

**MOTHERHOOD, MEDIA, AND REALITY:
ANALYZING FEMALE AUDIENCE RECEPTION
OF CELEBRITY PARENTHOOD AS NEWS**

A Dissertation

by

ELIZABETH FISH HATFIELD

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2011

Major Subject: Communication

Motherhood, Media, and Reality:

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ABSTRACT

Motherhood, Media and Reality: Analyzing Female Audience Reception
of Celebrity Parenthood as News. (August 2011)

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Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Srividya Ramasubramanian

The growing cultural commodity of celebrity news and its increasing focus on celebrities' families is examined by this project to determine what consequence communications about celebrity pregnancy and parenthood have on readers most likely to identify with the stories – new mothers. While gossip magazines are not meant to provide parenting advice, their editorial focus on parenting may position celebrity parents as role models for audiences. Guided by theories of media effects, this project sought to understand why and how that might happen. Using narrative thematic analysis, two complementary data sets were analyzed: 36 issues sampled from the leading gossip magazines, *People* and *Us Weekly*, during 2007-2009, and five focus groups with recent mothers.

Gossip magazines positively framed celebrity family life, idealizing the experience by avoiding talk of parenting's daily challenges. Resources such as nannies and personal trainers define celebrity parenting by affording celebrities, especially women, the ability to continue work while maintaining the identity of primary caregivers. A gendered act, consumption was intrinsically part of good celebrity

parenting. Expectations for celebrity postpartum weight loss communicated that bigger bodies are a work-in-progress rather than an acceptable new body type. Fathers were visually depicted more often than in conventional parenting media, though these images similarly showed parents performing normative, gendered behaviors.

Participants reported escapism as their main reason for reading gossip magazines and parasocial relationships existed with both liked and disliked celebrities. For liked celebrities, a parasocial dialectical tension emerged defining role models as both special and ordinary. For disliked celebrities, negative frames portrayed their parenting behavior as unacceptable and served as the strongest form of social learning from gossip magazines as readers internalized media criticism. Celebrity role models were selected based on feeling similar, serving as fantasy role models whose parenting lifestyles were simultaneously interpreted as aspirational and unattainable. Participants' social comparisons usually evaluated their own parenting experience as preferred to the demands and media environment faced by celebrities. Situations interpreted as incomparable attributed celebrities' success to external factors rather than internal characteristics. Overall, gossip magazines do provide parenting information that expands and impacts the real experience of mothers.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family Michael, Sidney, Dad, Emily, Brad, Caroline, Lauren, Laurie, Jim, and Tracy, and in memory of my mother.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Celebrity Media Culture and Celebrity Pregnancy

Erving Goffman (1959) argued some family behaviors are meant for public consumption while others are reserved for the privacy and confines of the home; this perspective allows us to think of the family as theater (Fox, 1999). The idea of front stage and back stage behavior implicates the socially regulated nature of private actions. During the late decades of the twentieth century, a shift in media coverage of celebrities trampled the long held boundaries for privacy in celebrities' personal lives, and pushed us into what Cashmore calls "celebrity culture" (2006, p. 155). She writes of today's media atmosphere for celebrities: "Celebs must surrender themselves to life in a kind of virtual Panopticon" (Cashmore, p. 155).

Monitoring celebrity lifestyles has developed into a massive editorial focus for infotainment media outlets. These media outlets – television shows and series, magazines and Internet sites – track celebrity activities and report on them in a news-like fashion, appealing to a broad audience of viewers who have made this genre of media entertainment popular. The success of celebrity news can be seen in the great variety of options available to consumers today including at least six competing celebrity gossip magazines (*People*, *Us Weekly*, *Star*, *InTouch*, *OK!* and *Life & Style*), multiple nightly television shows (*Entertainment Tonight*, *TMZ* and *Access Hollywood* plus others) and numerous websites and blogs.

This dissertation follows the style of *Critical Studies in Media Communication*.

Celebrity journalism pushes celebrities into the public sphere whether or not they are interested in making their private lives public (Cashmore, 2006; Fox 1999). Many celebrities even thrive on publicity to keep their careers afloat. This symbiotic relationship between celebrities and the media (Buhl, 2008), along with today's multimedia, convergence culture, shifts the traditional public relations-type celebrity coverage towards reporting that mimics the 24-hour scrutiny now given to traditional news (Thussu, 2003). One topic receiving significant exposure in these publications is celebrity pregnancy and parenthood. The visible nature of pregnancy and parenthood means that while stars may not provide the details, a changing family structure cannot be hidden from reporters and is often presented as "news" to the greater public.

The media packages and presents stories of celebrity pregnancy to the public by thriving on being the first outlet to access news of a pregnancy announcement, birth or baby's first images at home (Stelter, 2008). These profitable stories have long been a staple of magazines and other media, actively constructing images of Hollywood stars' personal lives (Bailey, 1989). Their frequency intensified, however, during the 1970s and 80s with the growth of celebrity gossip as a genre and the birth of Princess Diana's sons (Douglas & Michaels, 2005). Both *People Magazine* and *Us Weekly* were introduced in 1974 (Douglas & Michaels, 2005), and following these magazines' popularity television shows *Entertainment Tonight*, *Access Hollywood* and most recently *TMZ* were created with a similar focus on entertainment news. Visual representations of pregnancy have also changed with the increase in media coverage; Demi Moore's pregnant nude photos taken by Annie Leibowitz for the cover of a 1991 *Vanity Fair*

influenced the popular inclusion of visual representations of the pregnant body in mainstream media (Tyler, 2001). Now, the “baby bump” watch has become a staple of celebrity media outlets (Sha & Kirkman, 2009, p. 363) Finally, the family unit — an extension of the pregnancy story — provides coverage of the celebrity and his/her life story.

The Evolution of Celebrity Journalism and the Celebrity Mom

The relationship between celebrities and journalists stretches back long into the history of printed media (Marshall, 2006). Marshall argues: “The celebrity embodied that contradiction of being individually elevated and thus relatively unique, but dependent on a new system of ‘democratically inspired’ value that was derived from popular audiences” (2006, p. 316). News of celebrities offered a common ground for audience members – a sense of community in a culture of mass media. Reporting on celebrities during the twentieth century changed from being a mash up of second hand stories to being cooperative pieces in which the celebrity supplies the information (Marshall, 2006). Lowenthal’s 1944 study on biographies in popular magazines cited the rising number of stories about celebrities and the decreasing number of stories on political figures (1944/2004). He argued these story types fed a growing culture of consumption, an early argument for not only consumption, but the consumption of celebrities themselves. Marshall calls this the “commodification of the self” (1997, p. 26). Since then coverage of celebrities has only grown – hitting almost a fever pitch in the last decade.

Interest in celebrities' personal lives led to the formalization of the "celebrity mom profile," as discussed by Douglas and Michaels in their book *The Mommy Myth* (2005). This story type, a popular inclusion in women's magazines, offers in-depth interviews and photo displays covering celebrity family life for magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* or *Ladies Home Journal*. Douglas and Michaels argue coverage of celebrity mothers increased in the early 1980s, coinciding with the Royal Wedding of Princess Diana and Prince Charles and the birth of their sons William and Harry. Douglas and Michaels write: "The celebrity mom profile was probably the most influential media form to sell the new momism, and where its key features were refined, reinforced, and romanticized" (2005, p. 113). These profiles are still a common feature in women's magazines and a dominant editorial focus in celebrity gossip magazines.

Douglas and Michaels mockingly introduce their "rules" for what a celebrity mom profile must entail. They include,

Rule one about the celebrity mom profile: The mom is gorgeous, in clear control of her destiny, and her husband loves her even more once she becomes pregnant...

Rule number two about celebrity moms: They are always radiantly happy when they are with their kids...

Rule number three of the celebrity mom profile: They always look and feel fabulous – better than ever – while pregnant, because they are nutrition experts and eat exactly what they should and have the discipline to exercise regularly...

Rule number four of the celebrity mom profiles: Whatever your schedule, whatever institutional constraints you confront that keep you away from or less involved with your kids, it must be clear that they are your number-one priority, no matter what...

Here is *rule number five* of the profile: There must be some human frailties, some family tragedies, some struggles or foibles that bring the celeb down a peg, makes her seem a bit more like us and allow some of us to identify with her...

Rule number six: The celebrity mom is fun-loving, eager to jump up and play with the kids at a moment's notice...

Rule number seven of the celebrity profile insists that truly good, devoted mothering requires lavishing as many material goods on your kids as possible. (Emphasis added, 2005, p. 126-133)

The authors' tone reflects their view that these rules embody an ideal woman who is a crafted public relations story, rather than a reality. Though these rules were originally discovered from analyzing coverage of celebrity mom profiles in women's magazines, the articles in celebrity-focused magazines such as *People* and *Us Weekly* closely follow them in their reporting.

In Britain and Canada, a similar but slightly more democratic version of the celebrity mom is the "yummy mummy," most often depicted by media in the form of celebrity mothers. Being a yummy mummy does not require celebrity as a definitive concept, but the media clearly identifies celebrity role models (O'Donohoe, 2006). For example, Jermyn's study of Sarah Jessica Parker's media interviews found the media positioned her as both a normal, down to earth mother balancing work and family *and* a fashion icon and celebrity – ultimately allowing her to "have it all" as an ideal yummy mummy (2008, p. 174). Indeed, yummy mummies offer a media tool intended to encourage regular women to aspire to the depictions of motherhood shown in the media of "an attractive, confident, and well-groomed or expectant mother, a woman who

‘manages to glide through pregnancy and motherhood with style and composure she possessed pre-conception’” (O’Donohoe, 2006, paragraph 3).

Researching Celebrity Gossip Magazines

Though few studies have directly addressed contemporary celebrity news outlets, Hermes’ work offers a useful starting point for this project. She identified gossip magazines as a subgenre of women’s magazines and found they had positive effects on readers who felt connected to the stars they read about (1995). She noted: “The pleasure of reading about celebrities is a pleasure both of vicariously enjoying the world of glitter and glamour and of gaining a ‘secret’, inside knowledge that may confer an imaginary sense of power over the rich and powerful” (1995, p. 123-124). Celebrity gossip magazines created a feeling of closeness between the reader and the star that offered personal benefits and satisfaction. Indeed, Hermes’ findings demonstrate the potential for rich future research on this genre – one which offers a modern replacement for the oft-researched women’s genre of soap operas since early media studies (Hermes, 1995; Herzog, 1941/2004; Ang, 1996). Hermes’ findings offer audience examples of several media effects theories being used to frame the current project including social cognitive theory, social comparison theory, and parasocial relationships.

Hermes’ work follows the tradition of audience reception researchers, such as Janice Radway and Ien Ang, who approach their female media audiences with “respect” rather than “concern” (1995, p. 1). Deciphering between these approaches is critical for Hermes, who argues assumptions about female media audiences (as is typical of much critical studies and feminist studies projects) often portray these audiences as either

repressed or highly-influential media targets. Audience research for Hermes then offers a chance to reduce the distance between researcher and subject – offering a humanistic view that accepts pure pleasure can be an important element of media selection and its result is not necessarily oppression. For this research project I, too, hope to engage my participants as audience members with respect rather than concern, remaining open-minded to the many ways that celebrity news may impact their lives.

The growth of the celebrity news genre as a cultural phenomenon in America interested me as a researcher focused on media studies, culture, and gender. The continued and pervasive coverage of celebrity pregnancy and parenthood typical of this genre appeared to be an understudied, yet intriguing, topic of study. Why is celebrity pregnancy such a popular story, and how does its coverage affect “normal” audience members? Scholars Douglas and Michaels’ work *The Mommy Myth* (2005) addresses this subject in a rhetorical analysis of the culture they call “the new momism.” Wolf argues women are pushed towards the demands of “total motherhood” (Wolf, 2007), a standard of perfection often conveyed in the repetitive visual and textual communications characteristic of celebrity journalism. This project seeks to build on works such as these by extending their foci – expanding what we know about the media’s content, connecting that knowledge with the real experiences of women, and adding a cognitive component to our understanding of total motherhood.

Focus of Present Study

My dissertation takes a mixed-method audience reception approach aimed at identifying what consequence communications about celebrity pregnancies and

parenthood have on readers most likely to identify with the stories – new mothers. Past research has offered qualitative summaries of pregnancy coverage in women’s or parenting magazines (Johnston & Swanson, 2003; Schwartz, 1996; Woodward, 1997), a rhetorical analysis of celebrity moms (Douglas & Michaels, 2005), or research on women’s reception of media messages (Radway, 1987; Ang, 1996; Hermes, 2006); this project combines these topics to study the communications present in celebrity magazines (specifically stories about celebrity pregnancy) and their reception by audiences. The research process will consist of a qualitative analysis of pregnancy and parenthood stories in celebrity gossip magazines aimed at developing a solid understanding of their visual and textual communications absent from previous scholarship. Additionally, an audience reception component will be utilized to speak directly to female participants who actively interpret these media messages. Guided by media effects and audience reception studies, a series of focus groups will investigate how celebrity pregnancy stories affect women’s personal experiences including elements of self-efficacy, identification, the existence of role models and self-regulation.

The Gendered Experience of Pregnancy

Pregnancy changes a woman’s understanding of her physical and emotional self. As women go through these changes, their cultural environment will impact this experience. Placing this project within the existing literature on issues surrounding the body, identity, and the media in relationship to pregnancy provides background for understanding this experience. In a culture promoting total motherhood (Wolf, 2007), the gendered nature of pregnancy must be explored.

Pregnancy and the Body

During pregnancy, women experience changes to their body that reframe their identity and view of self (Bailey, 2001). Indeed, the changing body offers the most public aspect of pregnancy during the maternity period. As a gendered act, the physical nature of pregnancy greatly affects women – both from a personal standpoint and from a cultural standpoint. Bailey found that women’s sense of sensuality, shape, and personal space changed during pregnancy (2001). Some found these changes liberating, such as the opportunity to bypass cultural demands for thinness, while others reported increased feelings of uncertainty about the body as it takes on a more “functional” purpose like breast feeding (Bailey, 2001, p. 120).

Women struggle to embrace their maternal body shape while continually feeling society’s demands to control their body. Earle’s research highlights women’s desire to look “pregnant” rather than “fat” during pregnancy, especially during early pregnancy (2003, p. 247). She identified that feeling fat for her participants instigated a cultural “moral culpability” to demonstrate pregnancy rather than weight gain to avoid being judged for overeating or failure to manage their weight (2003, p. 247). This finding implicates the great sensitivity women feel vis-a-vis their bodies in the public domain, even during a period when weight gain is both expected and healthy. Evidence of current representations of pregnant-versus-fat issues are seen in maternity boutique t-shirts that read “with bump, not plump,” “Does this BABY make my BUTT look big?” and “babyfat” (from www.2chix.com and other websites). Dworkin and Wachs found pregnancy fitness magazines framed “pregnancy as shameful for women’s bodies” and

recommended “individual fitness as the feminist solution” while assuming a white, middle class audience (2004, p. 622). The “first shift” of paid labor and “second shift” of unpaid housework and child care required of women as identified by Hochschild and Machung (2003) is extended by Dworkin’s and Wachs’ research. They argue that the language of “getting your body back” after having a baby constitutes a third shift for women¹, adding to the first and second shifts they already must balance (Dworkin & Wachs, 2004, p. 616). Post-pregnancy shape therefore becomes another set of tasks expected of women (rather than a choice), even while promoting feminist ideals. Managing the body not only entails its physical shape, but extends to the decision to and period of breastfeeding (Avishal, 2007). In Freud’s study of new mothers, she found her participants expressed dissatisfaction with their post-baby bodies and weight gain, and felt surprise at how difficult it was to lose the baby weight (2008). The author credits this partially to do with the media’s unrealistic portrayals of celebrities’ post-baby bodies.

