



## Exploring the Tripartite Influence Model of body dissatisfaction in postpartum women

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### ABSTRACT

Pregnancy and childbirth result in dramatic changes in a woman's body shape, which can be associated with body image concerns. To date, however, little is known about how sociocultural factors may influence body dissatisfaction in postpartum women. This study aimed to test a sociocultural model of body image and eating concerns among a sample of postpartum women. A sample of  $N=474$  women, mean ( $SD$ ) age = 30.6 (4.8), having given birth during the last year, completed an online survey and reported on sociocultural pressures from media, peers, family and partners, thin-ideal internalization, appearance comparison, body dissatisfaction, and psychological functioning. Structural equation modeling analyses revealed a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(49)=220.20$ ,  $p<.001$ , RMSEA = .086, CFI = .93. Findings suggest that women experience strong sociocultural pressures to attain unrealistic body shapes/sizes during the post-pregnancy period, contributing to their body image concerns.

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### 1. Introduction

The months following pregnancy are associated with high levels of body dissatisfaction among women (Rallis, Skouteris, Wertheim, & Paxton, 2007). These feelings are due in part to the physical changes associated with pregnancy; however, an emerging body of literature has highlighted how increasing pressure on new mothers to achieve an unrealistic figure very soon after childbirth may also be a contributing factor (Gow, Lydecker, Lamanna, & Mazzeo, 2012). Such pressure may come from the media, but also interpersonal agents including peers, family members, and partners. To date, however, despite the months following childbirth being critical for the health of the mother–infant dyad, little is known regarding how sociocultural pressures may be related to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating among mothers who have recently given birth. Thus, the aim of this study was to test an adaptation of the Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999) as a model of the development of body image and eating concerns among postpartum women.

Body dissatisfaction is characterized by subjective unhappiness with some aspect of one's appearance (Thompson & Stice, 2001) and has a strong association with eating pathology (Polivy & Herman, 2004) and poor psychological adjustment (Cash, 1990). Negative

body image and body dissatisfaction are terms often used interchangeably in the literature (Thompson, 2001). Pregnancy and the postpartum period have recently gained attention as periods of high risk for body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, which, when it occurs has been associated with poor outcomes for mothers and infants (Franko & Walton, 1993; Skouteris, 2011). While pregnancy is often a joyous event, many women view postpartum weight loss as a stressor and experience a desire to quickly return to their pre-pregnancy shape and weight (Montgomery et al., 2013; Nash, 2012). Consistent with this, high rates of weight-related distress have been reported among postpartum women (Walker, 1998). Furthermore, research indicates that women who are dissatisfied with their postpartum bodies are less likely to breastfeed (Barnes, Stein, Smith, & Pollack, 1997; Walker & Freeland-Graves, 1998) and are at higher risk for psychological distress (Duncombe, Wertheim, Skouteris, Paxton, & Kelly, 2008).

Sociocultural pressures may leave a woman feeling unattractive, which often results in body dissatisfaction, anxiety, depression, and body related distress (Skouteris, Carr, Wertheim, Paxton, & Duncombe, 2005). While there are many theoretical approaches for describing the etiology of eating disorders, one model that has been widely researched is the Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson et al., 1999). The Tripartite Influence Model suggests there are three primary sociocultural variables (i.e., peers, parents, and media) that influence (via mediation) the development of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Fig. 1). A mediation variable is a variable that explains the relationship between the predictor and criterion variables (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Two mediating variables, internalization of societal ideals of appearance and social

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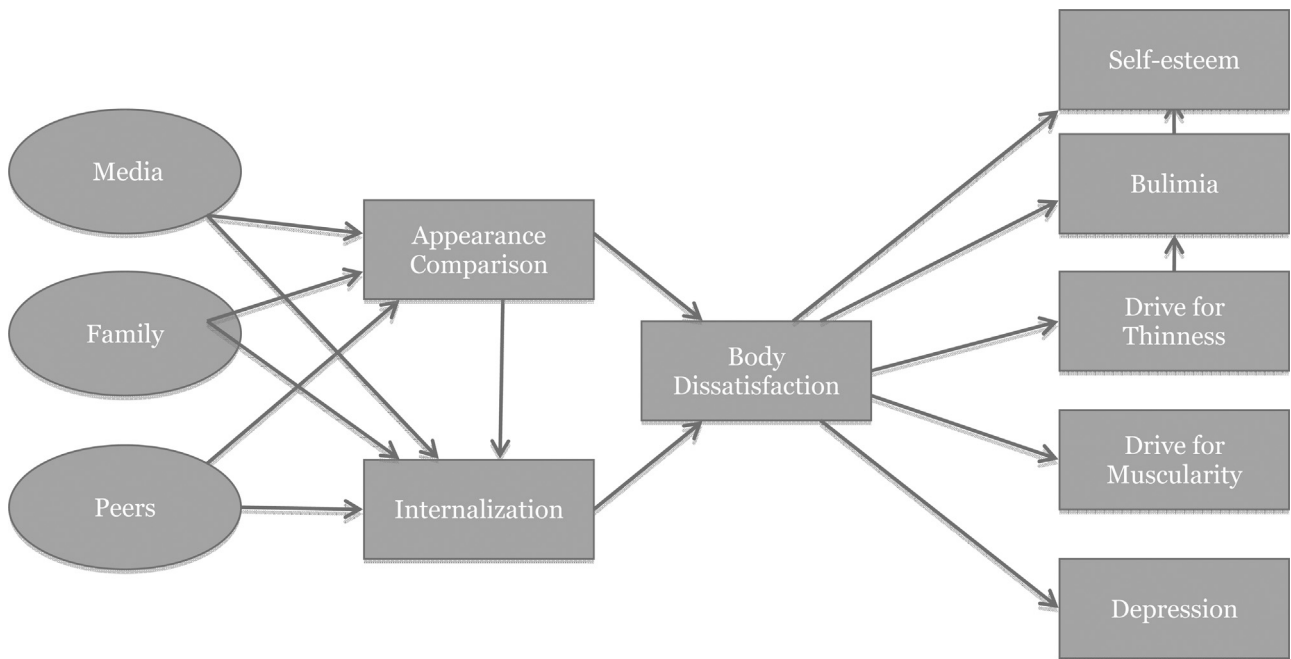


