see also Bordo, 1993.).

The popular media have also played a significant role in the process of making pregnancy and post-pregnancy public discourses. An early and well-known instance of this was the appearance of actress Demi Moore’s naked, pregnant body on the cover of Vanity Fair in 1991. This public display of the pregnant body through media channels was soon followed by other celebrities, including Victoria Beckham, Madonna, Jody Foster, Rosie O’Donnell, Goldie Hawn, and Farrah Fawcett (Douglas & Michaels, 2005; Earle, 2003; Fox, Heffernan, & Nicolson, 2009). It was during
the mid-1980s that magazine articles profiling celebrity mothers initially gained popularity, forming “a media genre that snowballed as the 1980s progressed,” and eventually became “a dominant fixture of women’s health and entertainment magazines by the 1990s” (Douglas & Michael, 2005, p. 113). Yet as Earle (2003) claims, “whilst this asserts both the aesthetic beauty and sexuality of pregnant women, it also establishes a standard to which all women should ‘aspire’” (p. 251). Currie (2004), for instance, found that many postpartum women participating in an exercise class “revealed awareness of the media’s constant portrayal of an ideal body shape” by celebrities (p. 236).

Those who are exposed to these messages might have a heightened awareness of how their own bodies do not match up to mediated ideals. Many celebrity mothers are “conventionally beautiful” (Earle, 2003, p. 251). Thus, it is not surprising that they publicly—and proudly—display their bodies. Readers might approach their stories as factual presentations of information and instructions on how to similarly lose weight and stay in shape. Yet one can rationally assume that celebrity mothers have access to resources that are not available to regular readers, from supplemental childcare to dieticians and personal trainers. While magazines might present celebrity mothers as figures with whom readers can identify, differences between the two groups’ pregnancy and postpartum experiences suggest that readers are not only presented with unattainable goals but are also encouraged to believe that they can replicate celebrities’ successes.

Media narratives and reader identification. There exist specific theoretical frameworks to facilitate the analyses of celebrities and their effects in the media. In particular, social cognitive theory, proposed by Bandura (1977, 1986), and its subsequent identification component are often employed to explore this subject matter. The theory’s central tenet is that people learn by observing, and what they observe includes the behaviors of symbolic figures. When individuals perceive shared similarities with these figures, they are more likely to replicate, or imitate, observed actions.

This replication, however, does not necessarily have to be an exact duplication of that which they observe. Basil (1996) stresses that while identification does not necessarily induce direct imitation of what a reader observes, it may still elicit a similar, related response. In the context of post-pregnancy weight-loss narratives, the enjoyment of such stories is not reserved solely for women. It is possible that readers who have shared in this unique life stage might identify more strongly with celebrity mothers’ weight-loss experiences. Even if inclined to imitate behavior she observes, a reader finds herself unable to do so. She may, however, feel motivated to perform similar or related behaviors that are within her abilities.

Role of magazines. Of the various media outlets that offer celebrity content, we focus on magazines for several reasons. First, magazines have traditionally been a prime target for scholarly examination of female body images, with a particular focus on how women learn what body types are desirable (Dworkin & Wachs, 2004; Jette, 2006; Tiggemann, Polivy, & Hargreaves, 2009). More specifically, magazines are acknowledged as “a primary source of idealized thin images and a cause of unhealthy body images and attitudes toward eating” (Park, 2005, p. 599). At the same time, magazines continue to be a medium trusted by women, providing a “wealth of information aimed at
helping them develop feminine skills and knowledge” and, in particular, “invite readers to learn more about their bodies” (Barnett, 2006, p. 1).

Popular magazines are a particularly visible medium, consistently featuring celebrities and making readers their unofficial weight watchers (Douglas & Michaels, 2005; Earle, 2003; Hoffman, 2009). Wilson (2010) argues that the images of celebrities, which proliferate in these publications, render their bodies docile (Foucault, 1979). Docile bodies, according to Foucault, are “subjected, used, transformed and improved” through a matrix of power and domination, wherein physical improvement comes from the all-important “ceremony” of exercise (pp. 136–137). General weight-loss stories are usually dramatic narratives with widespread appeal, emphasizing the cultural value of thinness and the pressure to conform to it as ideal. Only recently has the idea of body improvement extended to pregnant and postpartum celebrities as well.