For instance, British media’s depiction of the “yummy mummy” offers an icon to which the attractive, style conscious mother can compare; Campbell points to the common media story displaying a yummy mummy star’s post-baby body as a “coming out ritual now customary for postpartum sex symbols for showing they still have it” (cited in O’Donohoe, 2006, paragraph 4). Sexuality and the body are core elements of the yummy mummy in contrast to dowdy impressions of motherhood. In 1984, Young

¹ Note, Hochschild and Machung defined the third shift differently, instead describing the third shift as a period of reparation for frazzled parents recovering from the chaos of the paid labor of work and the unpaid labor of home (2003).

called our culture one that “harshly separates pregnancy from sexuality,” however media representations such as the yummy mummy work to reconnect these ideas, which have historically been intertwined (p. 53). The term “slummy mummy” also emerged in response to yummy mummy media depictions – an act of resistance by those who felt yummy mummies offered unrealistic ideals.

Today’s media culture does not shy away from the pregnant body as in earlier decades. O’Malley argues: “The celebrity bump is second only to the celebrity baby, and has been the must-have fashion accessory for several seasons now” (2006, paragraph 17). Lucille Ball’s 1952 pregnancy set the tone for maternity in Hollywood, as her highly controlled, simultaneous personal and professional pregnancies increased her popularity with fans (Davis & Smith, 1998). Forty years later, Demi Moore’s nude, pregnant image once again changed how American audiences understood cultural acceptance of the pregnant body. This image is credited with transforming pregnancy from being a cloaked activity to a literally uncloaked celebration of the pregnancy body, ushering in a new set of cultural demands for women (Tyler, 2001; O’Malley, 2006). O’Malley notes the vast array of media available to pregnant women frames their experiences with pregnancy by allowing them to “evaluate their own experiences as ‘normal’ or ‘deviant’ in so far as their experiences align with the ideals portrayed” (2006, paragraph 2). One reason for this is that parents today most often look to peer models rather than predecessors for parenting advice and cues (O’Donohoe, 2006). As a cultural shift, the acceptance of the (sexy) pregnant body by the media is demonstrated

by comparing reactions to Demi Moore's 1991 image (Figure 1), and a similar image of Britney Spears that appeared on *Harper's Bazaar* magazine's cover in 2006 (Figure 2).



Figure 1. *Demi Moore on Vanity Fair cover, 1991.*
The 1991 nude image of Demi Moore that created initial cultural discomfort for some audiences and liberated others.



Figure 2. *Britney Spears on Harpers' Bazaar cover, 2006.*
Britney Spears' similar image in 2006 was no longer shocking.

Just fifteen years later, a naked, pregnant celebrity image was not a notable magazine cover; in response to Spears' cover, "the rest of the world barely raised an eyebrow" while Moore's was considered racy enough by some to require in-store placement amongst magazines such as *Playboy* (O'Malley, 2006, paragraph 18).

Pregnancy and Identity

During and after the physical transition to motherhood, issues of identity are an important part of the transformation. Issues surrounding motherhood may disrupt a woman's identity and lifestyle (Earle & Letherby, 2007) as researchers have identified that pregnancy (Freud, 2008; Bailey, 1999), the voluntary decision to not have children (Gillespie, 2003; Campbell, 2003), and unwanted infertility (Olshansky, 1987; Matthews & Matthews, 1986) all influence women's understanding of self. During pregnancy, Bailey's research participants "chose" to self-identify as mothers reporting a negotiation between the old identity and new "mother" identity (1999, p. 339). Indeed, the nine months of pregnancy were described as a "psychological period of readjustment" (Bailey, 1999, p. 340).

Motherhood discourses force women to self-identify as stay-at-home versus working mothers (Eaves, 2008), and as self-sacrificing mothers similar to media depictions of idealized motherhood versus those resisting cultural demands for perfection (Douglas & Michaels, 2005; O'Donohoe, 2006). Though motherhood approaches more likely follow a continuum rather than acting as polar opposites, the media coerces women to choose these hegemonic sides as part of their identity formation. Collett (2005) found women actively manage their impression as a "good

mother”. This was very important for her participants, who reported the presentation of their children as one strategy for maintaining impressions through the selection of nicer clothes when going out in public, along with successful performances of good behavior by their children. Regarding the mother identity, Collett writes: “The woman who believes that she successfully manages her children’s appearances gains confidence in her abilities and affirms her most salient identity” (p. 343). Collett argues that the women’s actions defined more than their identity as “good mothers” but also impacted their class identity (p. 343). Indeed, socioeconomic background offers a critical space for investigating motherhood. Media depictions of motherhood often assume a white, middle-to-upper class mother able to participate in consumption activities (O’Donohoe, 2006; Jermyn, 2006).

Johnston and Swanson (2006) found that mothers actively constructed what constitutes a “good mother” identity based on a combination of their mothering ideologies and work status. Stay-at-home, part-time working, and full-time working mothers each defined what good parenting meant to fit with their particular situation – allowing them to justify decisions about work and childcare. For mothers who continue in the work force post-baby, professional identity was particularly challenged by pregnancy – an identity felt to be a reflection of the self (Bailey, 1999). Haynes’ study of accountants transitioning to motherhood found women struggled with the reality of being working mothers as compared to their personal expectations for identifying as both good mothers and successful professionals (2004; see also Millward, 2006). Haynes labeled her participants’ struggle to negotiate mother and work identities as

“fragmenting” (2004, p. 31) while Bailey called it a “refracted self” (1999). Both descriptors point to the fact that impending motherhood is one of many identities a woman takes on and it can be challenging to integrate it into a firmly established personal identity. This is particularly true for type-A women compelled to demand perfection (O’Donohoe, 2006).

Garey’s study of female night-shift nurses found participants selected patterns of work that allowed them to relate and identify with stay-at-home moms capable of daytime activity with their children. Garey summarizes the findings of her participants’ ideas of motherhood:

Being at home during the day is related to concepts of both what a mother *does* and what a mother *is*, to both *doing* and *being*. To be at home during the day is to emulate non-employed mothers, who are sometimes referred to as “full-time mothers.” I borrow the term “full-time mothers” to point out that this term, used in popular discourse as synonymous with “non-employed mothers,” captures the idea that to be employed lessens the fullness or completeness of one’s mothering. It is in response to this concept that the night-shift workers are constructing a “working mother” who is a “full-time mother” because she does what “full-time” (non-employed) mothers do: she is at home during the day. Even if her husband and children are not at home, the woman *of* the house is the woman *in* the house. (1995, p. 342, emphasis in original)

For these women, identifying as a good mother is directly linked to management of workforce identity. Regardless of how a mother determines what being a “good mother” entails, Johnston and Swanson found that working and staying home both present limitations for parents (2006).

Pregnancy and Consumption

Douglas and Michaels refer to the “standards of perfection” (2005, p. 3) expected of mothers today, challenging media messages that constantly reinforce an ideal for

motherhood requiring mothers look perfect, have a demanding career, a perfect house and well behaved, loving children. Wolf argues that “ethics of total motherhood” (2007, p. 615) have even stretched to cover fetal rights – asking mothers to bypass their own desires while pregnant to constantly prioritize the fetus’ needs. These depictions of motherhood frame identity as women transition to motherhood and are furthered by the existence of celebrity models selected by the media to represent both good and bad mother identities.

One way the media and today’s culture suggest mothers can actively manage their identities as good mothers is through consumption. Schwartz writes: “Consumer capitalism transformed the family from a unit of production into a unit of consumption” (1996, p. 76). The task of shopping for the household remains a mother’s traditional responsibility, and mothers find pleasure in buying things for their children, affirming their identity as a “good mom” (Coffey, Siegel & Livingston, 2006, p. 6). Additionally, mothers are encouraged to buy for themselves during pregnancy and beyond to manage their bodies and appearance (O’Donohoe, 2006). Certainly, the expectation of a new baby brings with it an actual *need* for many baby goods most expectant parents do not already own. The centrality of consumption during pregnancy is highlighted by bestselling books such as *Baby Bargains* and *Best Baby Products* which “help” new parents navigate the consumption process by offering advice on the best and safest products available. Indeed, consuming on behalf of a child is an activity many women welcome – beginning when an ultrasound reveals their child’s sex (Taylor, 2000).

Identifying their unborn child's sex signals Western women to freely engage in consumption of baby goods, which are often gender-coded in pink and blue.

The baby shower is a ritualized stage of pregnancy originally meant to pass knowledge of parenting from generation to generation, but now representing the close relationship of consumption practices and parenthood (Taylor, 2000). The act of "showering" pregnant women with gifts is seen as an important stage in the rituals of pre-birth parenthood preparation and socialization. Thomsen and Sorenson note: "Consumption activities have come to replace culturally prescribed rituals, the so-called rites of passage, which support the individual during her transition" (2006, paragraph 6). Their research on stroller advertising emphasized the impact this purchase had on new parents' identity construction as a publicly visible good used in the care of their children. Engaging in consumption practices, such as purchasing items during pregnancy, allows women (and men) to fantasize about their future identities as parents.

The Gendered Experience of Parenthood

Gender stereotypes about what constitutes appropriate behavior for women and men develop from various influences including the media. Heavy media users often reflect the fact that media portrayals of gender roles are quite traditional – with men operating in the public sphere of work and society and women operating in the private sphere of home life (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 687). "Gender labeling gives salience not only to sorting people on the basis of gender but also aggregates the features and activities that characterize each gender," argue Bussey and Bandura (p. 705).

Gender conduct is learned from peers who sanction what is appropriate (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 712). While initial gender roles may be learned in the early years of childhood, the reinforcement of or alterations to those roles occurs continually through interdependent social systems including personal acquaintances, legal structures, and the media (Bussey & Bandura). Parenthood is not experienced until the teenage or adult years and understanding one's gender role may be influenced greatly while preparing for and experiencing pregnancy. At that point, the topic now carries a new relevance, making messages about pregnancy and parenthood more relevant for audience members.

Gender and Family Roles

The family unit offers a mini-culture in which members learn about and recreate gender roles (Goffman, 1997). West and Zimmerman argue that every time we interact we are “doing” gender, a process that essentially works to create difference between the sexes (1987, p. 126). Children observe their parents performing gender in different ways and experience different treatment and expectations than their opposite gender siblings (Goffman; Chodorow, 2001). These experiences are incorporated into children's frameworks of understanding about the world. This early family model socializes boys and girls into not only “appropriate” gender roles, but also parenting behaviors. Boys become fathers and girls become mothers.

Men *re-experience* fatherhood from a different perspective – incorporating their own experiences as sons into their roles as fathers, and reproducing themselves through sons (Townsend, 1998, p. 363). Similarly, mothering is also reproduced within the

family. Mothering is more than having a child – it is nurturing and caring for that child as he/she develops. Chodorow writes: “Women’s mothering is central to the sexual division of labor” (1998, p. 271). Mothering as a female task is naturalized and taken for granted by some researchers who accept biological and bioevolutionary explanations for a gendered division of parenting (Chodorow, p. 273). Chodorow negates these explanations, demonstrating that both men and women are capable of caretaking and nurturance. Instead, men choose not to mother, a task which is low status and unpaid as compared to work in the public sphere. This choice not to mother reinforces the superiority of men over women in the social world (Chodorow, p.282). Alternately, a social structural approach finds the same conclusion, arguing that the unpaid labor of house work and child care is relegated to women as a result of a dominating capitalist society which defines these tasks as lacking a market exchange value, and thus places women in a position of dependency on men (Gerson, 1986). This view does not place women in a position of choice, but as contained in a larger system defining gender roles.

Historically, there have been several shifts in the dominant images and expectations of parenthood in the United States dictating mothers’ and fathers’ levels of involvement. During the colonial period, the father was seen as the “moral pedagogue” responsible for all teaching and parenting in the household (Pleck, 1998, p. 352). This father was hands-on and involved in the daily life of his children. One reason this was possible was that during this period, work usually was done in the home and fathers were present during the day. Mothers during this period enjoyed participation in family work – a role that allowed them a position of relative social equality. However, starting

in the early nineteenth century, a shift in ideology framing women as the pure, unselfish, and nurturing gender transferred parenting responsibilities to the mother (Pleck, p. 353). This was coupled with structural changes resulting from industrialization that removed fathers from the home to participate in paid work. Once work transferred outside the home, away from family businesses such as farming, women were fully relegated to the domestic sphere (Branson, 2001).

Motherhood became married women's dominant identity as paid labor was the exclusive domain of men; women's participation in the marketplace was limited to the role of consumer (Branson, 2001). Fathers became seen as distant breadwinners and remained the final authority in the home, but were distanced from the day-to-day decisions and caretaking of children (Pleck, 1998, p. 355). Even when women's participation in the work force grew during the 1900s, women maintained the bulk of unpaid household tasks (Keene & Quadagno, 2004).

Today, we still see the father as breadwinner to be the most commonly practiced form of fatherhood, though a final, idealized father type has been introduced: the new father (Pleck, 1998, p. 358). This father participates in daily care from infancy on and is involved with both daughters and sons. Believed to be a response to women's increased participation in the work force resulting from the women's movement mid-20th century (Pleck), this father type is often more imagined than real creating a gap between the *culture* and *conduct* of fatherhood (LaRossa, 1998). That culture may promote more active fathering roles does not match with the actual practices taking place – the conduct of fathers (LaRossa, p. 451).

As women entered the work force, motherhood remained central to women's cultural identity; Woodward argues that "motherhood is part of the composition of this successful new woman" (1997, p. 263). Until the 1970s, marriage status and class were the greatest indicators of a women's likelihood to hold a job outside the home (Costa, 2000). During the last decades of the 20th century, however, single and married women of all classes were much more likely to work than in previous periods (Costa, 2000). The "working mother" was introduced in 1980s magazine articles and took motherhood from the private arena to the privatized arena, where mothers now played an active role in the marketplace (Woodward, 1997, p. 265). In her review of British women's magazines, Woodward found two versions of motherhood that were prominent in their stories: the "working mother" that emerged from second wave feminism and the "caring mother" that offers the more traditional positioning for mothers. These two versions of motherhood are often pitted against each other in the frequent media depictions of the "mommy wars" (Douglas & Michaels, 2005). The 1990s updated media depictions of motherhood with the "independent mother," a figure which combines career success and care work in a way that "challenges the simple binaries of good and bad" (Woodward, 2003, p. 28).

Gender and Work

In terms of work and responsibility, family work remains gendered even though women may now serve as both mother and provider or co-provider. Thompson and Walker (1989) found that within families, men "help" women with housework and childcare while women "help" men as providers (even if women earn more overall).

Women are not necessarily happy with this agreement, but consider even a little “help” from men to be substantial. This is contrasted by the fact that women’s financial contribution to provision was viewed as minimal, regardless of the actual amount (Thompson & Walker).

Milkie and Peltola found that employed men and women perceive their work-life balance similarly – both felt they were “somewhat” successful at achieving it (1999, p. 483). Though similar levels of satisfaction were reported by men and women, the struggle for work-family balance is *experienced* differently by men and women (Keene & Quadagno, 2004). Women continue to shoulder the bulk of domestic work, while men hold more demanding jobs. Family concerns are more likely to affect women’s work output as compared to men (Keene & Quadagno, p. 19).

One influence impacting issues of balance is the role reversal home and work take for parents. Hochschild (1997) documented the feeling that home is work and work is home for parents – meaning that work is the place parents go to relax and get away. The tasks of home become so time-consuming that predictability and calmness experienced at work means parents choose not to use family-friendly work policies even when these policies are offered. Of one couple Hochschild interviewed, she found: “The Averys did not feel their actual home was a haven or that work was a heartless world” (p. 40). The world of work, especially as a world women participate in, has significant impacts on home life. Hochschild writes:

The more women and men do what they do in exchange for money and the more their work in the public realm is valued or honored, the more, almost by definition, private life is devalued and its boundaries shrink. (p. 198)

Balance between home and work life as documented by Hochschild greatly contradicts the idealized celebrity mom images described by Douglas and Michaels (2005).

Wall and Arnold analyzed a newspaper advice column targeting fathers and found that our cultural expectations for fathers were in line with the day-to-day reality in which mothers serve as the primary caregivers (2007). The fathers in the articles studied by Wall and Arnold were positioned as secondary or part-time caregivers, behind the mother (see also Sunderland, 2006). Instead, their work identity was positioned as their primary identity and child care, while appreciated, was not expected of them.