Fig. 1. Original tripartite influence model with the addition of drive for muscularity.

comparison, constitute the mechanisms through which the socio-cultural variables are associated with body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Thompson et al., 1999). Evidence supporting the usefulness of this model has been found among a number of different populations across the Western world, including adolescents and college-aged samples (Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Rodgers, Chabrol, & Paxton, 2011; Shroff & Thompson, 2006; van den Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, & Covert, 2002; Yamamiya, Shroff, & Thompson, 2006).

A recent study by Huxley, Halliwell, and Clark (2015) tested the Tripartite Influence Model among groups of heterosexual and lesbian/bisexual women to explore whether sexuality may protect against sociocultural pressures around thinness. Interestingly, their research found that the pathways from sociocultural influences (i.e., female partner, media pressures) to weight satisfaction and restrained eating were not significant to women who identified as lesbian/bisexual. Additionally, this study found pressures from friends was not related to body image in adult women as opposed to previous research with college-aged women. This research highlights the importance of testing the tripartite influence model in older populations of adult women to explore its applicability and how pathways may be modified as a result of lifespan development.

To date, the Tripartite Influence Model has never been explored among new mothers; however, there is evidence suggesting its applicability in this population. Thus, for instance, research has indicated media pressure towards gaining minimal gestational weight and returning almost immediately to one's pre-pregnancy figure (Gow et al., 2012; Hopper & Aubrey, 2016; Roth, Homer, & Fenwick, 2012). Although the data are scant, they have shown that, consistent with sociocultural theory, interest in media and celebrity portrayals was associated with increased body dissatisfaction during pregnancy (Krisjanous, Richard, & Gazley, 2014), and exposure to media images of postpartum celebrity bodies has been shown to be associated with increased body surveillance among never-pregnant women (Hopper & Aubrey, 2016). Thus, the existing data suggest that the media promotion of unattainable postpartum bodies may be associated with increased body image and eating concerns among postpartum women; however, more research is needed to confirm this relationship.

In addition to media influences, peers, family members, and romantic partners may be important sources of influence on body image during the postpartum period. Similar to the empirical data exploring the role of media influences, data focusing on the role of interpersonal influences on body image and eating concerns during the postpartum period are lacking. Thus, for the purpose of this study, an additional sociocultural variable of romantic partner was included in the Tripartite Influence Model. Due to the social support and intimacy that characterizes marriage/cohabitation, partner support is often found to be a protective factor in the physical and mental health of women (Fincham, 1998). In contrast, however, negative criticism from an intimate partner can be detrimental to a women's body image. Pole, Crowther, and Schell (2004) found perceived negative evaluation by a spouse to be significantly associated with body dissatisfaction, and accounting for 8.8% of the variance after controlling for weight and perceived negative family history. Similarly, in a small, qualitative study of immigrant Latina women living in the United States, pregnant and postpartum women identified their husbands as the primary influence on weight related issues and stated they desired to please their husbands by either gaining or losing weight (Thornton et al., 2006). Recent studies exploring body image among male populations (heterosexual and gay) and have found the inclusion of romantic partners as a sociocultural variable to be a meaningful addition to models explaining body image concerns (Tylka, 2011; Tylka & Andorka, 2012). Moreover, Nunez and Tantleff-Dunn (2016) found perceived pressure from a spouse or romantic partner to be a "hot mom" was associated with lower self-esteem and increased appearance anxiety. In addition, supportive husbands have been shown to contribute to positive body image among postpartum women (Ogle, Tyner, & Schofield-Tomschin, 2011). Given this research, a partner variable was added to the model to explore its contribution.

Although body image concerns have been shown to exist during the postpartum period as described above (Duncombe et al., 2008), the factors that contribute to them may be different during this period compared to other times in women's life. Specifically, it is possible that perceived distance from sociocultural ideals may be attributed to pregnancy as opposed to a lack of discipline as sug-

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