Celebrity news has become increasingly central to popular magazines’ financial success. Sales figures for celebrity-oriented magazines, including the likes of People, Us Weekly, Star, In Touch, Life & Style, and OK, consistently indicate their growing popularity. In 2006 they represented nearly one third of newsstand sales (Davis, 2007a, 2007b). The popularity of celebrity stories is not reserved for those of a particular socioeconomic status. In the early 2000s Us Weekly had an “outstanding increase in the median household income of its readers: 40 percent, to $83,365” (Wilson, 2010, p. 25). Demonstrating the popularity of news concerning celebrity mothers, in 2006 People sold “800,000 more copies than usual” when it featured the first published pictures of Angelina Jolie’s and Brad Pitt’s baby (Pérez-Peña, 2008, para. 16). Not only does this genre have widespread appeal, but it is also useful for assessing media figures’ general popularity among audiences.

**Method**

This study analyzes People magazine for specific reasons. First, it is unparalleled in its popularity. In 2010 its circulation was 3,553,420 copies per week (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2010), rendering it an “industry leader that is generally regarded as the most successful magazine in the country” (Seelye, 2006, p. C7). In 2006 People generated the “highest circulation revenue among the top 100 ABC magazines, with combined circulation sales of over $534 million” and was “named ‘Magazine of the Year’ by Advertising Age” in October 2005 (Treme, 2010, p. 7). Among America’s most popular magazines, People is acknowledged as the first to be celebrity centric (Powers, 2001), consistently maintaining its leading position in the genre. Even with successful competitors, including “In Touch, Life and Style, Us Weekly, and Star, People remains on top” (Treme, 2010, p. 7). Its emphasis on celebrity news does not alienate it from the general market. In fact, these human-interest stories led to its initial—and continued—success. When People debuted in 1974, it offered an entertaining alternative to a “world wearied of war in Vietnam, the worst recession since the Depression, and journalism that brooded over interest rates at the expense of human interest” (Yardley, 1994, para. 2). People is a noted pioneer among publications featuring getting-the-body-back narrative after publishing one of the earliest galleries of Hollywood’s “hottest new moms” in May 1997 (Cunningham, 2002, p. 432).
The demographics of People’s readers indicate that pregnancy and postpartum narratives would be of interest to this population. The majority of readers—70%—are women (“Demographics,” n.d.). Similarly, 66% of the magazine’s Internet readers are female, and the median age of readers is 36 (Time Inc., n.d.). The largest age segment of female readers is 18 to 34 years old (38% of the entire readership), while the second largest segment is women who are 45 to 59 years old (28%) (Winerip, 2009). Thus, a sizable number of readers might identify with the magazine’s motherhood narratives in particular, as the majority of readers are women who are at the reproductive or post-reproductive life stages themselves. Forty-two percent of readers report having at least one child in their household (“Demographics,” n.d.).

Articles were selected for this analysis after running keyword searches in the magazine’s archive through the ProQuest Research Library database. To examine recent narratives, the authors focused on a three-year period (January 1, 2008, to December 31, 2010) as our unit of analysis. We also reviewed two earlier three-year periods (January 1, 1988, to December 31, 1990; January 1, 1998, to December 31, 2000) to assess chronological trends, specifically whether the quantity of celebrity mothers’ weight-loss narratives has changed since the late 1980s. The following combinations of words were used to detect relevant articles because their connotations, alone and combined, touch on weight-related issues surrounding pregnancy and motherhood: pregnancy and diet, pregnancy and weight, motherhood and weight, baby and weight, motherhood and diet, postpartum, pregnancy and baby, baby and body, celebrity and mother, baby and bump, and baby and fat. After selecting the articles through the database search, we captured them in their original published form, taken directly from People magazine’s online archive. This enabled us to examine aspects other than the texts, such as layout, visual images, and captions.

Preliminary textual assessments were used to identify relevant articles, which were subsequently analyzed for thematic patterns. Among popular journalistic texts, celebrity mothers’ stories frequently appear in personal narrative formats. These narratives typically center on celebrity mothers as principle characters and narrate their experiences involving other characters (e.g., their child or children, husband, critics), factual elements (e.g., their body weight, age, number of children), their inner feelings, how they change, and so forth. At times, a single element or a combination of these elements might occur. A repeated or consistent appearance qualifies it as a “theme.” D’Unrug (1974) defines a theme as “a complex unit of meaning, variable in length, and more of a psychological than a linguistic nature: a theme may consist of an assertion or a reference” (as cited in Gorin & Dubied, 2011, p. 603). A theme is more than a descriptive categorization of elements within a narrative; it allows a text’s producers and readers to engage in “assertion on a subject” (Bardin, as cited in Gorin & Dubied, 2011, p. 603) and enables readers to recognize the characteristics of a subject that might involve value judgments. To detect such themes, the authors paid close attention to “selection and salience” (Entman, 1993, p. 53), referring specifically to what elements were emphasized in articles versus the ones that were deemphasized or omitted. We also focused on “the close examination ‘of language and rhetoric, of style of presentation’ supported by and linked to the social, political, and cultural context in which the texts are produced” (Shah & Thornton, 2004, p. 22).
Results and Analysis