Similarly, Dworkin and Wachs analyzed *Shape Fit Pregnancy Magazine* and found that fathers were rarely mentioned in the magazine's articles, but were assumed to be part of the newly formed family (2004). They noted that "there were no articles that include creative fathering as a difficult juggle between work, family and fitness," yet this juggle was central to most of the magazine's articles targeting women readers (Dworkin & Wachs, p. 621). These works demonstrate the media's portrayal of parenting as the sole responsibility of the mother, rather than a shared responsibility of mother and father. Media messages such as these reproduce a gendered division of labor within society.

Organization and Scope of the Dissertation Project

Understanding women's experience identifying and transitioning to the role of mother offers an important area of study that has been addressed by many researchers (Collett, 2005; Haynes, 2004; Woodward, 1997). A study of media communications about celebrity pregnancy and parenthood adds to this body of knowledge by expanding its topical focus to celebrity journalism and seeking to gain explanation through the use

of media reception theories. This research will focus on the portrayals of celebrity pregnancy and parenthood in celebrity gossip magazines, analyzing these media communications with an emphasis on the gendered nature of pregnancy. The goals of this research project are to a) observe the messages communicated to audiences by celebrity gossip magazines and develop a baseline understanding of these types of communications, and b) examine whether and how these communications influence the experience of new motherhood for their audiences based on the media effects theories discussed in the next chapter.

This first chapter intended to outline the celebrity news genre, celebrity pregnancy as an editorial focus, the rationale for study, and general dissertation project. A literature review of issues surrounding gender, celebrity, pregnancy, and parenthood outlines both the cultural environment and past scholarship. In summary, the topic of celebrity parenthood offers an opportunity to better understand women's experiences with motherhood through inquiry into celebrity media journalism and audience reception.

The second chapter introduces the theoretical concepts which connect the topic of celebrity parenthood with audience reception of media messages. Discussion of media effects theories summarizes the major theoretical concepts being used to define the scope and goals of the project. Research questions are specifically outlined to guide the project.

The third chapter introduces the methodologies I have selected for this project. To learn how celebrity pregnancy and parenthood stories affect audience members,

research will be guided by several media effects theories including framing, social cognitive theory, social comparison theory, and parasocial relationships. A narrative thematic analysis will allow me to identify broad themes across the data sample, offering the first stage of study. Qualitative focus group discussions will then utilize the findings from the textual analysis and review of literature to guide the conversation while testing the principles of my selected media effects theories. This chapter will address how these methods will be used to examine my guiding research questions as outlined in Chapter II.

The fourth chapter will report the results from my qualitative analysis of two media outlets: *People* and *Us Weekly* magazines. Examining the content of these media will identify and confirm the most common messages received by audiences while demonstrating the consistency of celebrity narratives across the genre.

Discussed in the fifth chapter will be the process and results of conducting focus group research. In particular, these group discussions will be analyzed for their demonstration of media effects through audience reception. The comments of my female participants will be analyzed using qualitative methods to determine whether media effects theories can explain any impact felt by new mothers resulting from media portrayals of pregnancy.

Finally, my sixth chapter will conclude with a summary of my research process and its implications for the project's guiding research questions outlined in Chapter II. Research outcomes discussed in Chapter III will be considered and directions for future research will be addressed. Findings related to media effects, gender, and parenthood will be summarized.

CHAPTER II

PREGNANCY, CELEBRITY, AND THE MEDIA

Overview

Much media effects research has been done on traditional news and entertainment programming, yet few studies in this field have focused on celebrity journalism. This project connects media effects theories and audience reception approaches with an understudied genre of media messages – celebrity news. Several theories are useful for this study including framing, social cognitive theory, social comparison, parasocial relationships, and identification. This chapter discusses the general principles characterizing each of these theories, selected for their applicability in understanding audiences as they receive and interpret media messages with a particular consideration for the genre under study. Of her approach to the study of celebrity gossip magazines, Hermes argues research must go beyond content analysis by studying audience reception in order to fully understand the process of meaning-making for readers (1995). To begin, first I examine the theoretical frameworks that influence my methodological approach.

Framing

Media messages rely on frames to communicate with audiences. McCombs and Reynolds (2002, p. 10-12) define framing as second-level effect agenda setting – concerned with not just what people think about (first-level agenda setting), but also how they think about it (framing). Cashmore notes: “Celebrity culture is prismatic: it enables us to see something but its refractive surfaces ensure that what we see depends on the

angle from which we look” (2006, p. 159). Examining celebrity media coverage allows us to get at the frames, or tools, used to shape how readers think about celebrity pregnancy and parenthood. This is particularly important for media outlets such as *People* or *Us Weekly* which are not meant to offer traditional parenting advice (as compared to *Parents Magazine* for example), but focus instead on the day-to-day activities of celebrities, including during pregnancy. Though pregnancy is presented as news, it is not offered in an informational manner, but as entertainment (Douglas & Michaels, 2005). Therefore, celebrity infotainment frames most likely focus on different information about pregnancy than pregnancy guides.

In their research, Gamson and Modigliani (1987) provide a definition for framing. They write, “A frame is a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them,” (Gamson & Modigliani, p. 376). Additionally, Entman (1993) takes this definition further, noting that framing involves selecting elements of a story to highlight while leaving out other elements – essentially choosing the parts of the story you want to include to create the story you want to tell. By framing a story, media producers influence the salient parts of the narrative and make a moral evaluation, treatment recommendation, problem definition, or causal interpretation (Entman). The frames selected by media outlets impact how audiences interpret news – an important cognitive element of audience reception.

Based on the literature review and a pilot study related to this project (briefly discussed in Chapter III), several key frames were expected. It seemed probable that the

“rules” outlined by Douglas and Michaels (2005) would be followed by reporters presenting celebrity motherhood. Mothers will be shown as positive, fulfilled by parenthood, and always putting their children before their careers. Additionally, several story types identified in the pilot study were expected, offering a master narrative for the celebrity pregnancy experience. These stories begin with a “baby bump watch” or celebrity pregnancy announcement, take the reader through baby showers, learning the baby’s gender, the changing celebrity body, and culminate in the birth announcement.

Through the pregnancy period, stories such as these allow readers to keep up with celebrity pregnancies while simultaneously identifying any controversy. Turner describes the nature of celebrity journalism: “The tabloids deal with the celebrity industries through a see-sawing pattern of scandalous exposures and negotiated exclusives – at one point threatening the professional survival of the celebrities they expose, and at another point contracting to provide them with unparalleled personal visibility” (2006, p. 491). Gossip magazines demand celebrities’ “authenticity” through consistent presentation of their professional and personal selves as a critical element for audiences (Hinerman, 2006, p. 457). Demonstrating inconsistency in either their public or private lives creates a gap for celebrities that tabloids investigate as “guarantor[s] of public morality” (Hinerman, p. 458).

Pregnancies may result in monitoring of the state of the relationship, especially for unmarried couples. A notable example includes actress Bridget Moynihan and professional football player Tom Brady. Their breakup came before the pregnancy was confirmed to the media, and Brady quickly began a subsequent relationship with model

Gisele Bundchen, causing great discussion and speculation by the celebrity tabloids. Additionally, having children out of wedlock (when no drama exists between the couple) is normalized for audiences when the parents are of a culturally accepted age. Therefore, older actors and actresses who adopt or have children alone are not covered critically, while 16-year-old Jamie Lynn Spears' pregnancy resulted in judgments of her morality and preparedness. Frames such as these were expected and explored.

Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory claims that observational learning occurs in everyday experiences – people learn vicariously by watching the world around them (Bandura, 2002). This learning can occur in face-to-face situations or through mediated communications. Bandura notes: “A vast amount of information about human values, styles of thinking, and behavior patterns is gained from the extensive modeling in the symbolic environment of the mass media” (p. 126). Celebrity models, in particular, may be identified as exemplars and social leaders depending on their reputation. The application of celebrity models as social influencers is best seen in the great proliferation of celebrity spokespersons advertising a wide variety of products (Brown & Fraser, 2004, p. 100). Advertisers hire celebrities to promote their products based on their ability to connect with audiences, a highly recognizable image, and the likelihood that audiences will identify with them.

Douglas and Michaels write of the period that coverage of celebrity mom profiles emerged: “This was the era of the role model – we were supposed to have role models and be role models. But since many women didn't have such mentors in real life, they

looked to the media. Celebrity moms were women who *had* combined demanding careers with motherhood” (2005, p. 118, emphasis in original). Because celebrity journalism provides “real life” examples of mothers who are managing their careers, family lives and bodies, they offer audiences a model of parenting that may increase their self-efficacy, or feeling that they too can attain all they want to accomplish. Self-efficacy is the feeling that one is capable of repeating the modeled behavior and a central element of social cognitive theory. When an individual feels similar to the model, self-efficacy may be increased – especially when the model is rewarded for behavior. Considering that over half of *Us Weekly* and *People’s* readers are parents themselves (“Index - Us Weekly”, 2009; “Demographics – People”, 2008), stories about celebrity parents should have great salience with audiences who feel they have something in common with the celebrity (Bandura, 2002, p. 129).

Social cognitive theory stipulates that individuals self-regulate to decide whether the modeled behavior should be enacted. Individuals observe others’ responses to a behavior and determine the outcome of the behavior based on punishment or reward (Bandura, 2002). When behaviors are rewarded, individuals will have greater motivation to enact them whereas negative responses will inhibit future similar behavior. This type of learning allows individuals to avoid personal trial-and-error and greatly speeds the process of learning. Yet it also impacts our understanding of the world and social norms. For example, Sha and Kirkman (2009) found that Australian women’s magazines judged the maternity wear worn by celebrities, finding mothers-to-be were expected to dress modestly as part of a greater morality. These communications about

appropriate clothing communicate to readers that the only appropriate, or rewarded, style of dress is modest clothing and more sexualized attire will receive negative social sanctions. As a result, readers may alter their own maternity clothing styles to avoid first-hand the negative criticism received by celebrities.

When activities are questionable, euphemistic labeling as part of social cognitive theory can transform these activities and confer status (Bandura, 2002, p. 133). The terms “Hollywood Mom” or “Celebrity Mom” used widely in the media take on this function – relabeling an activity that ages a celebrity and distorts her body into a natural act glamorized by the very nature of being a celebrity. Because mainstream acting and modeling jobs are intricately linked with a person’s external appearance, the distortion of the body through pregnancy temporarily halts the ability to work and potentially changes the overall body shape. These effects in another context might be seen as negative impacts on the very roles that make celebrities famous in the first place. “Celebrity mom profiles are carefully packaged fantasies, but they ask readers to approach them as if they were real,” argue Douglas and Michaels (2005, p. 123). Celebrating pregnancy allows magazines to avoid their usual stance on weight and appearance and instead re-story the act to celebrate femininity (Sha & Kirkman, 2009).

Social Comparison Theory

Related to social cognitive theory, social comparison theory further explains the relationships we have with role models. In particular, with social cognitive theory people evaluate role models' behaviors; with social comparison, people evaluate themselves in relationship to others, including role models. The desire to compare with others is a natural element of self-evaluation (Festinger, 1954). As audience members read stories about celebrities' changing pregnant bodies, the "thin ideal" of most media outlets (Dittmar & Howard, 2004) is replaced by a new body to which woman can compare. Indeed, images of celebrity pregnancy may even offer an updated version of the thin ideal by promoting the celebrity's new body image (in the form of a thin pregnancy). Earle contends the pregnant Demi Moore magazine cover, rather than being liberating, might instead offer a standard of perfection most women are incapable of during pregnancy (2003).

Social comparison often involves comparisons with others considered similar in terms of ability (Festinger, 1954), but also includes upward and downward comparisons. Upward comparisons occur with models one views as socially superior; research on women's comparison with models in the media often result in increased personal distress and dissatisfaction with body image following an upward comparison (Dittmar & Howard, 2003; Bessenoff & Del Priore, 2007). Conversely, downward comparisons often result in improved feelings about one's ability (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Individuals are more likely to make upward comparisons than downward comparisons, particularly when motivated to improve performance (Buunk & Gibbons).

Alicke notes: “Favorable upward comparisons are potentially the most ego-enhancing of all social comparisons. Nothing is more satisfying to athletes, for example, than to defeat top performers in their field” (2000, p. 275). An upward social comparison with a role model that *does* result in a positive evaluation will leave individuals feeling better about themselves and more confident in their own abilities, particularly because this positive evaluation defies expectations. Marshall writes: “Celebrity has a metaphor for value in modern society” (1997, p. 7); his argument intrinsically defines celebrities as offering upward comparisons. Tiggemann, Polivy, and Hargreaves found that female magazine readers instructed to fantasize about the thin-ideal models, rather than compare with them, were more likely to have a positive increase in mood (2009). This finding indicates that the approach taken by the reader impacts their response to content.

Parasocial Relationships, Identification, and Fandom

Parasocial relationships emerge when audience members begin to feel that they have a real relationship with a media character, usually a fictional persona though relationships also can occur directly with a celebrity (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Related to theories of uses and gratifications, audience members develop parasocial relationships with people they could see themselves being friends with, find attractive and evaluate to be similar to themselves in relation to attitudes and behavior (Giles, 2002; Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006). These relationships vary in intensity and can be viewed along a spectrum (Klimmt et al.). Though parasocial relationships may feel like real relationships to audience members, Giles points out:

Despite the noted parallels between social and parasocial interaction, the status of parasocial relationships as *relationships* is doubtful if using long-established definitions of relationships, such as Hinde (1979), who argued that “a relationship only exists when the probable course of future interactions between the participants differs from that between strangers” (p. 16). In a parasocial relationship, the media user is a “stranger” throughout. (2002, p. 284, emphasis in original)

Giles does not believe that parasocial relationships necessarily indicate a psychopathological state, and that instead, they can represent normal social interaction (2002). Indeed imaginative interaction is used by people as they plan future, traditional interpersonal interactions and parasocial relationships have existed across cultures and time (Giles, 2002).

Media outlets promote the inclusion of popular celebrities likely to attract audiences. Magazine cover stories act as advertisements, meant to entice readers into buying not only the magazine, but its advertised products within (McCracken, 1993, p. 14; Winship, 1987/2008). Klimmt et al. write: “People who select a specific media offering because of the expected appearance of a persona, anticipate rewarding experiences that build on parasocial interaction with that person” (2006, p. 303). As a result, strong parasocial relationships are most likely to develop with obtrusive celebrities – those who are frequently mentioned in the media (Klimmt et al.).

Identification is similar to parasocial relationships and may result from them (Brown & Fraser, 2004). Identification goes beyond feeling as if one has a relationship with a celebrity to the desire to *actually* be like or be the celebrity. “In the identification process, the individual actually believes in the values, beliefs and behaviors that he or she adopts from another person,” write Brown and Fraser (p. 103). They argue that

identification is a much stronger media effect as compared to parasocial relationships – changing an audience member’s actual appearance, beliefs, or other attributes to be more like a media model. Parasocial relationships result from media exposure and a determination by the audience that a media persona is *liked*; identification extends beyond simple like-dislike affinities in a value-based framework focused on emulating a media model (Brown & Fraser).

Audience members who engage in either parasocial relationships or identification can be recognized as fans. Being a fan offers a way for audience members to be part of the star system as fans “are defined as a *response* to the star system” (Jenson, 1992, p. 10). Tulloch and Jenkins argue that fandom is characterized by “consumption and spectatorship rather than production or participation,” placing the fan in a passive, observational role (1995, p.4). Fandom requires an emotional investment, as Sandvoss (2005) and others have noted (Brown & Fraser, 2004; Hermes, 1999), often developing around cultural products that might fall under a category of low culture such as soap operas, science fiction, and romance novels (Fiske, 1992). Coppa’s brief history of fandom highlights several characteristics of fan communities including the existence of publications that bring a group together and make them aware that similar fans exist, the engagement by fans in “critical discussion” and “creative responses” to the media outlet, and participation in online forums that discuss fan content (2006, p. 45). Fandom can bring people together in friendship united by a common interest (Hermes).

