Brief research report

The hot body issue: Weight and caption tone in celebrity gossip magazines☆

Andrea McDonnell [a,*], Linda Lin [b,1]

[a] Department of English, Emmanuel College, 400 The Fenway, Boston, MA 02115, United States
[b] Department Chair of Psychology, Emmanuel College, 400 The Fenway, Boston, MA 02115, United States

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ABSTRACT

While representations of bodies and weight have been studied in regards to fashion and fitness magazines, little research exists that examines such representations in celebrity gossip magazines. Using data collected through content analysis of 262 photo-caption units published in June 2015 issues of American celebrity gossip magazines, this study examines representations of bodies within the genre and the relationship between the gender, race, and body size of pictured celebrities and the tone of accompanying captions. Results indicate that celebrity gossip magazines critique the bodies of both female and male subjects, but that women are more likely to be the subject of negative comments than men. Underweight women and overweight men are especially targeted for criticism. Latinos are praised more often than other racial groups. The implications of these representations are discussed.

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Introduction

Since the early 2000s, celebrity gossip magazines have commented on the physical appearance of famous bodies via small bursts of text, or captions, appearing alongside large, color photographs. These magazines have become a mainstay of Western media in the 21st century (McDonnell, 2014). This study examines weight-focused photo-caption units across five celebrity gossip magazines in an effort to assess the relationship between message tone and the gender and race of celebrity subjects.

Scholarship suggests that differences in body ideals and body satisfaction vary by gender and race. Though primarily associated with women, recent studies suggest that young men also experience body dissatisfaction (Frederick et al., 2007). In addition, Black women may feel more satisfied with their bodies and experience lower rates of eating disorders than White women, while Asian and Latina women have similar levels of body dissatisfaction to White women (Grabe & Hyde, 2006). Research in this area is ongoing and dynamic, particularly as women of color gain greater representation in mainstream media (Botta, 2000).

Magazines are a powerful slice of our media environment, presenting idealized images of the body. Scholars have analyzed the content of fashion and fitness magazines; findings suggest these publications predominantly feature young, Caucasian women (Wasylkiw, Emms, Meuse, & Poirier, 2009) and emphasize appearance over health (Willis & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014), while men's magazines emphasize leanness, muscularity (Labre, 2005), and self-regimentation (Ricciardelli, Clow, & White, 2010). Representations of bodies in publications targeted to Black readers may be more likely to present diverse body sizes (Dawson-Andoh, Gray, Soto, & Parker, 2011; Thompson-Brenner, Boisseau, & St. Paul 2011).

But while many magazines celebrate hyper-idealized bodies, celebrity gossip magazines judge and poke fun at celebrities' bodies. Yet despite the genre's popularity – in 2015 Us Weekly, drew 13.5 million readers weekly (GFK Mediamark Research and Intelligence, 2014–2015)[2] – few studies examine its treatment of bodies (see Gow, Lydecker, Lammana, & Mazzeo, 2012). Further, to our knowledge, no study exists that systematically examines how gossip magazines communicate through photographic content and captions. We analyze weight-focused photo-caption units in an effort to understand the relationship between the body size, gender, and race of the pictured celebrity and caption tone. We hypothesize

2 Celebrity gossip magazines self-report their demographic and sales data via their online media kits. These kits contain data collected by GFK Mediamark Research and Intelligence (MRI). Data points from years prior to 2015 are no longer publically available. Please contact the authors for hard copy of these reports.

that (1) female celebrities' bodies will be judged more harshly than male celebrities' bodies and, (2) White celebrities will be judged more harshly than celebrities of color.

Method

Materials

We conducted a content analysis of *Us Weekly*, *Life & Style*, *Ok!*, *In Touch*, and *Star* magazines, the leading American publications (McDonnell, 2014), published in June 2015. Each magazine published one issue per week for five weeks; our final sample consisted of twenty-five issues. Advertisements were not sampled. All photo-caption units referencing weight and/or physical appearance of the body were selected; some pages contained more than one photo-caption unit. Relevant pages were removed from the body of the magazine, placed into clear sleeves, and labeled in a binder. Pages that contained text without an accompanying image were not sampled ($n = 5$). We did not find any images unaccompanied by text. One hundred and seventy-five of 1440 total editorial pages (12.15%) contained one or more relevant photo-caption unit. 262 photo-caption units were sampled.