The keyword search for the most recent period (1/1/2008–12/31/2010) yielded 331 articles. After removing all overlaps and engaging in a preliminary textual analysis, the authors determined that there were 35 articles whose main focus was celebrity pregnancy and postpartum diet narratives, rendering them relevant to our study. The middle period (01/01/1998–12/31/2000) yielded a total of 202 articles, yet the majority focused on health-related questions, and only four were relevant to our study. The earliest period (01/01/1988–12/31/1990) resulted in a total of six articles. None were appropriate for this study because they focused almost exclusively on pregnant or postpartum women’s health-related concerns and medical questions. We examined the two earlier periods only to discover the chronological development of the “getting the body back” narrative. These findings suggest not only the significant growth of public interest in postpartum and pregnant celebrities but also the shift in the dominant themes in these articles from being health-related to being preoccupied with weight loss and beauty.

An analysis of the most recent articles revealed five recurring themes pertaining to celebrity mothers’ weight loss: 1) The Postpartum Body as “Fat”, 2) “Back in Shape” as a Symbol of Success, 3) Getting Back in Shape: Time Frame, 4) Media Parameters of Healthy Motherhood, and 5) Closing the Gap: Celebrities Are Just Like Us. In some instances, multiple themes were present within a single article, whereas other themes were implied rather than explicitly stated.

The Postpartum Body as “Fat”

Negative attention is frequently paid to female celebrities who do not conform to the idealized thin body shape. Kirstie Alley, Jessica Simpson, and Oprah Winfrey’s weight fluctuations have been well-documented by the media, and all three made it to the New York Post’s list of “50 Fat Celebrities” in 2009 (“50 Fat Celebrities,” n.d.). People refrains from criticizing seemingly overweight celebrities in the way that many other media outlets do, but its narratives are typically published only after the weight-loss process is complete. These visually frame weight loss in itself as an achievement, and pictures of the body before and after modification evidence that the larger, “before” body is the less desirable of the two. Therefore, while not overtly ridiculing either photo, the implicit message is that the thinner body is the better one. This perception transcends to the realm of postpartum weight loss, wherein pregnancy-related weight gain is framed as equally undesirable as general weight gain.

A People article featuring model-actress Milla Jovovich clearly articulates that there is an equal level of undesirability for pregnancy-related weight as there is for regular fat. During pregnancy, the story reads, not only did Jovovich understand for the first time in her life “what it felt like to be a heavier person,” but she also had never expected “people to be so judgmental of a pregnant woman!” (“Beauty After Baby,” 2009, p. 133). In another piece, actress Melissa Joan Hart highlights how she ‘can still picture the ‘horrifying’ moment in 2005 when, while pregnant with her first child, she was shaving her legs ‘and I looked down and I had tons of cellulite around my knees! … I knew I was huge, but that was crazy’” (Wihlborg, 2009b, p. 52). After returning to the Hollywood audition circuit, she was repeatedly faced with the question, “How does she look? Is she
Celebrity Mothers’ Weight-Loss Narratives

fat? Everyone wanted me to dance for them and show my behind—they literally wanted to see how big my behind was! It was horrifying” (Wihlborg, 2009b, p. 53). Reality television star Trista Sutter similarly reminisces about the 53 pounds she gained during her second pregnancy: “I saw that number,’ she says, ‘and was like, ‘Oh, God—how am I going to lose it?’” (Wang, 2009, p. 128). These sentiments frame pregnancy weight gain as an obstacle to overcome, not as a symbol of pride and positive motherhood experience. Weight gain impedes professional growth, confidence, and status. If fat is contemptuous in itself, then so are those with whom it is associated, and as these excerpts indicate, even a new mother’s weight gain will leave her feeling stigmatized if she does not lose it quickly enough.

“Back in Shape” as a Symbol of Success

The women featured in these articles share personal anecdotes that suggest the weight they gained during pregnancy is extra, unwanted, and unneeded. Thus, modifying their postpartum bodies so as to appear to be the way they were before pregnancy becomes their goal. People frequently contrasts photos of celebrities at their largest during pregnancy or soon after with photos of them after “successful” remodification. This success is contingent upon a return to pre-pregnancy form, and failure to do so results in an incomplete dramatic narrative.