Audience Reception Studies

Each of the media theories discussed – framing, social cognitive theory, social comparison theory, parasocial relationships and identification – supposes an active audience working to make sense of media texts. Schroeder, Drotner, Kline, and Murray note: “It is a basic tenet of reception research that meaning is never just transferred from the media to their audiences” (2003, p. 122). Audience reception research descends from cultural studies, a discipline which emerged with seminal pieces such as Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding,” arguing audiences engage in a process of “decoding” media messages to make sense of them (1973/1980). Since then, audience reception has shifted to ethnographic approaches that involve in-depth interviews of audiences to “look at reception from the audience’s end of the chain” (Alasuutari, 1999, p. 5). Audience reception studies are removed from the quantitative causal determinations strict media effects studies employ and instead assume a polysemic media text whose study allows a researcher engagement with the “production of meaning in everyday life” (Moore, 1993, p.3; Schroeder et al., 2003). Alasuutari contends the future of audience reception takes audience ethnography further: “A study may start out from such a research design, but the big picture one wants to shed light on, or the big picture to pursue, is the cultural place of the media in the contemporary world” (p. 7). The current study strived to achieve this goal by considering pregnancy as a construct impacted by media culture.

Ang’s research on audience responses to the television show *Dallas* demonstrated women related to characters on the show that were not necessarily the nicest or most likeable – surprising results that differed from her expectations (1996).

This points to an important element of audience reception studies as outlined by Schroeder et al.: that meaning is a “joint product of text and reader,” (2003, p. 124). While textual analysis can offer an expert reading of a text, speaking with audience members allows researchers to access the cultural codes ascribed to a text during interpretation (Schroeder et al., 2003). Ang writes: “Studying media audiences is not interesting or meaningful in its own right, but becomes so only when it points towards a broader critical understanding of the peculiarities of contemporary culture” (1996, p.4). Audience interpretations offer perspective on culture and can be understood by pairing media effects theories with audience reception approaches.

Research Questions

The selection of theories to frame this research project was done with the text in mind – celebrity gossip magazines. Based on the review of media effects theories, several research questions were developed to guide this project.

Initial questions guiding textual analysis include:

RQ1: How is pregnancy/parenthood framed by celebrity gossip magazines?

RQ2: What elements of celebrity pregnancy/parenthood are most salient in celebrity gossip magazines?

RQ3: How is the relationship between pregnancy and the body portrayed in celebrity gossip magazines?

RQ4: How is the relationship between pregnancy and consumption portrayed in celebrity gossip magazines?

RQ5: How does the nature of coverage change as a celebrity transitions from being a new parent to a parent of older children?

Additionally, data collection using focus groups will address five additional research questions:

RQ6: What purpose do audience members report for engaging with celebrity gossip magazines?

RQ7: How do audience members interpret messages about celebrity pregnancy?

RQ8: What roles do identification and fandom play in celebrity modeling?

RQ9: How do audience members engage in social comparison with celebrities?

RQ10: How do celebrities act as role models and how do audience members alter their own behavior in response to celebrity models?

In the next chapter, I will discuss the methodologies selected to address these questions, the participant population and expectations for the research process.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Overview

This chapter introduces the two methodological approaches selected for the current study on celebrity gossip magazines, pregnancy/parenthood, and audience reception. First, the textual and visual components of two celebrity weekly magazines were thematically analyzed. A pilot study of these magazines' content is briefly summarized as preliminary data informing the current project. Next, I talk about the decision to gather data through focus groups. The rationale for choosing this method and its benefits are discussed as well as my goals and basic outline for data collection.

Researcher's Positionality

As an avid reader of *People* and *Us Weekly* for years leading up to the start of my dissertation, this project was at least partially a result of my own reactions and thoughts about the magazines' content. Reading these publications offered me an escape each week as I spent an hour or two keeping up with my favorite celebrities. But I began to notice something else – a social component to this knowledge. Having up-to-date celebrity gossip offered an easy jumping off point for conversation with friends and strangers, similar to how men talk about sports. I started listening to the ways people were discussing celebrities and soon realized that as a media researcher, something existed in these conversations to be studied. Feasey's work formalizes these thoughts as she found female audience members used celebrity gossip as a safe topic of conversation in social encounters and a way to "encourage women's talk" (2008, p. 691-692).

Expanding Feasey's work, one of the key areas I noticed being discussed by celebrity gossip fans was celebrity parents. My position as a researcher interested in this topic began simply as one who counted herself a fan of celebrity gossip. However, as I conducted this research I simultaneously experienced pregnancy myself. This changed and deepened my approach to the topic as my position shifted from that of an outside observer to one entrenched in the culture of new parenthood. Feminist standpoint theory would argue this increases the validity of my research process as an "embodied subjectivity," claiming that to gain knowledge of women's experience one must also be a woman (Wolf, 1996, p. 13). While this project is not autoethnographic in nature, certainly my thoughts during this process influenced the direction of the research particularly when considering textual analysis and media effects. With the arrival of my first child in January 2010, I found myself positioned to think as my participants.

Similar to Gamson's work on and affinity for daytime talk shows, my personal experience with the texts under study offered a starting point for academic research (2003). My identity as both a feminist researcher *and* new mother appeared to benefit the research process by working to reduce power differences between myself and participants while increasing commonality (Wolf, 1996). I presented myself as a fellow new mother, yet my role in the focus groups remained as moderator. Wolf notes that many feminist researchers have "played upon their race, their class position, and/or their status as women when it was useful" (p. 9). In particular, Wolf argues immersion in a culture offers the strategic viewpoint from within and "may position the researcher in a way that differs from a more distant participant-observer, but it does not basically alter

the researcher's positionality" (p. 10). Though my position certainly influenced my preparations, this project was not about me. Riessman writes, "Interviewing necessitates following participants down *their* trails" (2008, p. 24, emphasis in original). It was my participants' stories and "trails" that constituted my research.

Narrative Thematic and Visual Analysis

Narrative analysis is a family of methods which focus on texts that come in the form of stories (Riessman, 2008). Because of the dramatic nature of gossip, and therefore celebrity gossip magazines, the selection of an analytical method emphasizing narratives fits well with the content under examination. Gossip is told and retold within the pages of these magazines in a story form, and researchers have noted the social element of celebrity stories, such as Hermes' reference to both real and imagined communities that resulted from their reading (1995). Narrative analysis is a qualitative method that privileges the individual, and analyzes the story as a whole, rather than interpreting only shorter excerpts. As a qualitative method, narrative analysis allows us to develop a deeper, local knowledge of the subject (Riessman, 2008). Additionally, by keeping the story intact, it provides understanding not just of the events of the story but its outcomes – a particularly relevant task for this project due to its theoretical grounding in media effects research. By looking at the story as a whole, researchers can understand more about the cultural messages within stories and their impact on audiences. The narratives of celebrity pregnancy and parenthood within *People* and *Us Weekly* become data for this project, and thematic analysis allowed me to understand what elements of

the stories were emphasized, avoided, and what purpose these messages serve for magazines and readers (Riessman, 2008).

As a method of study, narrative is very similar to traditional qualitative thematic analysis, with the major difference being the unit of study. Aronson (1994) describes the pragmatics of thematic analysis, noting the method “focuses on identifiable themes and patterns of living and/or behavior.” The initial stage of research determines and collects an appropriate data set; a two step process for this project including assembling a sample of media texts and conducting focus group interviews. This mixed method approach was selected for its reflexive nature, each providing the researcher context about the other during the process of analysis. The data sets were considered separately, but used the same analytical technique.

Once collected, the data is coded, organized and assembled into like groups pointing to recurring themes and categories (Aronson, 1994). I continued to work with the data, resorting and identifying sub-themes until a cohesive analysis materialized. Predetermined codes can be and were used as a starting point for analysis, but I continued to critically examine them during the process; new codes emerged and were clearly defined as directed by Fereday & Muir-Cochrane (2006). Extracting short stories from the larger data set, grouping them into themes, and further analyzing questions of interest may be a useful tool for refining thematic codes (Riessman, 2008). Questions I asked included: Why does this topic reappear? What is the storyteller's purpose in sharing it? What does it establish for the storyteller? Once themes have been identified

and an argument for the analysis made, previous scholarship should be used to further demonstrate the conclusions of the researcher (Aronson, 1994).

For the visual images within the sample of magazine articles, a related methodological approach was taken. Narrative visual analysis is based on Gillian Rose's work and studies narratives through images that tell a story, or images that create a story (Riessman, 2008). There are three main sites of production that Rose believes should be studied and add to our understanding of the created narrative (Riessman, 2008). The first is the production of the image. The researcher should learn who created the image and why. What was its goal? What was the intention behind deciding how to create the image? The second site of production is the content of the image itself. The researcher should look at the light and camera angle of the image as well as notice what has been included, or not included. Attention to detail is important here. Finally, the third site of production is the reaction to the image by others. This can occur multiple times for the same image - such as the response by the creator, the researcher, and an audience. Riessman notes that texts are polysemic: they can have multiple meanings depending on who is viewing them. This approach allowed me to understand and compare how this polysemic nature of texts impacted audiences and changed over time. The mediated nature of celebrity images in these publications must be considered in this analysis, as well as the cultural weight such images carry. As with text, this portion of the analysis looked for patterns in the data such as what family members are pictured, what role each member takes in the image, and the type of picture selected to accompany text.

Analyzing Celebrity Gossip Magazines

Justification for Text Selection

In order to examine the relationship between celebrity journalism, pregnancy, and women's experiences, my project surveyed the two most popular celebrity gossip magazines, *People* and *Us Weekly*. Women's magazines have been a site of study for many researchers (Hermes, 1995; Ballaster, Beetham, Frazer & Hebron, 1991; Winship, 1987/2008), though the subgenre of gossip magazines has not yet been formally studied from a text-focused perspective. Therefore, the information gained from examining this data provides useful information about the particular media messages included in *People* and *Us Weekly* surrounding celebrity parenthood. The results of this analysis were considered with the media effects theories discussed in Chapter II to inform focus group moderation.

The texts for this study were selected based on publicly available information about readership identifying them as media market leaders for the genre of celebrity gossip magazines. In 2005, the Magazine Publishers of America listed *People* as the 12th most popular magazine overall with a circulation of 3.7 million ("Average Circulation for Top 100 ABC Magazines", 2005). *Us Weekly's* 1.7 million readers ranked the publication 47th. Their media kits outline their respective goals:

People is a cultural force. Defining celebrity, driving conversation and inspiring action. We're America's trusted connection to the people you want to know and the moments that shape their lives. ("Editorial Statement - People", 2008)

Us delivers a mass audience of young, educated and affluent adults who are compelled by breaking celebrity news, Hollywood style and the best in entertainment. ("Index - Us Weekly", 2009)

The popularity of these texts – identified by their large weekly audiences and competitive environment – demonstrates the need to better understand the social psychological nature of celebrity gossip from a media research perspective. The analysis of these texts' context was used to inform preparations for focus group discussions intended to understand how audiences interpret and act on messages.

Sampling

The sample for this study includes 18 issues each of *People* and *Us Weekly* from the period of 2007-2009. This provided a longitudinal sample across three years, expanded a smaller sample used for a previously conducted pilot study (discussed below), and avoided seasonal trends which might influence editorial decisions or story popularity. The website ResearchRandomizer.com's online tool for randomizing data selection was used to objectively generate the issues of each magazine to be studied. Six issues of *People* and six issues of *Us Weekly* were selected from each year, 2007, 2008, and 2009, for analysis. Content to be analyzed in this study included any story that appeared in the table of contents and referenced celebrity pregnancy or parenthood. Key words such as pregnancy, parent(ing), family, child, baby, mother, and father were used to identify these stories. Both magazines include in their table of contents brief summaries of the stories' main focus providing enough information for me to decide whether pregnancy or parenthood was a central theme within the article. Images and text within these articles will be analyzed.

Media Texts, Media Studies, and Audience Reception

Though Joke Hermes (whose work *Reading Women's Magazines* informs the current project) chose not to use textual analysis as a basis for her research, many others have looked to key media texts in combination with audience research. The study of content can be an important step in the research process, as content offers the mediating variable between cultural conditions influencing content creation and media effects resulting from content (Riffe, Fico, and Lacy, 1998). Hermes argues textual analysis privileges the text as the site of meaning rather than the audience, but notes several researchers who have connected textual analysis with interviews or other audience ethnography techniques (1995). For example, Winship (1987/2008) and Ballaster et al. (1991) both combined these methods to complete their studies on women's magazines (note, these studies looked at traditional women's magazines, and not gossip magazines). Though Hermes believes textual analysis was not necessary for her study, she notes disappointment in the quality of her interviews (80 total interviews, a significant number for a qualitative study) which failed to elicit much commentary from participants about the meaning created through magazine media usage (1995). She explains this by arguing women's magazines, and gossip magazines as a subgenre, are an "everyday media" genre with which readers thoughtlessly engage while simultaneously watching television or doing other activities (1995, p. 20). Of everyday media use, she writes:

Experiences become meaningful only in looking back at them. Everyday reading practices follow the same path, they are part of everyday routines; as such, they are not often reflected upon and therefore do not have conscious meanings. This explains why it is truly difficult for readers to enlarge upon why and how they read. (1995, p. 23)

Hermes concludes her participant interviews lacked richness and recall since readers of women's magazines do not think about what they are reading and magazines are an easy-to-put down form of entertainment (1995). My project sought to test this conclusion by teaming textual analysis with focus groups – allowing me, as the researcher, to frame discussions in a way that pulls directly from magazine content with a goal of encouraging rich responses from participants as they discussed their understanding of gossip magazines. As Riffe et al. argue, knowledge of content is a critical step for understanding the connection between those who create media content and those who consume media content (1998).

Feasey selected participants for her focus group research on the Netherland's *heat* magazine that self-identified as fans of the publication and fell in the demographic target market outlined by the magazine (2008). She did not report the same issues as Hermes, potentially because of her more targeted approach. Hermes notes that readers of gossip magazines in her study found them meaningful as they created “‘imagined’ communities” (1995, p. 121) rather than the “fantasies of perfect selves” that resulted from traditional women's magazines. For readers who may share common characteristics with the celebrities being covered – such as motherhood – both meanings may be experienced as celebrity role models demonstrate what it is to be a good mother and salience with readers is increased.

Pilot Study: Celebrity Gossip Magazine Content

A pilot study conducted of four issues of *People* and four issues of *Us Weekly* identified potential themes and coding frames that were considered for the current

project (Hatfield, 2010). Notably, the pilot study demonstrated the editorial emphasis placed on celebrity pregnancy and parenthood, as one third of the total articles within these issues contained these topics. This preliminary sample of 30 articles provided analytic category-level codes and criteria that were used as a starting point for the dissertation. During the coding of the dissertation, particularly at this category level, I remained open to the emergence of new categories that may have been left out of the pilot study's smaller sample size. The pilot study was sorted into analytic frames outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. *Pilot Study Analytic Frames.*

Analytic Category	Criteria
<i>Wanting to get pregnant</i>	A story about the desire for pregnancy
<i>Pregnancy Announcement</i>	A story announcing a celebrity's confirmed pregnancy
<i>Pregnancy Preparation</i>	A story about a celebrity's preparations leading up to birth
<i>Birth Story</i>	A story about the arrival of a celebrity's baby
<i>Body Story</i>	A story about a celebrity's plan to get into shape after having a baby
<i>Parenting Story</i>	A story about a celebrity's specific experience parenting
<i>Update Story</i>	A story that updates readers about a celebrity's ongoing parenting
<i>General Profile</i>	A general profile of a celebrity that includes references to being a parent

A second coding frame was expected based on pilot study results identifying the celebrities' involvement in the story. Articles were coded as "cooperative" or "independent", a reflection of the celebrity's participation in the story's creation. In cooperative stories, the celebrity clearly worked with the publication to produce the article.

More specific thematic coding in the preliminary analysis found motherhood was pictured and described as a satisfying experience that women find fulfilling both for their happiness and femininity. Natural and deep connection with your child is shown through images of celebrity mothers staring into their newborns' eyes. The responsibilities associated with caring for a child were demonstrated and described as superficial tasks – providing a large home or decorated nursery and including only the most obvious daily activities such as feeding the baby or putting them to bed. Though men were discussed as loving fathers, most were not visually depicted or textually described as involved in the day to day care of their new children. The articles on celebrity moms did not typically discuss the celebrity's career demands, instead focusing on her role as a mother and caretaker. All of the female celebrities were pictured in the domestic setting. Work is not part of their lives and instead, only their experience of parenthood is shown. Articles about fathers placed them in the role of provider – be it through reminding the reader that the father's work demands would shortly resume or how the father is able to “provide” a solution for their child's problem. Each of these preliminary findings will be used to develop categories for the current study.

