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“Bouncing back”: How Australia’s leading women’s magazines portray the postpartum ‘body’

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Summary

Purpose: To examine how the Australian media portrays the childbearing body through the use of celebrity stories in women’s magazines. The study aimed to provide insight into socially constructed factors that might influence women’s body image and expectations during pregnancy and the early postnatal period.

Method: Media content analysis was used to analyse 25 celebrity stories about the childbearing postnatal body (images and texts) collected from Australia’s three leading women’s magazines between January and June 2009 ($n = 58$).

Findings: A variety of persuasive textual and visual messages were elicited. The major theme representing how the postnatal body was constructed was labelled ‘Bouncing back’; the focus of this paper. The social messages inherent in the magazine stories were that women need to strive towards regaining a pre-pregnant body shape with the same effort one would employ when recovering from an illness. Three specific sub-themes that promoted weight loss were identified. These were labelled ‘Racing to bounce back’, ‘Breastfeeding to bounce back’ and ‘Pretending to bounce back’. A fourth sub-theme, ‘Refusing to bounce back: Celebrating my new body’, grouped together stories about celebrities who appeared to embrace their changed, but healthy, postnatal body.

Conclusions: The study highlighted the expectations of the postpartum body in relation to speedy return to the pre-pregnant state. Understanding how these portrayals may contribute to women’s own body image and expectations in the early postpartum period may better assist maternity health care providers to engage with women in meaningful discussions about this important time in their lives and challenge notions of ideal body types. Assisting women to accept and nurture themselves and have confidence in their ability as a new parent is a crucial element of quality maternity service provision.

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Introduction

Pregnancy, birth and early parenthood are important life experiences and these represent a period of adjustment which is associated with personal, familial and social changes that often carry cultural significance.¹ As such, the childbearing woman psychologically adapts to the changes that are occurring. A woman is also faced with exploring the relationship between her changing body and her identity as a mother.² Women's expectations and beliefs about their body, childbirth and becoming a mother are strongly influenced by the public, private and professional discourses around birth and parenting.^{3,4} One potential powerful public discourse is the popular media. This paper presents some of the findings from a qualitative study that examined how the childbearing 'body' is portrayed through the use of 'celebrity' media images and texts in Australia's three leading women's magazines. The paper focuses on the changing postnatal body and highlights the messages that may contribute to a woman's expectations and experiences of the early postpartum period.

Background

Sociologist and feminist Leslie Jeffries⁵ has argued that the female body is constructed as a 'problem' in today's society. Like many of her postmodernist counterparts, Jeffries contests that language plays a pivotal role in this construction. Jeffries⁵ makes the point that what we understand by the 'body' or the 'language' is dictated mainly by the norms and conventions of the context in which women find themselves and the cultural imperative for women to look 'good' is strong. In earlier work, Gatens⁶ examined traditional philosophical notions of the body, sex and gender. She argued that bodies should be seen as products of the way culture organises, regulates and remakes itself. She claimed that many of the functions we think of as being grounded in biology are in reality produced by cultural processes, institutions and expectations which are then, retrospectively, naturalised. Gatens⁶ adds that the way our bodies look is not easily separated out from the way we feel about them and the expectations of others.

One of the major contributors to how society both constructs and simultaneously reflects existing attitudes, perceptions and culture is the popular media.^{7,8} The media plays a powerful role in shaping, framing and proliferation of certain body image ideologies.^{7,8} Women's magazines are particularly influential given their high distribution rates. Australia, for example, is the second largest per capita consumer of magazines worldwide.⁹ In addition, the circulation and readership of a woman's magazine often depends on the celebrity depicted on the cover of the magazine as celebrities confer a certain discursive power.¹⁰ The social status of celebrities gives them a voice above others and when channelled through the media often becomes significant.¹⁰ While celebrities may be a productive and an effective cultural force¹¹ they are part of a very elaborate media economy which is connected to audiences and value. Marshall¹⁰ claims that saturation coverage, in terms of frequency of celebrity exposure, is recognition of cultural value. Readers of women's magazines may therefore be in a 'weak'

position in relation to the producers of the various ideologically laden messages about the childbearing female body; since they directly or indirectly offer advice about the best way to improve looks and attractiveness. Given the current climate of women's magazines being inundated with text and images of pregnant celebrities, their birth stories and their postpartum experiences one may conclude that this phenomenon may reflect a certain type of cultural value. For this reason we undertook this study.

Method

The aim of this study was to examine how the Australian media portrays the childbearing body through the use of celebrity stories (text and image). This study used the technique of media content analysis to examine the social construction of the early postpartum female body.

Media content analysis

Media content analysis is open to many interpretations, largely depending on the theoretical underpinnings of the author or researcher. It is characterised by a wide range of phenomena including the medium, production techniques, messages, sources quoted or referred to and context. The approach varies depending on the framework as well as the method and design tool used by the researcher. This study took a qualitative humanistic approach to media content analysis.⁸

The humanist approach draws on psychoanalysis and cultural anthropology to analyse how media content reveal 'truths' about society. In essence it takes a look backwards and as such is a reflection of society and culture. While recognising that media texts will have multiple different meanings to different readers the approach attempts to determine the likely meaning of texts to audiences.⁸ Qualitative media content analysis focuses on ways in which language and visual imagery combine to create meaning. In essence it is concerned with discovering the 'sub-textual' aspects of the information examined. The aim is to understand how things are said and what underlying socio-cultural meanings may be projected.

Data collected

The data sources for this study were collected from Australia's three leading women's magazines; The Australian Women's Weekly (monthly magazine published by ACP Magazines), Woman's Day (weekly magazine published by ACP Magazines), and New Idea (weekly magazine published by Pacific Magazines). The data collection period was between 1st January 2009 and 30th June 2009 inclusive. This resulted in the collection of 48 weekly magazines and six monthly magazines ($n = 58$).

As the material used in this study was publicly available the research was 'unobtrusive' in nature.¹² This means that it did not involve asking people directly what they thought or did in relation to the research question. As such ethical approval was not required. However, an ethical stance was maintained throughout the research with issues such as privacy, confidentiality, duty of care and beneficence being

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