In November 2008, People featured actress Poppy Montgomery in the “Body Watch” section of the magazine (“How She Lost,” 2008) (See Figure 1). Titled “How She Lost 70 lbs. of Baby Weight!” the article details the more extreme aspects of her postpartum diet (1,200 calories a day via a meal delivery service) and exercise regimen (six days a week of the P90X DVD program). The article also visually contrasts a paparazzi photo of her taken two weeks after giving birth with one styled especially for the piece. In the former she wears a loose-fitting sweater, long pants, and sunglasses, while the posed photo features her in a bikini with professionally styled hair, makeup, and her infant child on one hip. Montgomery confesses, “The best part about being pregnant? ‘I ate with no guilt!’” and explains that “overindulging” was the reason she gained 70 pounds while pregnant (p. 88). Not only is her success established by the text of the article, which reads that she can fit back in her pre-pregnancy jeans, but it is also visually confirmed. Her “Now!” body, which takes up more than half the page, demonstrates her mindfulness and adherence to the thin ideal. Posing with her healthy and happy baby also establishes her biological competency to reproduce.

Another article featuring actress Constance Marie of the George Lopez Show represents a narrative structure wherein weight loss symbolizes successful motherhood. Before her most recent pregnancy, she suffered multiple miscarriages and underwent numerous fertility treatments in her “devastating journey, both physically and mentally” to have children (Wihlborg, 2009a, p. 132). Her weight loss makes an abrupt appearance in the story’s final paragraph: “I feel so blessed,’ says Marie, who has lost 30 of the 40 pounds she gained during pregnancy” (p. 132). There are no other references to diet or exercise, yet her weight loss is presented as relevant in a story that would otherwise chronicle her struggle to conceive a child and carry to term. While her weight loss has nothing to do with being “blessed” with a baby, the article uses it to reinforce her success as a woman and a mother, and thus to conclude the story optimistically.
Figure 1. “How She Lost 70 Lbs. of Baby Weight!” (November 24, 2008). People, 70(21), 88.
Conversely, *People* has also framed the inability to get the body back as impeding new mothers’ happiness and success, as demonstrated by the magazine’s profile of *Ugly Betty* actress Ana Ortiz. Initially, Ortiz reveals that when she returned to work after her pregnancy, she was uncomfortable with her weight, “given her character’s skimpy, skintight outfits” (Chi, 2009, p. 117). The article continues: “I was like ‘Where are the Spanx? Get me the Spanx!’” (p. 117). While the mention of her weight and need for Spanx are irrelevant to the rest of the article’s content, their presence indicates that the getting-the-body-back narrative has become central to media determinations of what does and does not constitute personal and professional success. It seems unfair, however, that these comments were made and published less than two months after Ortiz had given birth. While reframing brief periods of time as prolonged accomplishes a dramatic effect, this is done at the expense of disseminating legitimate medical information.

*Getting Back in Shape: Time Frame*

In 1961 Boorstin succinctly noted that a celebrity “is a person who is known for his well-knownness” (p. 57). Today this still holds true, as fame and celebrity are achieved through public visibility. In order to have a sustained career, a celebrity must be constantly present in the public eye. Prolonged absence or decreased visibility can significantly damage one’s career, but getting “back in shape quickly” receives positive media attention and avoids risking employment. Therefore, it is the demands of her career, in part, that dictate the time frame for a woman’s postpartum weight loss. Milla Jovovich illustrates this, as she was presented with a choice between losing the weight she had gained during pregnancy and losing an upcoming movie role. Because her weight had increased to 192 pounds “with only five months to prep for bikini scenes in her next film, *A Perfect Getaway*, the 5’9” actress signed up for five-day-a-week workouts with [her trainer], who also cooked for her” (Keith, 2008a, p. 110).

*People*’s “Body After Baby” series features photos of celebrities during and after pregnancy. Not only do these images visually contrast how much weight was gained during pregnancy and lost afterward, but the captions also verbally place importance on the length of time it took to do so. In an article titled “Now She’s Pregnant, Now She’s Hot! Here’s How the Famously Fit Actress Got Red Carpet Ready in Record Time,” readers learn that at the American Latino Media Arts Awards in 2008 actress Jessica Alba “showed off her newly svelte silhouette just two months after welcoming daughter Honor Marie” (Keith, 2008b, p. 92). Not only had she returned to the gym three weeks after giving birth, but by the time she appeared at the awards show, she was also eight pounds below her pre-pregnancy weight. Similarly, the article “Runway After Baby” reveals what motivated model Alessandra Ambrosio to lose the 45 pounds she gained during her pregnancy: a Victoria’s Secret fashion show that loomed only three months ahead (Triggs, 2008). These stories are visually and results oriented. They display photos of the featured women side-by-side, pitting them against one another to see who was the “most successful” in regaining her pre-pregnancy body, with special attention to how quickly she was able to do so.
Celebrity Mothers’ Weight-Loss Narratives