Analyzing Focus Groups

Justification for Use of Focus Groups

The use of focus groups as a method of study was selected to highlight the interactive nature of both media usage and pregnancy. Hermes writes: “Like other media, women's magazines are used indirectly in identity building and maintenance, which is an important part of attaching generalized, evaluative significance to texts”

(1995, p. 27). Her comment demonstrates the interactive nature media use can take and sometimes obscure ways media use can affect identity. Testing the selected media effects theories' (such as social cognitive theory, social comparison, and parasocial relationships) using focus groups merged qualitative research techniques with audience approaches to understand these relationships. Lunt and Livingstone detail how focus groups can allow researchers to simulate conversations, public discussion and gossip – communications which contribute to the social construction of meaning (1993).

Similarly, Schroder, Drotner, Kline, and Murray contend: “In the group interview, informants collectively enact a negotiation of the meaning of a media product, which is designed to simulate, and thus to reflect, the way the social production of meaning normally takes place in interpersonal encounters, in more extended spans of time and contexts of space” (2003, p. 152). Because social cognitive theory centers on the idea that observers symbolically code and remember communications (Bandura, 2002), speaking with participants in a group rather than individually allows such codes to emerge for discussion and debate about their cultural meaning. Participants may support each other as they disclose information and ideas acting as “consultants” rather than “objects of research” (Lee, quoted in Lunt and Livingstone, 1993, p. 84).

Participants

Feasey's work on the Netherland's *heat* magazine used focus groups to study readers' impressions of celebrity gossip magazines (2008). When recruiting participants, she argued: “I wanted to recruit not only loyal readers, but loyal readers who were seen to fit the target demographic as presented by the magazine” (2008, p.

689). Participants for this study shared basic demographic characteristics representative of these magazines' readerships. *People's* average reader is a woman around 40 years old with a household income above average and most likely a college degree ("Audience Profiles: Women - *People*", 2008). *Us Weekly's* average reader is similar but younger – closer to 30 years old – and identified as mostly white ("Demographics – *Us Weekly*", 2009). *People* notably leaves out the race/ethnicity of their audience in their demographics information, but diversity amongst participants was desired.

Approximately 50% of both *People's* and *Us Weekly's* readers have children at home. Because this study focused on pregnancy and parenthood, participants were women who had a child under five years old, recruited for participation from local mothers' groups and through snowball sampling measures using my personal contacts. With the average age at first birth in the United States at 25 years old ("Quick Stats: Average Age of Mothers at First Birth, By State – United States, 2002," May 20, 2005), the expected age range was 20 to 40 years old. Diversity of education, race, income level, and work force participation were encouraged within other qualifying characteristics.

A flexible interview schedule was used for focus groups, which ideally had 5-10 participants each. Four initial focus groups were held and following those groups, I determined an additional group was needed. Lunt and Livingstone address the need for research to achieve saturation – a point when no new information is gleaned from additional data collection (1993). They write: "A useful rule of thumb holds that for any category of people discussing a particular topic there are only so many stories to be told"

(Lunt and Livingstone, 1993, p. 82). At the completion of these five focus groups, it was determined that saturation had been reached.

Focus Group Preparation and Logistics

Many researchers have used focus groups for audience reception studies (Feasey, 2008; Kitzinger, 2000; Morley, 1980). Schroder et al. write: “Reception research methodology is predicated upon the qualitative research interview, which is used as a discursive generator for obtaining an insight into the interpretive repertoires at the disposal of the informants as they make sense of a specific media product” (2003, p. 143). Schroder et al. outline the two options for qualitative interviewing – individual or group interviews. For this project, I selected group interviews to draw on the social nature of parenthood and framed these interviews as a “friendly conversation between strangers” per Schroder et al.’s suggestion (2003, p. 149).

Focus group participants were pre-screened to evaluate their appropriateness for the current study. Critical to the pre-screening is the determination of the participant as qualified to discuss both pregnancy/parenthood and celebrity gossip magazines. Potential participants needed to have read celebrity gossip magazines in the period leading up to the focus group meeting, and their level of involvement with the media (heavy user, light user, etc.) was reported. Other questions included in the pre-screen prepared the researcher and provided preliminary demographics about the participants (see Appendix A).

Prior to the group interviews, the magazine text sample was analyzed and its findings used to prepare the interview schedule. Schroder et al. point to the need for the

researcher to enter an interview with solid knowledge of the media environment: “The researcher must have a certain amount of knowledge about this media product, in order to be able to conduct a meaningful and focused conversation with the informants about it” (2003, p. 154). Additionally, the researcher should be prepared to discuss the research topic beyond the specified genre – here, celebrity gossip magazines – as participants are likely to draw on experiences from a broader, overlapping media environment (Schroder et al., 2003). Schroder et al. use examples from reality TV and television news programs, arguing that even though a researcher may be focused on one particular example from those genres participants are likely to draw on knowledge of similar programs as viewers compare and contrast their viewing experiences (2003). Evidence of this overlap within celebrity gossip is seen from the top-down in the cross-platform approach many media producers take including *People*, *Us Weekly*, *TMZ*, and *Entertainment Tonight* which utilize both traditional mass media outlets such as television or magazines along with websites (see for example Petersen, 2009). This was expected and encountered, but did not compromise conclusions made about the project.

The interview schedule was critical to the focus group process by preparing questions that specifically elicited conversations addressing the research questions outlined in Chapter II. The use of an interview schedule can increase the reliability and credibility of the study (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The focus group discussions began with brief instructions from the moderator (me), brief member introductions, and some introductory questions meant to both gauge and refresh the group's knowledge of celebrity pregnancy stories through group conversation. As the moderator, I worked to navigate between an adherence to the questions prepared for the interview schedule and the group's natural flow of conversation. Probing offered an important element of focus group interaction as explicit answers were desired, particularly as I tried to connect theory with participants' explanations and commentary. Focus groups ranged between one to two hours. All conversations were recorded and transcribed in preparation for analysis.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF CELEBRITY GOSSIP MAGAZINES

Sample Selection of Texts

The first stage of research for the current project analyzed two celebrity gossip magazines, *People* and *Us Weekly*. These publications were chosen for their high readership numbers and focus on celebrities. Using random sampling techniques, 36 issues were included as data for this study: 18 issues of each magazine including six from the years 2007, 2008, and 2009. I had in my personal collection several years of back issues from which the sample was collected for both publications. Any missing issues were purchased from ebay.com to complete the data set.

After collecting the magazines, the table of contents for each issue was categorized and any articles about celebrities which mentioned pregnancy or parenthood were included. These magazines utilize a narrative table of contents, with either a partial or full sentence describing the article. Key words within these narratives proved to be quite broad, with examples such as mother, father, custody, family, kids, daughter, son, baby, twins, pregnancy, and playground that signaled a story for inclusion in the study. Additionally, my familiarity with the content helped to identify stories which did not use key words, but referred to the family by their first names. For example, “Kate Hudson and Ryder take Manhattan” (“Inside Us”, April 30, 2007) does not include key words, but is a story about a celebrity and her child Ryder. Years of regularly reading the publication meant that I felt comfortable identifying these stories. If elements of pregnancy or family life were not explicitly mentioned, the story was not included. Both

stories that were traditional articles (mainly text with images) and stories that included only images (with a caption or headline) were included if they were mentioned in the table of contents. This resulted in approximately 160 stories, or an average of just over four articles per issue. These stories served as the unit of analysis within this project. Stories about pregnancy and parenthood represented approximately 30% of each week's overall content.

As expected from my pilot study (discussed in Chapter III), the articles were initially categorized by their "story type" – a general synopsis of the story's focus. Story types mimicked the phases of parenting from considering becoming parents to having an older child. These categories allowed me to both see trends in the data, such as which story types frequently recurred, and group articles together to allow for comparison between like topics. Some categories initially appeared too broad, such as the category of "update" – a general topic category for any story about older babies and kids. This category was refined after a closer read, with some stories being relabeled and a new category developing called "outing" which referred to articles that discussed a typical daytime outing such as going to the park or taking a child for a stroller ride. Once I was satisfied that the categories provided accurate and clear descriptions, the category groupings were then thematically analyzed. Appendix B fully outlines the definitions for each category identified and their frequencies.

Table 2. *Category Level Themes.*

Preparing for Baby	The New Celebrity Parent	Celebrities Getting Their Bodies Back	Daily Family Life	Tragedy
Wanting to be pregnant Pregnancy Rumor Pregnancy Announcement Pregnancy Update (General) Parents' Preparation for Baby Baby Shower	Birth Announcement Breastfeeding Adoption Baby Personality/Style Lifestyle Outing/Daily Life Paternity	Weight Loss/Fitness Lifestyle Breastfeeding	Career Update Home Life Other (General) Outing Relationship	Death in the Family Divorce/Custody Tragedy

What these categories, listed in Table 2, demonstrate is the “lifecycle” approach taken by these magazines. A celebrity’s pregnancy can be covered from its beginning on: through a pregnancy announcement, baby shower, birth, and infant milestones such as walking. Public family life offers a visually interesting piece for magazines such as *People* and *Us Weekly* that include photos with every story. Even short articles include a headshot or other photo of a celebrity. Some “stories” listed in the table of contents took on a style similar to photojournalism, with a photo being the “story” supported by a one or two sentence caption.

Celebrity magazines appear very willing to work with celebrities who want to use their pregnancies or family life as a public relations opportunity. Sometimes this relationship becomes exposed, particularly when highly sought after images endure a bidding war for their rights (Clark, February 28, 2008). Reports of multi-million dollar payments for newborn photographs are common for A-list stars, such as Jennifer Lopez or Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt (Today Staff, August 4, 2008). These payments ensure a star cooperates with a publication, often allowing by allowing the publications to photograph the new family in their home, and reflect the lucrative nature of introducing

a celebrity's baby. New York's *Daily News* reporter Salamone commented: "With profits like that, who needs hit records or blockbuster films? Hollywood moms and dads know where the real money's at – their nurseries" (February 18, 2008, p. 27). This story type was the most popular overall with a total of 31 stories in the data set.

Celebrity babies born to less popular or demanding stars, such as reality stars, may be used to garner publicity without receiving a paycheck for cooperating. For example, in 2009, two reality television stars were pregnant and due at the same time: Kendra Wilkinson Baskett of the reality shows *Girls Next Door* and *Kendra* (Grossbart & Schutte, August 3, 2009) and Kourtney Kardashian of *Keeping up with the Kardashians* (Caplan, August 31, 2009). The noticeably high frequency of cooperative articles between Kardashian, Baskett, and the celebrity weeklies indicates a relationship forged to promote their reality shows and image. As reality stars, their personal lives become crucial to continued success keeping viewers (and readers) paying attention. The greater need by B-list and other less well known celebrities for publicity is seen in their greater willingness to speak directly with a publication. Articles in *People* and *Us Weekly* with less popular celebrities featured more interviews than those with the top stars, and reports of payment for stories do not exist. While this type of publicity is harder to document without the tattling by magazines that lost out on bidding wars, it is clear that the good publicity that accompanies a new baby and other aspects of family life is an opportunity not to be missed (Seelye, July 31, 2006).

The first portion of my analysis takes a close look across categories. Stories of the same type will be compared and thematically coded. Results will be presented

within a few key themes. Five research questions were outlined in Chapter III. Those questions included:

RQ1: How is pregnancy/parenthood framed by celebrity gossip magazines?

RQ2: What elements of celebrity pregnancy/parenthood are most salient in celebrity gossip magazines?

RQ3: How is the relationship between pregnancy and the body portrayed in celebrity gossip magazines?

RQ4: How is the relationship between pregnancy and consumption portrayed in celebrity gossip magazines?

RQ5: How does the nature of coverage change as a celebrity transitions from being a new parent to a parent of older children?

Rather than address these questions specifically, they will be addressed throughout the chapter both in specific and general ways. Overall, this chapter found celebrity parenthood stories described a nuanced experience according to gender, age, relationship, and celebrity status.

Visual Depictions of Gender

Images of Mothers and Fathers

The narrative inherent within the images of celebrity families in this study highlighted how stories often mirror cultural norms and gender roles, while simultaneously countering the visual depictions of family life described in previous research – most notably the visual absence of fathers. Within my data set, the majority of articles included photos of both parents, whether they were shown in the same images

or multiple images within a single article.² When both parents were shown together, mothers more frequently were the one holding the child (Figure 3). This was certainly not consistent across the entire sample – with a smaller portion of stories picturing the father holding or caring for the child(ren). However, the mother was always an integrated part of the image – a narrative of family life in which she becomes indispensable. It was not uncommon for stories to focus on fathers, particularly when the father was more well-known than the mother. However, stories that *pictured* only fathers were almost nonexistent, while a good sample of stories showed images of the mother only (Figure 4). A single example from the 2007 sample (49 articles total) pictured only the father – a story called “Noah Wyle pulls daddy duty,” (*Us*, July 23, 2007). The language used in this story contradicts itself – Wyle is described as a “hands on dad” within the article and is shown taking full responsibility for care, yet the article’s title indicates a more temporary nature to his fatherhood. While we visually see Wyle independently parenting, the text lets us know his role as primary caregiver is a temporary “duty” taken on only when mom is not available. Similarly, the 2008 data featured two stories that featured fathers only, and three were included in 2009. I use numerical counts here only to underscore the rarity of these images and the challenge I had in finding these few examples within the data. This data supports previous findings that mothers are depicted more frequently than fathers in communications about parenting and as the primary caregiver (Lazar, 2000; Schwartz, 1996; Wall & Arnold, 2007). Though gender stereotypes existed within these images, the mere existence of

² Because most articles within the data set referenced male/female parenting relationships, that is the language used for most of my analysis.

celebrity fathers offers a positive example of a media text where fatherhood has a significant presence.³



Figure 3. *Traditional family image.*

Image of celebrity family where celebrity mother holds child, demonstrating the mother's central role to caregiving. (Photo by Michael Simon/Startracks Images)

³ All images within this chapter were part of the data set collected for analysis.



Figure 4. *Mom-only family image.*

When only one parent was pictured, it was almost always the mother. Here, no father is pictured in this story of gymnast Moceanu's baby. (Photo by Jeff Sciortino)

Gendered Caregiving

In terms of gender portrayal, some images of fathers and mothers displayed similar caregiving activities - usually pushing a stroller or carrying a child. When families were pictured together, fathers were often shown in the more "active" role carrying/pushing the child (Figure 5). These limited depictions of paternal caregiving may be read as a reinterpretation of male chivalry due to the physical nature and weight of transporting a child.



Figure 5. *Hands-on, active fathering.*
Image of celebrity father in reinterpreted act of chivalry pushing stroller. (Photo by BF/Flynet Pictures)

Other images of fathers included interactions of play and entertainment such as engaging in a sport. While some elements of caregiving were demonstrated by both parents, other examples showed the greater role mothers play in preparing for and caring for children. The preparation of a nursery is described in these magazines as an important step as the baby's arrival gets closer. This classic feminine domain remains such, with images of lavish nurseries carefully designed by the expectant mother. Mothers are shown in the nurseries, communicating the mother's role as primary caregiver (Figure 6). Readers can interpret dad's absence in many ways; a traditional reading might be that dad is out "providing for the family" while mom serves as homemaker.



Figure 6. *Example of nursery image.*

This actress shows off her lavish nursery decorated in preparation for children, a gendered caregiving activity. (Photos by John Russo)



Figure 7: *Mother feeding her child.*

A second example of gendered caregiving, a female celebrity feeding her child. (Photo by Ian White)

A second visual of gendered parenting came through food. Mothers were shown cooking for or feeding their children, a visual story that tells of the daily task of caregiving. An image (Figure 7) of family breadwinner Chyler Leigh feeding her child a homemade muffin is accompanied by text that reads: “She’s a phenomenal actress and

an amazing best friend, but mothering is what she does best,” says husband West (quoted in Tresniowski & Grossman, November 10, 2008). Mothering here includes cooking for and feeding her child, even as Leigh works full time supporting her family.