Procedure

Two female undergraduate students served as raters and were blind to the study hypotheses. Content codes were created to identify the body size, gender, and race of each celebrity. Both authors trained the raters in the coding system and practiced on sample images during a two-hour long meeting. Authors and raters also met to establish consistency before the study commenced. After training, the raters demonstrated acceptable levels of reliability using Cohen's kappa scores or intra-class correlations. Final data were based on the agreement between coders.

Captions were rated as either positive/praising or negative/criticizing in tone. The inter-rater reliability Cohen's kappa for caption valence was .81. Classifications for gender were male, female, and transgendered; however, coders did not identify any subject as transgendered, therefore, only male and female categories were included in the analysis. The inter-rater reliability Cohen's kappa was .98 for gender. Coders rated subjects' race/ethnicity as White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, or American Indian. Cohen's kappa inter-rater reliability were .78 for race.

To rate body size, we used a methodology similar to Thompson-Brenner et al. (2011) in which celebrity body size was estimated using Pulvers Figure Rating Scale (Pulvers et al., 2004). The scale includes nine figure drawings, which correspond to body mass indexes (BMIs) ranging from 16 to 40, with each figure representing a jump of three BMI points. The scale demonstrates internal consistency ($\alpha = .95$) and reliability ($r = .85$) and the BMI ratings have been shown to be valid (Pulvers, Bachand, Nollen, Guo, & Ahluwalia, 2013). Raters matched each celebrity with the drawing most closely resembling her/his body size; sizes were recorded as the number of the scale figure, and then converted to BMI values. These BMI values were also classified into categories using the BMI classification system: underweight (under 18.4), average weight (18.5–24.5), and overweight/obese (24.6 and higher) (Keys, Fidanza, Karvonen, Kimura, & Taylor, 1972). 13 celebrities' body sizes could not be determined from photos because images only showed a specific body part. Using the remaining body size ratings, inter-rater reliability was assessed using intra-class correlations two-way mixed model with absolute agreement for body size and found to be acceptable ($ICC = .85$).

Results

262 photo-caption units were analyzed (64% female subjects, 46% male subjects). Overall, the captions praised the subject's weight and appearance 74.6% of the time, and were critical 17.7% of the time. Information on the racial/ethnic background, gender, and body mass index category are shown in Table 1.

Main Effects for Demographic Variables on Caption Valence

Chi-square analysis examined the ratio of praise and criticism by BMI category (underweight, average weight, and overweight) and

Table 1
Frequency analysis of male and female subjects' caption valence by race/ethnicity, age, and body mass index.

Variable	Women			Men		
	Praise	Criticism	Total	Praise	Criticism	Total
Race/ethnicity						
White	89 (74.8%)	30 (25.2%)	119	70 (88.6%)	9 (11.4%)	79
Black	9 (90.0%)	1 (10.0%)	10	3 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3
Latino/a	15 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	15	4 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	4
Asian	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0
American Indian	1 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0
Mixed race/undetermined	–	–	29	–	–	2
			174			88
Age						
Under 18	2 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2	1 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1
18–29	26 (76.5%)	8 (23.5%)	34	23 (95.8%)	1 (4.2%)	24
30–39	52 (70.3%)	22 (29.7%)	74	22 (91.7%)	2 (8.3%)	24
40–49	36 (83.7%)	7 (16.3%)	43	24 (92.3%)	2 (7.7%)	26
Over 50	8 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	8	7 (63.6%)	4 (36.4)	11
Undetermined	–	–	13	–	–	2
			174			88
Body mass index						
Underweight	16 (57.1%)	12 (42.9%)	28	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0
Normal weight	96 (82.8%)	20 (17.2%)	116	53 (96.4%)	2 (3.6%)	55
Overweight	12 (63.2%)	7 (36.8%)	19	24 (77.4%)	7 (22.6%)	31
Undetermined	–	–	11	–	–	2
			174			88