Figure 2. “Body Watch, Body After Baby” (April 12, 2010). People, 70(26), 126–129.
Competitiveness is not evident in all articles featuring celebrity mothers’ post-pregnancy body modification, but the amount of time within which it occurs remains an integral component. One article suggests that model Niki Taylor took an unusually long time—13 months—to lose the 59 pounds she gained while pregnant (Dennis, 2010). Another article quotes actress Jennifer Garner’s trainer, who acknowledges that her client “didn’t have a job that was pressing…. So [the weight] came off a little slower than for some actresses” (Tan, Triggs, & Chi, 2009, p. 85). Yet model Camilla Alves, who claimed to be “in no rush to tone her postpartum body” (Lakshmi, 2010, p. 88), still had practically returned to her pre-pregnancy figure within nine weeks of giving birth. (See Figure 2.) These women may not have prioritized exercise and weight loss immediately after childbirth. Their stories do, however, still follow the magazine’s formula for narratives of success. Even if doing so does take them an “unusually long time” by industry standards, they eventually lose all the weight they gained while pregnant. In addition, explanations are consistently provided as to why some of these women are allowed to operate within more relaxed time frames. Ultimately, whatever her reasons may be, the legitimacy of the time it takes a celebrity mother to lose this weight is dictated by the expectations of her career.

**Media Parameters of “Healthy” Motherhood**

Even when celebrity mothers are under immense pressure to lose weight quickly, they cannot forgo the childcare aspect of the motherhood identity and focus exclusively on their own body reclamation. Failing to do both, or failing to *look good* while doing both, is not viewed favorably and might lead to media scrutiny. For example, a celebrity mother who is considered “too thin” might have to refute accusations that she is an imbalanced individual, incapable of providing adequate childcare and of being a positive role model for her children. The following case illustrates this discourse well.

In addition to widespread speculation about her strained family relationships, actress Tori Spelling was heavily criticized for losing what the media deemed “too much” weight after her pregnancy. In spring 2009 celebrity magazines began suggesting that she suffered from disordered eating. The headline “TORI ANOREXIC? 98 lbs” (“TORI ANOREXIC?”, 2009, cover) was splashed across the cover of *Star* magazine, which ultimately declared it was time for “REHAB for Tori! Size 00 and wasting away” later that year (“Mom Candy Pleads,” 2009, cover). After these headlines, *People* magazine’s coverage of Spelling’s weight loss went beyond the unflattering paparazzi shots that had substantiated the majority of *Star* magazine’s coverage. In its April issue *People* ran a far more detailed piece on Spelling, giving her the opportunity to defend herself against these allegations. While she conceded in her interview that she had lost a great deal of weight, she attributed it to the hectic schedule that comes with parenting and not to disordered eating:

I’m so blessed to have as much work as I do, but I agree there needs to be some downtime…. I’m the first to admit that sometimes I don’t have the time to sit down for a well-balanced meal. Usually you kind of just finish whatever your child doesn’t eat and that’s it because you have to move on to get them into the bath and then to bed. (Jordan, 2009, p. 64)
She related an experience that took place roughly seven months after giving birth to her daughter, when she found that she could fit into her pre-pregnancy jeans for the first time in two and a half years. Yet her happiness was short-lived, because soon after

... unflattering paparazzi photos of her new body were splashed across the tabloids and Internet with labels like “scary skinny,” along with speculation that she was battling an eating disorder. “It’s hard for me. I wish they could flash back to what my old body was before I got pregnant, which was pretty much this,” says Spelling. (Jordan, 2009, p. 64)

Spelling is not the only victim of similar media allegations. Many actresses, singers, and models receive similar treatment for having what the media deem to be “scary skinny” (“Plus: Scary skinny celebs,” 2001, cover) or “too thin” bodies (“Too Thin for TV?,” 2009, cover), or who are allegedly on “extreme diets” (“Extreme Diets,” 2005, cover). People is unique in that it consistently refrains from explicitly alleging that even the skinniest of celebrities might suffer from an eating disorder. Instead, it provides a forum for celebrities to respond to accusations by Star magazine and other competing media outlets that depict them negatively. Such was the case for Tori Spelling, who had probably hoped that her participation in People’s piece would counteract the media representation of her as unhealthy.