Often the most egalitarian images were found in families with two children – a communication that this situation requires more from fathers. In a profile on Nicole Richie and Joel Madden’s second child, the family notes that Madden now spends most of his time with Harlow, their older daughter, since mom is with newborn son Sparrow. The visual depiction of each parent holding a child demonstrates an equality in caregiving not present in images of single child families (Figures 8 and 9). Other examples include Jack Black and his wife, along with the Jolie-Pitt family. The Jolie-Pitt children, a total of six during this writing, are often pictured with both parents or with a single parent. When readers see Brad Pitt or Angelina Jolie individually with the kids, it is in similar ways and frequencies.



Figure 8. *First egalitarian image.*

Celebrity families with more than one child often demonstrate fathers in more central caregiving roles, such as these where each parent holds a child. (Photographer not identified)



Figure 9. *Second egalitarian image.*
(Photo by Kevin Mazar/Wire Image)

Though many examples were found, multiple child families do not always result in images of co-parenting. Images of twins, for example, frequently communicated both a need for two involved parents and existing gendered roles (Figures 10 and 11). Dads were never shown with both babies, while moms were often shown holding them both. This communicates a capability by the mother to nurture and care for two children at once (even with dad right there), placing her again as the primary parent and care manager.



Figure 10. *First image of mother holding twins.*
 The centrality of the celebrity mother is seen in these images of newborn twins where the mother holds both babies even while the father is present.
 (Photos John Russo)



Figure 11. *Second image of mother holding twins.*
(Photo by Simon Ferreira/Startraksphoto.com)

Overall, images of parenting in this magazine depicted actively involved parents interacting and caring for their child. Compared to earlier research on visual depictions of parenting and gender roles, the images present in these publications contrast typical parenting communications by presenting both parents most of the time. However, the notable difference in frequency of presenting dad alone significantly less than presenting mom alone and subtle gender differences in terms of care visually reinforce the role of mom as primary caregiver.

Consumption as Preparation

Following celebrity pregnancies begins when the pregnancy is announced. Often, these publications break the news of a celebrity pregnancy – such as Jennifer

Lopez' or Nicole Richie's pregnancies (Davis, January 7, 2008). Weeks after cover stories that broke the story, the celebrities finally affirmed the news. As a celebrity moves through her pregnancy, updates on the pregnancy, preparation for baby, baby's sex, and the baby shower appear in these publications. Celebrity consumption was a major part of narratives about parents preparing for their new baby. Readers learn what items celebrities either buy or receive as gifts for their unborn children (Figure 12) – usually luxurious baby items too expensive for most new moms such as infant cashmere outfits that cost almost \$300 apiece or a six pack of embroidered onesies for \$169 (Tan, December 24, 2007).



Figure 12. *Baby booty.*

Magazines frame and encourage consumption for audiences by clearly displaying brand names and prices in association with specific celebrities, here Jennifer Lopez. (Photos by Kevin Mazar/wireimage.com, Courtesy Nava Designs, Petit Tresor)

Readers easily can find and buy these items after reading these articles due to the sidebar layouts used by the magazine and labels identifying the brand and cost. The

presentation of these usually high-end items sets apart Hollywood babies from the ordinary child – essentially a form of the designer clothes and fabulous houses their parents inhabit. The status of the celebrity baby thus becomes elevated amongst the luxuries provided.

Consumption within these articles identifies celebrity babies as “special”, but it also signals a star’s ability to be a good parent. The process of consumption visually replaces the baby it honors – a temporary substitute while an expectant mother proceeds through the period of gestation. Showing a celebrity mother with her “baby booty” demonstrates for readers a socially appropriate, desirable way to prepare for your child. The joy later depicted as a mother looks at her newborn child can also be seen as a celebrity takes steps to prepare for baby.

In addition to clothes, décor, and toys, often a celebrity’s home – and its great expense – is mentioned in stories of preparing for baby. Having a large home with a decorated nursery becomes an assumed part of parenthood. Again, mentioning homes in the million dollar range reminds readers that while celebrities may be similar to them (as homeowners), they are still living in a different world. Readers learn of singer Lily Allen’s baby preparations: “As for other baby preparations, Allen and her beau will move sometime after Christmas into the \$1.4 million north London pad the crooner bought earlier this year” (Guarente, January 7, 2008, p. 12). Before the baby, the home sat vacant, but now that a baby is on the way, inhabiting the home becomes paramount.

Building Excitement, Sharing the Experience

The joys of parenting start before baby arrives. Feeling the baby's kicks is a noteworthy story – readers learn reality star Trista Sutter “absolutely loves it” and Kendra Baskett's baby bump had just appeared when she started feeling the kicks. A guest at Jennifer Lopez' baby shower noted that she and husband Marc Anthony were “so excited to meet their little babies” (Dyball, February 4, 2008). This excitement is just one impact of pregnancy on a relationship; many celebrity couples also report the experience brought them closer:

We have become even more connected. (Tori Spelling, quoted in Bartolomeo and O'Neill, April 30, 2007)

As in love as we were before, this makes it even deeper. (Jeri Ryan, quoted in Wihlborg, May 26, 2008)

Drew is the love of my life, but having a child changes everything. Your bond is even more intense. (Lea Lachey, quoted in Coplin and Vituska, January 7, 2008)

For some celebrities, the intensity of pregnancy resulted not in a better relationship, but an ended one. Celebrities such as Kelly Rutherford, Denise Richards, and Bridget Moynihan all broke up with their partners while pregnant.

Another way readers are brought into the experience of a celebrity pregnancy is by twisting the traditional pregnancy craving into a noteworthy story. For many celebrities, pregnancy signals a welcome opportunity to indulge their bodies and abstain from their typically stricter diets. Celebrity cravings are reported, often with a focus on the less healthy foods celebrities eat while pregnant such as Jennifer Meyer's cheese enchiladas (Davis, March 2, 2009) or Angelina Jolie's Cheetos (Davis, March 31, 2008)

– a tool that makes celebrities feel “real” and normal. The amount of weight a celebrity gains during pregnancy often is included for readers. Though celebrities may allow themselves more freedom calorically, most usually continue to exercise through pregnancy, such as Nicole Kidman who ran as far as five months into her pregnancy or Lisa Marie Presley who worked out until she was seven months pregnant. Once the baby arrives, coverage shifts to the joy of parenthood as well as the return to diet and exercise.

The New Celebrity Parent

Narratives of new parenthood describe the experience as euphoric, transformative experience during a period of extreme joy and happiness. Often, the pregnancy’s finale – the birth – is discussed with language that indicates a journey or change to the person. This language of transformation is seen in the following examples:

[Halle] Berry finally realizes her dream of being a mom. (O’Leary, June 23, 2008, p. 48)

This is what [Jessica Alba’s] always wanted. She didn’t want to wait until later in her life to do it. (O’Leary, March 23, 2008, p. 63)

It’s been an absolutely incredible experience. (Jeff Gordon, quoted in Abrahamson, July 23, 2007, p. 66)

I can’t say that I miss anything about my old life. I can’t imagine my life without my kids. (Nicole Richie, quoted in Ingrassia, November 2, 2009, p. 61)

Though the wee early-riser (who was born four weeks premature, after his parents tried for two years to conceive) has improbably transformed Mom and Dad into morning types, they’re not complaining. ‘It is really special,’ marvels Trista. (Abrahamson, Bartolomeo, O’Leary, & Schutte, January 7, 2008, p. 55)

These celebrities, whom readers may look up to, offer quotes that position motherhood as a personal goal superior to all others. Used to bolster this frame are supporting comments that discuss the happiness of family life:

Now the proud parents – and four big sibs – are experiencing baby joy, times two. (Referencing Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, Tauber & Green, July 28, 2008 pg 55)

Nicole [Kidman] is euphoric. She's wanted this for so long. (Tauber, Akers, West, Finan, & Leonard, July 21, 2008, p. 64)

There are no words. You have to cry when you see that little kid. Because it's yours. (Carlos Mencia, quoted in Dyball & Gee, April 9, 2007, p. 100)

Cash is a dad now, so I'm sure he is one of the happiest men alive. (Joshua Alba, quoted in O'Leary, June 23, 2008, p. 63)

This last quote in particular indicates an assumption about parenthood that the magazines clearly promote: that being a new parent is synonymous with happiness.

Finally, many fathers used language of accomplishment to describe parenthood:

Being a father is by far my greatest achievement. (Ryan Phillippe, quoted in Davis, March 31, 2008, p. 30)

[Son Kingston] is my greatest triumph. (Gavin Rossdale, quoted in Agresti, January 7, 2008).

Being a parent changes everything about you. (Matt Damon, quoted in Schutte, June 23, 2008).

Within the broad narrative of new parenthood, stories that do not adhere to these frames of transformation or bliss typically result from health concerns present at or experienced immediately after the birth. For example, Dennis Quaid's twins were given a dangerous overdose immediately after birth. His articles concentrated on their recovery rather than on the parents' happiness at their arrival. Similarly, for Nancy

Grace, a CNN reporter, her premature twins' struggle after birth was documented by these publications. Grace is quoted as saying, "It was difficult bringing only one baby home on Thanksgiving, but David and I were thrilled to have our daughter come home days later" (Davis, December 17, 2007, p. 38). In this sample, issues such as postpartum depression or difficulty adjusting to life with a baby were rarely discussed and never the primary focus of an article. A rare mention of postpartum depression was one sentence within a full two-page article about Marie Osmond's tough year.

The term "maternity leave" a term that frequently emerges in discussions of, and among, non-celebrity mothers was notably absent from these articles. The return to work was ambiguous; often dad was immediately back to work, while the mother's plans were not directly discussed. For example, singer Bo Bice was back to performing on the road just six days after his wife gave birth ("American Idol's Bo Bice", August 25, 2008). Similarly, race car driver Jeff Gordon's involvement is described: "Although his job will require him to be away from the young family's home in NYC, he is committed to being a hands-on dad" (Abrahamson, July 23, 2007). In an article on Jessica Alba, she is quoted as saying: "I'm going to take time off. Babies don't stay babies very long" (O'Leary, June 23, 2008). For an actress, the flexibility of her job means that maternity leave is not the same fixed number of weeks that traditional occupations allot. However, the demand to appear in public soon after birth may mean that rather than enjoying a lengthy maternity leave, stars are instead forced back to work much sooner than is typical. Images of stars working out four to six weeks after having a baby, earlier than

most doctors recommend, demonstrate the demands placed on celebrities to bounce back faster than regular women.

Getting Your Body Back: A Star's First Priority?

Stories that focus on a celebrity's efforts at "getting her body back" populate *Us Weekly* and *People* magazines. "Getting your body back" articles ranged from debating whether breastfeeding is an easy way to lose the weight to stories of stubborn pounds and difficulty losing the baby weight. What sets apart narratives of celebrities losing the baby weight is that they always do lose the weight. "Body" stories offered a fine-tuned script with little deviation and the same conclusion – the return to Hollywood's slender ideal. Within this data set, readers never hear of long-term failure to lose weight gained during pregnancy. Celebrities typically both embrace the pregnant body they had, while indicating a necessity to get back into shape. Articles on celebrity weight loss post-baby usually involve the celebrity through personal interview and "before" and "after" pictures. The "before" pictures often are taken soon after the pregnancy or at the end of the pregnancy, while the "after" pictures are current (Figure 13).



Figure 13. *Body after baby.*

This article from the data sample applauds actresses for their weight loss post-baby; the before pictures taken close to the birth date create the most dramatic effect for highlighting these celebrities' slimmer bodies. (Photos by Janet Mayer/Splash News, Upi/Landov, Flynet, X17, Cam/Fame, FZS/Sipa, National Photo Group, Beimages)

These articles often focus on the hard work that went into reshaping a celebrity's body, usually with a trainer multiple days a week.

I work really, really hard... You've just got to put the time in. (Gwyneth Paltrow, quoted in Velez, September 17, 2007)

She works extremely hard. (Britney Spears' trainer Manny Bujold, quoted in O'Neill, April 30, 2007)

I'm very happy, but it's hard work. (Octo-mom Nadia Suleman referencing losing 145 pounds of baby weight, quoted in Andersson, November 2, 2009)

The irony of these comments is how easy celebrities make losing weight look. *Us Weekly* and *People* applaud the effort of celebrities, yet the magazines' articles

communicate an unstated expectation that stars *will* get their bodies back. Salma Hayek is pictured about three months after having her baby with the caption: “Salma Hayek, who gave birth to Valentina in September, kept her postbaby body under wraps in L.A. Dec. 16th” (Davis, December 31, 2007). The image shows Hayek wearing a winter coat in December, attire that reflects the season. Yet, this brief caption twists the visual, repositioning a normal picture as one implying Hayek has something to hide or present. Conversely, a star who steps out in form-fitting attire for the first time after having a baby can expect the media’s commendation on the state of her body.

The expected return to the pre-baby body is communicated again when breastfeeding mothers are discussed. If a celebrity’s weight loss post-baby is not dramatic, the decision to breastfeed is legitimized as an acceptable reason to delay the return to the pre-baby body. The required extra calories for a healthy breastfeeding mom mean that extreme diets and extended time away from baby are not possible. Hayek told *Us Weekly*, “I don’t care if I cry, I don’t care if I am fat. When I see how much good it is doing her, I can’t stop” (Quoted in Andersson, Guggenheim & Holloway, December 1, 2008, p. 14). Celebrity Naomi Watts “isn’t skimping on calories” because she is hungrier as a breastfeeding mom than when she was pregnant, and has a noted ten pounds left to lose approximately three and a half months after her son was born (Davis, March 2, 2009, p. 48). While framing a celebrity’s decision to breastfeed as an ideology of good mothering, simultaneously readers are reminded of its temporality. Once breastfeeding ends, the weight is no longer excusable. Naomi Watts commented “getting a trainer is on her to-do list” (Davis, March 2, 2009, p. 48) reminding readers

that she postponed losing the weight for breastfeeding, but will ultimately lose it.

Similarly, Hayek says: “I’m proud of the weight that I’ve lost and the rest is going to go when it’s time to go” (Tan, May 26, 2006, p. 171). The responsibility to lose weight remains even as one’s actions are heralded.

Whether breastfeeding or not, many celebrity moms profess a lack of concern about losing weight post-baby, yet often begin working out as early as three weeks after giving birth. Most typical new mothers are told to wait six weeks after having a vaginal delivery and eight weeks if the baby was delivered via cesarean section before working out. Tori Spelling is shown running with her husband less than four weeks after the caesarian delivery of her first child in March 2007 (Bartolomeo & O’Neill, April 30, 2007), but later remarks that she could not work out until nine weeks after having the baby (“Body after baby”, September 17, 2007), a blatant contradiction. Spelling’s reflection on being out of shape when her son was about two months old demonstrates conflicting feelings: “I was okay with it, surprisingly. But it was in the back of my mind” (Wihlborg, September 17, 2007). Jennifer Garner took nine months to lose the baby weight because “she didn’t have a job that was pressing” (Tan, Triggs & Chi, October 12, 2009). *People* reports she resumed working out just three weeks after her second child’s birth. Though Jennifer Lopez told *People*, “I’m supposed to be relaxing for the first six weeks,” she began thrice weekly workouts with a trainer once that period was up (Tan, Lye, Sundel & Wihlborg, May 26, 2006).

The trainer, a personal coach who guides workouts, is a staple for new moms in Hollywood (and most other celebrities too). The relatively quick (body) recoveries

displayed by celebrity moms often result from intense workouts with a personal trainer. In a story on four new Hollywood moms' "slim-down secrets," three of the four reported working out with trainers as part of their weight loss regimen (Tan, May 26, 2006). Six months post-baby at the time of this article, Salma Hayek is presented as the example of a celebrity unconcerned with rapid weight loss. She does not use a trainer and chooses healthy foods for her child since she is breastfeeding. However, Hayek's accompanying image shows her svelte figure six months after baby, the longest "recovery" of a celebrity body after baby within the story (the shortest was Halle Berry at one month), and still a relatively short amount of time.