What differentiates the media’s allegations against her from those against other celebrities is that by insinuating that Spelling was anorexic, her ability to mother her children was also deemed questionable. She notes that she is aware of this later in the article:

“It’s horrifying for me as a woman because the last thing I want to put out there is that it’s acceptable to be too thin or have an eating disorder. I want to be a positive role model for my daughter,” she says. “And I have two kids that I need to be healthy for because they need their mom.” (Jordan, 2009, p. 65)

Spelling’s repeated denials were not enough to put the media allegations to rest. While this article provides her with the opportunity to defend and explain her thin appearance in a public way, details are included that present her as a flawed individual. These include her strained relationship with her own mother and reliance upon her husband, Dean, in raising their children.

Combined, these variables portray her as a questionable mother and necessitate Dean’s presence and guidance. His wife is incredibly driven, he claims:

She wants to create it all and she can, but she has to learn how to balance everything, and that’s where I come in…. She wants to do it all, but I can tell you right now, there is no way in hell that I would ever let my wife get unhealthy. (Jordan, 2009, p. 64)

Spelling’s own denial of disordered eating is not enough to negate the media’s claims, and she is portrayed as unable to be a good mother without the help of her husband. While her problems might lead to increased reader empathy or identification with her situation, the story’s basis is the media
controversy surrounding her body, which, she admits, could “stand to gain a few pounds” (Jordan, 2009, p. 64). In her favor, though, the article presents external reasons as the cause for this and not internal, psychological issues such as an eating disorder.

Unlike other similar articles questioning only the health of the celebrity they feature, Spelling carries the additional burden of having to defend herself as fit to parent. In general, losing what the media determine to be “too much” weight is an indicator of being a troubled individual. Spelling’s personal failures are iconographically represented by her body, which fails to meet media expectations for a thin—yet healthy—body.

Closing the Gap: Celebrities Are Just Like Us.

There are a number of ways in which People encourages reader identification with celebrities. Examining the MailBag, which serves as a letters-to-the-editor section, is one way to gauge the strength of reader identification with featured mothers. In the June 29, 2009, issue, a letter submitted by a reader is indicative of perceived similarity between her experiences and those of Melissa Joan Hart, based on the aforementioned article that featured her weight loss (“I Wanted to Prove I COULD DO IT!,” Wihlborg, 2009b):

It is wonderful to see how this pretty actress got her body back in shape after having two children. I am a working mom—I just had my second child eight months ago—and I, too, am in the best shape of my life. I dropped 30 lbs., in addition to the 30 lbs. of pregnancy weight I lost postpartum. I did it by cutting down on how much I eat, making better food choices and doing exercise after I put my kids to bed—no trainers, no nutritionists, no gimmicks. Karen. (MailBag, 2009, p. 6)

Karen’s perception of similarity between her postpartum weight loss and Hart’s stems from the fact that both are “in the best shape of [their lives]” after their second pregnancies (p. 6).

Karen’s sentiments mirror the sense of independent achievement evident in Hart’s article. Both are proud of their weight loss, but Karen is adamant that she did so without any trainers, nutritionists, or gimmicks. Hart, however, could have easily used all three. This detail, however, becomes unimportant when Hart claims that getting herself back in shape was “a lot of effort…. It didn’t happen by magic—it was as hard for me as it would be for anyone else” (Wihlborg, 2009b, p. 53). Thus, Hart becomes similar to women like Karen, who have successfully lost weight, as well as inspirational for those who are currently trying to do so. By praising Hart’s weight loss, Karen is in a sense recognizing her own success. Not only does she normalize weight loss as central to the drama of post-pregnancy narratives, but she also reaffirms the thin, ideal body as attainable by those outside the celebrity community.

Occasionally, these articles overtly acknowledge the presence and influence of trainers and nutritionists in celebrities’ postpartum weight-loss regimens. Although these mentions imply that celebrity mothers have an advantage over the general postpartum population, which could subsequently weaken reader identification with them, the more important and recurrent theme
remains that weight loss is hard for anyone. The magazine’s response to readers who question these omissions supports this claim:

Many readers thought celeb moms who slim down quickly after having babies enjoy a distinct advantage over the typical postpartum mother. “Most American women have no dietitian and no trainer to help them get back to their pre-baby state two months after giving birth,” writes Katie Maki.… March Warhft-Nadler of Ontario adds, “I’m always frustrated when magazines choose to print the impossible-to-maintain regimens of stars as a guide for us ‘normal’ people.” But Monica Bevill of Blytheville, Ark., says Hollywood moms still have to do the work: “Even with all the professional help, these ladies had to eat properly and do the exercise to lose the weight—and I think they look great!” (MailBag, 2008, p. 10)

The impression readers are left with is that celebrity mothers deserve admiration and praise simply because “they look great!” (MailBag, 2008, p. 10). Although they are presented as models whose diets and exercise seem to be replicable by any reader, this representation might do some postpartum women a disservice. Those without fame and fortune must work harder with fewer resources to achieve the same goals as their inspirational media figures. Some will probably fail, whereas others will succeed. So long as People continues presenting celebrity mothers as inspirational figures, it is unlikely that they will stress their celebrity privilege. Even if People’s readers do recognize that such privileges exist, they might knowingly overlook these aspects of the narratives in order to receive greater gratification when reading them. If readers willingly suspend their disbelief so that celebrity mothers’ struggles seem just like their own, they are more likely to feel that their experiences and attitudes are justified by a credible, identifiable source. The above quotations, by Karen and others in the MailBag, are indicative of such a negotiation between the magazine and its readers.

Readers’ own beliefs about postpartum weight loss can be assessed by analyzing their Internet interactions with the magazine’s content. People occasionally conducts online polls, asking readers to vote on the hottest, cutest, fittest, and overall most attractive of celebrities. In 2008 readers were asked to vote in three fitness-related categories: “Best Body After Baby,” “Best Bikini Body,” and “Sexiest Mom,” a title reserved for a reader (Readers’ Poll, 2008, pp. 126–129). (See Figure 3.) The winners were Halle Berry, Jessica Alba, and 26-year-old reader Mandy Schick, respectively. While this section offered participants a total of 18 categories to vote on, these were the only three concerning women’s bodies and fitness. The visual layout of the results denotes special significance to Berry as the winner of the “Best Body After Baby” category: Her photo rests squarely in the center of the first page of the results. The title of “Best Bikini Body” also went to a postpartum mother, although the category was open to a number of female celebrities with and without children. The caption next to a photo of winner Alba at the beach reads: “What baby? Just three months after giving birth to daughter Honor, Alba flaunted flat abs in a two-piece, earning her the fan favorite title over Jennifer Aniston and Rihanna” (p. 129). Alba’s “achievement” in regaining her pre-pregnancy body is framed as more merit-worthy than being fit without ever experiencing pregnancy, as was the case for her competitors. It is difficult to determine where the perception that postpartum
Figure 3. “Readers’ Poll” (part) (December 29, 2008). *People*, 70(26), 126–129.
fitness is more impressive than fitness in general originated. Yet what is clear is that the results of these polls occur in response to readers’ beliefs, which are at least somewhat informed by the content of *People* itself. This is indicative of a recurring cycle in which the magazine perpetuates fitness beliefs that are subsequently adopted by readers, who eventually perpetuate these ideals themselves.

The significance of these polls is that they involve the input of readers more directly than any other section of the magazine. Therefore, when the results are displayed, the readers themselves are in control of determining the magazine’s content. Letters to the editor involve only one or a few readers at a time, whereas this poll involved 2 million people (Readers’ Poll, 2008). Most significantly, of all the categories that asked for feedback on women’s bodies, these winning titles were awarded solely to new mothers. This indicates that readers have become inclined to associate post-pregnancy weight loss as a leading indicator of overall attractiveness and personal success.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This study identifies *People*’s narration of successful body modification within the context of celebrity mothers’ post-pregnancy experiences, wherein readers are presented with mixed messages concerning their weight and the importance of regaining their pre-pregnancy bodies. Of particular concern is the sentiment that while weight gain is acceptable during pregnancy, after childbirth any such residual weight is immediately deemed undesirable and unattractive. Patterns detected in reader feedback, from letters in the MailBag to data from reader polls, indicate that this sociocultural pressure to “bounce back” into shape is one that is understood beyond the celebrity community.

Two factors in particular differentiate these stories from more generic weight-loss narratives in the media. First, featured celebrities are concerned with creating and maintaining an image that shows them to be good, healthy, and, therefore, capable parents. Yet all aspects of this desired identity are contingent upon them regaining their pre-pregnancy bodies. Second, the time frame within which these changes are expected to occur is extremely brief. As reflected in these passages, celebrity mothers are often faced with the choice of losing pregnancy weight or losing upcoming employment. Their weight loss thereby has a definitive starting point, that being childbirth, and the amount of time it takes them to lose all the weight they gained becomes central when assessing their overall success as mothers. Even the visual presentation of many such articles denotes an emphasis upon time frame in weight-loss narratives by placing mothers next to each other and indicating the amount of time their weight loss took in bright, bold fonts. This perpetuates an air of competition, as the faster the weight is lost, the better and more praiseworthy the woman becomes.