The trainer's approach, techniques, and workout routine may be discussed at length in these articles – but two important elements of working out post-baby are left out of these discussions: money and childcare. Nannies, almost entirely absent in *People's* and *Us Weekly's* stories of celebrity parents, are the "dirty little secret" (Blakeley, August 5, 2010) of most celebrities. Blakeley reports, not only do most celebrities have help, they often have at least one nanny per child (August 5, 2010). Yet, these "helpers" (Blakeley, August 5, 2010) are rarely found in the pages of celebrity weeklies. Additionally, the high cost of celebrity trainers is also ignored – sessions which can cost \$250 or more for 45 minutes (Kaufman, 2010).

Though celebrity trainers and nannies help many celebrities quickly resume their pre-baby body, a second narrative frame within the body stories reminds readers that anyone can do it with dedication. Take mother to octuplets Nadia Suleman, who worked out three times a week at midnight and got by on a minimal three hours of sleep a day – efforts to regain her pre-baby body. Celebrities who choose not to use a trainer still demonstrate that getting your body back is possible. Within *People* and *Us Weekly*, losing baby weight on your own presents an even greater accomplishment than losing it with a personal trainer. This is communicated through the magazines' need to impress this fact upon readers. Suleman lost 145 pounds after giving birth to octuplets “without the help of a trainer or plastic surgery” (Bruce & Parker, November 2, 2009, p. 52). Similarly, Candace Cameron Bure (Figure 14), of *Full House* fame, discusses “how she lost 22 pounds by herself: no trainer, no surgery, no special diet” (Reinstein, December 22, 2008, p. 40).



Figure 14. *Celebrity weight loss without a trainer.*
 (Cover Images Courtesy of *Us Weekly* © Us Weekly LLC 2008, 2009, All rights reserved.
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Celebrities whose weight loss stories communicate independent perseverance often focus on stars whose names are less well known. Between these two approaches to regaining the body, the magazines find a space for all celebrities who want the accompanying publicity a newly-toned body can bring. Rather than a social accommodation to a celebrity's new status as a parent, instead these magazines frame losing baby weight as a personal responsibility. Failure to lose the weight therefore would signal a weakness in character – a personal flaw – that the publicity-driven celebrity industry makes no room for. This finding repeats what Dworkin and Wachs'

research on women's fitness magazines identified – that an inability to lose the baby weight constitutes “failed womanhood and failed motherhood” (2004, p. 66).

Daily Family Life

Exiting the initial phase of parenting, coverage of celebrity families shifts its focus to the “daily life” of celebrity families. Inducing a feeling of familiarity and intimacy, images of family life paint a playful and fun picture that leaves out most of the actual work of parenting. Parenting in Hollywood, as covered by *Us Weekly* and *People*, appears work-free and leisurely – when not shooting a film. Celebrities are shown out and about with their children, shopping, going to the park, taking a walk, and with older children either attending a Hollywood event or sitting courtside at a basketball game. These narratives give celebrities the appearance of being stay at home parents, even though they typically are not. Periodically, a magazine writer is welcomed into a celebrity's home for a longer profile article – articles which broaden the images of parenting painted by shorter, photojournalist-type pieces. While these magazines are not parenting magazines, messages about parenting practices and philosophies are present.

Messages on parenting within *Us Weekly* and *People* are indirect – quotes and summaries of lifestyles – but they present ideas about values and morals. For example, Melissa Joan Hart's family is moving from Los Angeles to Connecticut: “We just wanted more of a suburban life. We're looking for weather – for snow – and better schools” (quoted in Davis, August 3, 2009). Angelina Jolie discussed making time for many children each day: “Everybody gets [individual] special time so we can make sure we know where they're at” (quoted in Tauber & Green, July 28, 2008, p. 57). Having

grown up without luxuries, Sarah Jessica Parker integrates her experiences into her parenting: “I talk to my son about *need* first, not *want*, because they’re very separate,” (quoted in Shelasky, May 26, 2008, emphasis in original). Because this is not a parenting publication (i.e. its main purpose is not to provide advice about parenting for readers), reporting on this great variety of parenting styles often avoids critically addressing a parent’s choices and instead highlights why and how a celebrity makes parenting work for his/her situation. Topics that would be conceptually discussed in a parenting magazine, such as attachment parenting philosophies, translate into one-sided, example-based communications about a celebrity’s family life. The positive tone of many stories about celebrity families results from the fact that the “celebrity car crash doesn’t work as well as the celebrity baby” (Nicky Briger, quoted in Elder & Pech, July 6, 2008). Messages about parenting may carry more weight when celebrities serve as role models for admiring readers – and salience is high.

Parents who read *People* or *Us Weekly* will see many family types displayed – traditional parenting, co-parenting, same-sex parenting, single parenting, working parents, stay-at-home parents, strict parenting, and parenting with few household rules. While visually the magazines communicate the mother as primary caregiver, the articles’ text attempts to incorporate the egalitarian ideal to which many celebrities aspire. Though mother as primary caregiver/house manager was still found to be the most common family type within the articles’ text, these publications worked to actively demonstrate celebrity dads’ involvement in the family. Interviews with celebrity fathers

focus on their role – especially since pregnancy and breastfeeding fall outside fathers' capabilities.

Co-parenting situations, in which parents share the work and responsibility of children, demonstrate that men can contribute as equal partners. For example, an article on Ashlee Simpson-Wentz and Pete Wentz titled "The Wentz's Split the Work" quotes him describing their arrangement: "We don't have a set of rules that mom does or dad does" (Davis, August 3, 2009). Jeff Gordon, a racecar driver who travels weekends for work, tells *Us Weekly*: "I try to give her some time off. So I take Ella to school, or give her a bath, feed her, anything" (quoted in Grossbart, April 27, 2009). The most iconic co-parents may be Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, an unmarried couple whose six children are a blend of internationally adopted and biological children. The family is often shown out together, and depending on their work load, Pitt and Jolie switch off as the primary caregiver. Pitt "embraces his role at Mr. Mom" while Jolie films a movie ("School visits, grocery runs", May 25, 2009). At other times, we see Jolie out with the kids and are told Pitt's work schedule has kept him on location.

Co-parents embody the egalitarian ideal, one communicated through the frequent label of "hands-on dad" within these publications. This term quickly becomes a euphemistic label for "good dad" and indicates these fathers' choice for involvement with their children. However, its frequent use often ultimately points to the optional nature of fatherhood in our society. Amongst those who are labeled hands-on by these publications, significant variance in their family involvement occurs. Some hands-on dads resemble the helper role identified by Thompson and Walker (1989), such as

Gossip Girl star Kelly Rutherford's husband, who "is there to help out" his wife (Agresti & O'Neill, December 17, 2007). The choice given to men does not apply in the same way to mothers – instead employing a nanny (while rarely discussed or pictured) indicates mom's role with the kids. Because having a nanny is the norm, and the expense of a nanny can be absorbed more easily by celebrity families, celebrity mothers do have a choice as well. When a mother makes the decision (and it is the mother who makes the decision) not to have a nanny, the uniqueness is noteworthy. 39-year-old Kelly Rutherford commented: "I didn't wait this long to hand my baby over to a nanny. We stroll, we walk, I'm up at night with him" (Agresti & O'Neill). Kingston Rossdale, son of singers Gwen Stefani and Gavin Rossdale, is noted to be "a nannyless trendsetter" (Abrahamson, Agresti, & Bartolomeo, July 9, 2007). In this scenario, an updated form of mom as house manager emerges as she makes decisions about caregiving and nanny involvement. Though the "hands-on" celebrity father gives the mother a break, it is the nanny that truly allows a female celebrity to return to work.

While dad's role appears individually negotiated, most depictions of celebrity families indicate more traditional relationships in which mothers are the main caregiver (even when professing an egalitarian style). Actress Jennifer Garner took her 15 month old daughter to Vancouver where she was shooting a film when both parents had work commitments. Prior to his divorce, Mel Gibson's wife stayed home with their seven children while he worked (Buerger, April 27, 2009). When readers see men acting as the primary parent, usually the situation indicates the mother cannot do so. At Anna Nicole Smith's death, her daughter's father took over as caregiver. During her struggle

with depression, Britney Spears lost custody of her two children to husband Kevin Federline. Federline took the boys with him to a work obligation in Vegas; a friend commented: “[Kevin] was having a good time, but wasn’t the wild, crazy Kevin who used to come to Vegas. He was late to dinner because he wanted to tuck his kids into bed” (quoted in “Britney’s First Steps”, March 19, 2007). Chyler Leigh’s husband reportedly shoulders the bulk of childcare because she is the “main breadwinner” (Ingrassia, November 10, 2008).

Multiple family types appear in coverage of celebrities including unmarried couples having children (Halle Berry/Gabriel Aubry, Kourtney Kardashian/Scott Disick, and Nicole Richie/Joel Madden), single parents having or adopting children (Clay Aiken, Sheryl Crow, and Minnie Driver) and same sex families (Neil Patrick Harris/David Burtka and Cynthia Nixon/Christine Marinoni). Summaries of non-traditional families are matter of fact and normalized, such as a piece on same sex couple Cynthia Nixon and Christine Marinoni. *People* reporter Shelasky writes: “Nixon has found happiness with Marinoni” and “they share their life with Nixon’s children” (May 26, 2008).

In summary, *People* and *Us Weekly* provide positive coverage of various lifestyles and parenting approaches through their publicity-driven reporting styles. The magazines take a strong pronatalist stance – as long as one’s pregnancy fits within society’s boundaries. While non-traditional families, religions, or parenting styles are generally accepted, examples such as Nadia Sulemon and Jamie Lynn Spears demonstrate that not all pregnancies pass without criticism. These celebrities’

pregnancies met with disapproval rather than support from the publications; however once these outliers proved their ability to care for their child (and for Jamie Lynn Spears, enter the later teen years), the publications' tones transition to those used for "acceptable" pregnancies. A story on Spears during her eighth month of pregnancy presented her in a way that signifies the beginning of acceptance by the publication: a quote from the mom-to-be, a picture of her expanding waistline and news that she and the father plan to wed (Schutte, June 23, 2008). Having generated much public interest in the pregnancies through negative publicity, maintaining that interest is done by transitioning to more positive, longer-term coverage.

The example of Jamie Lynn Spears, the Disney star of family-oriented television show *Zoey 101*, highlights underlying norms within these publications. Her pregnancy announcement at 16 resulted in an ideal tabloid news story – a cover story for several publications. Celebrity weeklies' communicated her behavior as non-normative and socially unacceptable; Spears' previous success with Disney, financial situation, and long-term relationship with the father proved unconvincing evidence to the contrary. The single mom accepted by Hollywood appears to be at least 20 years old. A surprise pregnancy for 22-year-old Lily Allen is also reported in the same issue. Readers learn Allen was seen smoking recently, most likely while pregnant – a habit known as a high risk factor for birth defects (Guarente, January 7, 2008). Allen's behavior receives far less criticism than Spears, even though Allen had only been dating the father for three months and potentially harmed her unborn fetus by smoking.

Responses to Spears' teenage pregnancy further diverge from news of pregnancies among older actresses (sometimes near 50 and often pregnant through in vitro fertilization), who avoid criticism or discussion of the risks associated with an older pregnancy. When 41-year-old Halle Berry announced her pregnancy with boyfriend Gabriel Aubry, *People* declared she "now had the one thing she felt missing: the chance to be a mom" (Schneider, Garcia, Keith, Margaret, Carter, Cotliar, & Messer, September 17, 2007). In contrast, *Us Weekly* reported of Spears: "Now any carefree aspirations she recently entertained need to be pushed aside so she can prepare for her new life as a single teenage mom" (January 7, 2008, p. 44). Motherhood becomes a haven of bliss for celebrities of appropriate age getting their "happy ending," while Jamie Lynn Spears is treated as unprepared and unqualified to be a parent. Motherhood at a young age instantly becomes a burden rather than a joy.

When Families Suffer

Stories of scandal within celebrity weeklies are some of the most compelling stories for readers, often featured on the magazine cover to entice non-subscribers to purchase the issue (Crawford-Mason, Phone Interview, October 20, 2011). Much of the coverage of celebrity families includes stories of day-to-day life, but periodically these stories include darker topics: divorce, death, and tragedy (Figure 15 and 16). Of course, there are other scandals too – such as the treatment of Jamie Lynn Spears' pregnancy discussed above – but for the most part, magazines must wait for a public incident to uncover the challenges a celebrity family is facing.



Figure 15. *Divorce image.*

Focusing on the children of divorce dramatizes the events of a divorce. (Cover Images Courtesy of *Us Weekly*© Us Weekly LLC 2008, 2009. All rights reserved. Reprinted By Permission of Us Weekly LLC.)



Figure 16. *Family tragedy image*

Travolta's loss is accentuated through *People*'s sullen image of him and wife Kelly Preston, as well as text describing his emotions as "agonizing".

The Divorce Drama: Sensationalizing Change

When children are involved, a divorce offers celebrity weeklies a story guaranteed to have one losing party: the children (Figure 15). While a marriage may end amicably, no matter what the kids no longer will reside in a two parent home and custody arrangements will soon follow. Celebrity weeklies are quick to point that out – for example an *Us Weekly* reporter writes of the reality family, the Gosselins: “Call it the new reality for the Gosselin kids. Not only have the eight children...been forced to deal with the aftermath of their parents’ acrimonious separation, there is nothing understated or private about it” (Reinstein, August 3, 2009, p. 52). Similarly, *People* commented on Christie Brinkley’s divorce: “Instead, she now finds herself battling [her husband Peter] Cook over how to split up their family – and their assets” (Tan, July 21, 2008, p. 88). The language chosen by these publications – “battling” and “acrimonious” – highlight how difficult divorce is and alert readers that the celebrity family is in a state of crisis.

Some couples’ relationships end quietly and without media scandal. While the magazines may still question what happened, it is with an air of nostalgia. Of *Brokeback Mountain* couple Heath Ledger and Michelle Williams’ break up (the two were not married, but lived together with their daughter Matilda), *People* notes: “As the young parents set up house in a Brooklyn brownstone, they kept the public guessing about their marital status...But a few weeks ago, the two quietly called their coupledness off” (Stoynoff, September 17, 2007, p. 96). A later article written at the time of Ledger’s unexpected death continues: “Though she and Ledger had split in 2007, ‘Heath was the love of her life’” (Rodriquez, July 28, 2008, p. 63). Their relationship is romanticized –

even though it had ultimately ended – pulling fans into the tale which continues for one reason: their child.

However, when a celebrity’s inappropriate behavior led to the divorce, celebrity weeklies’ tones change quickly from respectful to harsh and judgmental. The magazine emphasizes those actions to build a story that will appeal to readers. When Mel Gibson’s wife of many years filed for divorce, the magazine emphasized Mel’s new “mystery brunette” girlfriend, the couples’ lack of a prenuptial agreement in a “marriage that had defied the odds of a Hollywood union”, and that they had “weathered some of the darkest times of Mel’s life” (Buerger, April 27, 2009, p. 47-49). Gibson’s adultery and many addictions become the cause of their breakup – with his latest tryst pushing wife Robyn Gibson to finally file. The language used sensationalizes the story beyond the facts of the divorce, a technique common to stories in these publications but especially in *Us Weekly*. Yet, as you engage in reading these publications over time it becomes obvious that celebrity marriages are not expected to last. Though the breakup of a celebrity couple may be dramatic or heartbreaking, for publications, a celebrity’s return to the dating pool simply means that the life cycle begins anew.

Tragedy and Loss

Often tragically unexpected, family drama also is found when either a loved one passes away or something irrevocably changes one’s life. Funerals are detailed for readers, a play-by-play that reminds them of the celebrity’s life and revisits the surprise of the death.

The service was delayed by last minute bickering. The deceased’s mother was heckled. And the frilly pink casket cover had a smiley face

made from Swarovski crystals. So went the funeral for Anna Nicole Smith. (“At rest, at last”, March 19, 2007, p. 83)

At the end of the 10-minute service – presided over by a Scientology minister – Travolta, 54, and Preston, 46, each approached the podium to kiss a picture of Jett on display. (Agresti & Reinstein, January 2, 2009, p. 9)

For nine months, William, 25, and Harry, 23, discussed the guest list, sought out appropriate readings and tested music on their iPods before choosing hymns like “I Vow to Thee My Country,” a favorite of their mom’s. (Lopez & Perry, September 17, 2007, p. 95)

These quotes highlight the intimacy within narratives that discuss death. The play-by-play method of summarizing a funeral brings readers into the action with a writing style that works to create a mental image of events and evoke emotion as the impact of loss is emphasized. Lisa Marie Presley told *People* that John Travolta and Kelly Preston were “utterly devastated” at the loss of their 16-year-old son. NiCole Robinson of television show *The West Wing* and her husband grieved the loss of their infant son: “Their devastation was beyond measure” (Lewis-Boothman, July 21, 2008).