*People* continues to perpetuate an ideology that affirms the importance of losing weight at the expense of more traditional aspects of motherhood. For example, only three articles that were collected referenced breastfeeding, and even then it was only within contexts that emphasized its ability to facilitate weight loss. While many featured celebrities admit to long hours in the gym or with trainers, doing so might be impossible for most mothers, who lack either the financial resources or the desire to spend extended time away from their children. Nevertheless, successful motherhood today is not confined to a biological ability to reproduce. It is contingent on postpartum weight loss.
Situation contemporary celebrity mothers’ weight-loss narratives within the history of celebrity mothers’ stories illuminates new ways to deepen understandings of celebrities and their functions, particularly as inspirational figures. Historically, celebrity moms were ordinary women who worked within the domestic sphere, cooking, cleaning, and caring for their families. Such was the case for homemakers June Cleaver of Leave It to Beaver and Harriet Nelson of The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet in the 1950s and ’60s, the ideal mothers of their day (Robertson, 2010). During the 1980s and ’90s, disclosing the details of celebrities’ personal lives became fashionable and financially lucrative, and thus the struggles and obstacles associated with motherhood shifted from being private to public discourses. No longer was the mediated ideal one of perfection with a glossy finish. Audience identification with media figures, especially mothers, might have been strengthened upon learning that celebrities were experiencing the same challenges and achievements.

Key to understanding the development of audience relationships with celebrities are the historical changes that have led to increased proximity between the two parties (Gamson, 1992). Celebrity narratives provide readers with an “inside journey” into the ‘real lives’ of celebrities, lives much like the readers” and, importantly, “the hard work of gaining and retaining success—further tightened the narrative links between the audience and the celebrated” (Gamson, 1992, p. 8). We argue the importance of considering historical evolution, both of popular media texts and of sociocultural narratives and truisms, when examining the development of the current anti-fat climate for postpartum women. Like celebrity mothers of the past, today’s media figures must demonstrate that they are capable parents who can care for their children. Yet they must additionally lose weight and, more important, lose weight quickly before receiving public praise. Thus, the work today’s celebrity mothers engage in is both domestic and public. Hard work, as mothers and as fitness role models, is key to their positive reception by audiences who expect nothing less than physical perfection from the rich and famous. Losing post-pregnancy weight is thus a narrative that unites audiences who share this sentiment, not only among other mothers but by anyone who has become implicated in the culture of body scrutiny.

The popularity of People’s postpartum weight-loss narratives has implications that extend beyond industry attempts to understand or replicate the magazine’s success. Ultimately, these findings corroborate prior research suggesting the sociocultural significance of physical fatness and thinness. Pregnancy “forces” celebrity mothers to become “fat,” and People’s narratives encourage readers to sympathize with their struggle. Not only must these women juggle child rearing, professional careers, and personal relationships, but they must also lose weight. Celebrities are known to influence not only body image but also the aspirations of fans and audiences (Barry, 2008). From letters in the magazine’s MailBag to polls that award readers with titles similar to the celebrities featured in the magazine, there is a public fascination and demand for information about celebrities’ weight-loss experiences.

This study presents a preliminarily examination of this trend through textual analysis, but further research should explore the effects these narratives have on readers. Getting-the-body-back narratives in popular magazines tend to be straightforward and eye-catching, yet the reader’s interpretation of them is expected to be more complex than direct internalization of presented
information. While celebrities’ stories can be inspirational, this does not mean that audiences necessarily aspire to replicate modeled behaviors. Instead, a useful approach would be to explore what reader characteristics lead to enjoyment of these stories and what qualities inspire sentiments of affinity and liking for celebrity mothers. This is especially important because of the unique conditions of pregnancy, including the mother’s age, her relationships with others, her career, and her socioeconomic status. In such a way, further analyses would provide more than a supplement to the existing studies of anti-fat discourses. Rather, they would enable a new perspective and insight into the interaction between mediated narratives and audience behavior.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the reviewers and editors of the *Journal of Magazine & New Media Research* for their thoughtful suggestions to strengthen the article. The authors would also like to thank the Department of Communication, State University of New York at Geneseo for supporting this project.

References


Celebrity Mothers’ Weight-Loss Narratives


Chi, P. (2009, September 27). Ana Ortiz’s pretty baby: Nothing can stop the *Ugly Betty* star from loving motherhood—not even having to wear Spandex. *People, 72*(10), 117.


Celebrity Mothers’ Weight-Loss Narratives


Celebrity Mothers’ Weight-Loss Narratives