Some stories discuss coping after the loss – as celebrities put their lives back together in the wake of tragedy. The process of recovery is painful – a truly human element that gives the story depth. *People* reports:

Whether the trial [examining his son’s death] will provide a sense of closure for Travolta, 55, and Preston, 46, and their daughter Ella Bleu, 9, remains to be seen, but it’s clear the months leading up to it have been heartbreaking.” (Tresniowski & McNeil, October 12, 2009, p. 58)

Coping involves working to return to a “normal life” (Rodriguez, July 28, 2008, p. 63). After a divorce, loss of a parent, and issues with her children, Marie Osmond “kept her signature smile in place through an increasingly difficult year” (Tauber, December 3,

2007, p. 109). These stories frame loss as something experienced and overcome: “For Chynna [Phillips], part of the healing process involved focusing on her still-burgeoning music career and ‘her profound and deep’ love for [husband Billy] Baldwin,” (Drew & Grossbart, October 5, 2009, p. 93). An optimistic tone also ends one of several stories on Jett Travolta: “Everyday is a turning point for John and Kelly. They get one day behind them, and then they get on with the new normal of their lives” (A friend quoted in Tresniowski & McNeil, October 12, 2009, p. 59).

Each of these stories of death, divorce, or personal tragedy works to accomplish a simple goal – to allow readers to mourn with celebrities. Bringing them into the drama of divorce, the shock and tragedy of a funeral, and the challenge of coping in the aftermath keeps readers hooked for the continued tale of a celebrity’s life. Positioned as both informative and intriguing, these articles demonstrate celebrity coping when life is taken out of one’s control.

Theoretical Implications: The Ideology of Celebrity Parenthood

Arendell’s 2000 survey of the field of mothering studies found:

The mothering experience is replete with dialectical tensions; for example, "mothering can confer both maternal power and an immense burden of responsibility" (Oberman & Josselson, 1996, p. 344). Mothering is a font of personal fulfillment, growth, and joy, on the one hand, and one of distress, depression, and anxiety, on the other (e.g., Ross, 1995). Child raising may bring personal development but also increased work and economic stress; it brings feelings of liberation and transformation but also of oppression and subordination. (Marshall, Barnett, & Sayer, 1998; Roxburgh, 1997, p. 1196)

The dialectical tensions summarized by Arendell come from first hand research with regular mothers. Motherhood, and more inclusively parenthood, is not concretely

positive or negative. It is a series of events that together, are reported by most parents to have made their life more meaningful. Yet within the pages of *People* and *Us Weekly*, these tensions become skewed, highlighting the “maternal power”, “personal fulfillment”, “growth and joy”, and “personal development” when celebrities are in the early stages of family life. Only when a marriage enters a period of demise or a celebrity parent is found unable to care for their child do the counter-tensions emerge within the publications – as divorce and tragedy exhibit distress, depression, anxiety, increased work, and economic stress. Taking this into account, therefore, *People* and *Us Weekly* promote an ideology of parenthood that is unrealistic – a fairytale for readers painted as celebrities’ reality. This ideology positions the maintenance of the initial family unit (whether single parent, two parent, straight or gay) as critical to maintaining a happy family. The most celebrated celebrity families enjoy a stable family unit. Additionally, successful celebrity parenting, void of the regular tensions faced by normal parents, comes only at the expense of luxurious goods, an ongoing staff of nannies to share the work, and personal trainers to support mothers as they overcome the physical changes brought on by pregnancy. This ideology positions the birth of a child as temporarily putting a celebrity off balance; equilibrium is regained by the return to a Hollywood-acceptable body and a relative freedom to parent and work at one’s personal discretion.

Arendell’s tensions therefore transform into media frames for celebrity life that communicate this ideology, offering an aspirational reality for readers. Celebrity parents easily transition between work life and home life, bridging the identity issues (Bailey,

1999; Haynes 2004) and work/life balance issues (Keene & Quadagno, 2004) identified by many researchers. Celebrities frequently communicated identifying as a parent first and actor/actress second, yet these identities becomes merged within the pages of *People* and *Us Weekly* as discussion of home life intertwines with the promotion of a new movie, television show, or album. The professional persona and the public persona on some level combine per the demands of readers/viewers who see celebrities as “symbols by which we narrate, negotiate, and interpret our collective experience and establish moral boundaries” (Breese, 2010, p. 352). This merged identity again serves the ideology in creating a version of female identity that does not struggle, or whose struggles do not feel quite so difficult. The idealized coverage of family demonstrates to readers a successful method of parenting unlike their own parenting experience. The question becomes whether this ideology of idealized celebrity families is accepted or reinterpreted by readers.

Concluding Thoughts

Celebrity weeklies introduce readers to celebrities they may or may not already know. The family offers the perfect way to create an ongoing story of celebrity life through the many events surrounding a family – weddings, pregnancy and birth, infant milestones, and challenges faced. In an interview with Clare Crawford-Mason, a reporter for *People* during its first five years of publication, she described the magazine’s initial purpose: “The whole purpose of *People* magazine is to tell you more about people you already knew about, and tell you things you didn’t know about people you knew about. And then tell you about interesting people you didn’t know about, you

should know about” (Phone Interview, October 20, 2010). This can be seen within the pages of this data sample – longer pieces that introduce a new family or update readers on an emerging actress’ home life. However, as celebrity weeklies developed as a genre (and the media environment evolved overall), Crawford-Mason notes that magazines like *People* and *Us Weekly* changed in their focus: “It seems to me that all it’s interested in is sensational stuff to do with Hollywood and entertainment.”

This analysis found that pregnancy and life as a family are often framed as joyful and ideal narratives. Regardless of the family structure or parenting approach, celebrities are happy about their pregnancies, find extreme joy with their newborns, and bounce back to their pre-baby bodies within a relatively short time frame. The celebrity usually has help getting settled in – with a nanny and a personal trainer, and the flexibility of filming means that maternity leave is rarely discussed. Some celebrities use their pregnancies to gain notoriety, especially reality television stars or lesser known actors and actresses. Regardless of their status, stories of new babies are popular and stories of family life are included multiple times in every issue of these magazines.

When stars experience traumatic events, the events are analyzed and made sense of. Divorce offers one of the few negative ways that family life is covered. The public nature of divorce puts the events of a break up in the public eye, even if celebrities refuse to comment on the situation. These publications may work to find and emphasize the most salacious aspects of a celebrity divorce, but also demonstrate respect when a marriage simply seems not to work anymore. Reporters work to put together a list of events leading to the divorce, and help readers to feel a part of the mourning process.

Expressive language is used to describe the pain and suffering of celebrities during a divorce or tragedy, but most stories end optimistically as celebrities begin a healing process. Soon the celebrity will be back to promoting a new project and will need to shed the wounded image and reassure readers they have recovered.

Overall, readers are brought into the world of celebrities through everyday activities. These stories make celebrities feel familiar and normal as readers see them out with their children, going through a pregnancy, on a date night post-baby, or wearing sweatpants at the grocery store. Ultimately, celebrities appear to desire what most people might want: “a happy family,” (Christie Brinkley, quoted in Tan, July 21, 2008, p. 90).

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS OF FOCUS GROUP DATA

Organization and Recruitment for Focus Group Participation

The previous chapter discussed the first stage of research, a narrative thematic analysis conducted of 36 issues of *People* and *Us Weekly* magazines. This analysis allowed me to become intricately familiar with the stories of celebrity family life in the media beyond my existing knowledge as a long-time reader of the magazines. With a goal of understanding how actual readers make sense of the stories and images within these publications, the second stage of research utilized focus groups to gather data. A total of five focus groups were conducted with mothers of young children who reported engaging with celebrity news media. To recruit participants, I utilized my personal connections with several local mothers' groups. Via email, mothers were invited to participate in a focus group discussing celebrities and their families taking place at my home.

The decision to hold the groups at my home was based on several key considerations. Primarily, the topic being discussed was determined to be one that fit within a home environment and might be more successful in a non-professional setting. A key goal of focus groups is to recreate natural conversation – in this scenario, conversation which might take place in a friend's living room. A second consideration was the location of my home in a central area that most participants could drive to within 15 minutes. The commonality of motherhood, geographic area, and overlap within the various mothers' groups from which I recruited resulted in a quick repertoire between

both the moderator and participants, even before starting the official focus group conversation. Participants were offered light food and drinks during the discussion.

The greatest challenge for conducting the focus groups was coordinating the schedules of women who stay at home, work part time, or work full time, with a requirement that they find childcare during the focus groups. To alleviate this issue, the focus groups were held either on a weekday evening or a Saturday morning. One group assembled during their regular meeting time with childcare available in an adjoining room. However, even holding the groups during times when another parent or caregiver might have been available still resulted in several smaller groups (participant n = 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7 members per group). Morgan argues smaller focus groups will be successful when participants are deeply engaged with a topic, avoiding lulls in conversation (1997). He writes: “Small groups are more useful when the researcher desires a clear sense of each participant’s reaction to a topic simply because they give each participant more time to talk” (1997, p. 42). Only the smallest group (n=2) in this study seemed to struggle with lulls in the discussion, yet even in this focus group participants demonstrated respect for each other while discussing multiple viewpoints and debating meaning.

Nine women worked part-time, ten women stayed at home full time, and three women worked full time. The average age of participants was 32.5 years old with a range from 28-41 years old. The 22 women all had a small child in their home, though many had more than one child. Over half of the participants identified themselves as heavy or medium consumers of celebrity magazines, reading these publications monthly.

The eight participants reporting heavy usage also visited blogs, websites, and smartphone applications on a daily basis, in addition to reading a weekly gossip magazine. Finally, 19 participants were Caucasian, one was biracial Native American/Caucasian, one was Chinese American, and one was Hispanic. Overall, the diversity in work situations and age satisfied my initial goals. Greater ethnic diversity may have broadened the scope of discussion, such as introducing a discussion of racial representation in these publications; addressing this in future research would be appropriate. All participants reported being middle or upper-middle class, another lack of diversity, but one which mirrors *People's* readership, for example, where average reader income is \$68,000 (“Demographics-*People*”, 2008).

Clear, consistent themes and celebrity exemplars emerged across all groups during the earliest phases of analysis, indicating that saturation had been reached. The remainder of this chapter interprets the data collected, emphasizing the project's research questions and understanding mothers' experiences in a media saturated world. To begin, data on media usage and environment will be used to contextualize how audience members engage with celebrity media.

The Pleasure of Gossip: Media Usage Findings

RQ6: What purpose do audience members report for engaging with celebrity news media?

Part of the data collection for this project included asking participants to fill out a short survey providing background information about their demographics and media usage. Participants were asked whether they were heavy, medium, or light media users.

This information showed that over half of participants were medium or heavy users – reading a celebrity publication at least once every month (and weekly for heavy users). Only one participant reported that she never read celebrity publications.⁴ This information was used to interpret the data from focus groups and connect media usage with participant commentary. The focus groups each began with a discussion of when, how, and why participants choose to read celebrity weekly magazines. The theory of media uses and gratifications indicates that different media are actively selected to fulfill different needs in a person’s life (Ruben, 1994). This project found that when mothers regularly read celebrity magazines, it is purely for pleasure. Many reported enjoying the “voyeuristic” element of reading celebrity gossip – something they would like to do with their real life neighbors.

I’m the kind of person, when you drive down the street, especially at night, I’m going to look into somebody’s house. How is the house decorated? I mean the stars are in such a position where, the good ones are open all the time. (Nina)

There’s this voyeuristic thing where you don’t get to peek into your neighbor’s windows, but here’s an excuse to hear all about someone’s marital issues or when people my age and our generation started having kids, it was always interesting. (Gloria)

Everyone wants to know what everyone is up to. With all the media, Twitter and Facebook and all that, everyone can know what everyone is doing. Especially like celebrities, a lot of people are very curious what their ordinary life is like. (Brooke)

⁴ Note, one focus group was conducted with a mothers’ group during their regularly scheduled meeting time. All group members were invited to the discussion resulting in the inclusion of some participants who reported lower media usage. However, all but the one participant still reported periodically reading celebrity magazines.

Participants consistently reported actively selecting magazines such as *People* or *Us Weekly* to fulfill a specific goal – namely escapism (Kristie; Angela). The “guilty pleasure” (Hayley) of reading about celebrities is “fun” (Susan; Laila).

Participants who reported lower media usage described celebrity magazines as something that “fills the time” at doctors’ offices and the grocery store. Others identified an important element of this study – the great predominance of celebrity news across all media formats.

I read it in the grocery store line or in Target. I’ll flip through but I don’t subscribe. But I do run into it a lot online. I don’t seek out those websites, but some of the blogs I read will link to them or whatever.
(Angela)

I saw on Foxnews.com there’s a section that talks about celebrity moms on the front page. And *People* magazine[’s website]. (Laila)

It’s interesting to me how much the nightly news will pull on a celebrity story. (Mindy)

There’s just more media. Well, we talk about the TV and there’s just – and the Internet, things that weren’t media outlets, that weren’t there 20 years ago. We have 300 channels, right? So then we’re not surprised that there’s these *Extra* shows dedicated to you know, celebrities and stuff.
(Katie)

The interactivity of the current media environment was evidenced through citation of the Internet, television, blogs, and magazines as interchangeable sources of celebrity news. Because so many media channels exist and must be filled with content, the topic of celebrity families offers a regular, popular subject for coverage. As participant Mia noted, “It’s continual news. You can’t always guarantee a scandal, but you can guarantee someone is having a baby.” Participants felt that motherhood (and parenthood) offered a story with universal appeal to women readers.

If women are the target audience, it's universal. For the most part, if you don't already have kids you are thinking about it in the future, or if you are a grandmother and you know, it's something that all women can relate to. (Angela)

People can identify with it because you know there's tons of parents out there. There's tons of mothers. (Claire)

It's just one piece of their lives that the rest of us can relate to. Whereas most of their life we can't relate to, you know because we just don't have houses and servants and drivers and planes and all these things. But we do have kids and if [celebrities] actually are at home, semi-taking care of their own children, then they're being thrown up on, peed on, they're up in the middle of the night, you know. (Destiny)

Focus group members identified the messages in these publications as targeting their age, gender, and lifestyle. Stories of celebrity parents emphasize commonality, bringing celebrities "down out of the clouds" (Destiny) for readers who may see few other similarities between their lives and stars.

For my participants, life with a young child served as a constraint that impacted overall media usage. As Caroline reported, she used to be able to sit and read the magazines at night: "Now that I have a child, I've got other things to do." Emma mirrored Caroline: "I have to tell you I don't follow it as well just because now I have two kids and I work. So there really is no time." However, participants still reported that when standing in the grocery checkout line, getting their hair or nails done, at a friend's or relative's house, waiting at the doctor's office and traveling, these magazines were ones they were likely to pick up.

I think it's just one of those things you don't have the time to take out, you're busy with other things and you want to read them and you want to indulge... When you're sitting there and you're traveling, I don't have anything else to do right now. We'll just soak it all in. (Hayley)

Whenever I go to a friend's house and they have an *Us Weekly* or a *People* or an *In Touch*, I always pick it up, regardless of the date. Because I love reading about the gossip. (Claire)

I think at the nail salon, when I get my hair done. Those kind of things. I'm all lost in the gossip. You could call my name, what? (Nina)

The nail salon. That's the last time I went cover-to-cover. (Emma)

Reading celebrity magazines becomes a luxury for mothers of young children and an escape. Comments such as Nina's getting "lost in the gossip" and Hayley's "soak it all in" indicate that reading the magazines essentially offers the reader an all-encompassing, pleasurable moment outside their normal daily existence. Hayley reported that when her husband interrupts her at the nail salon, she "gets upset" because that is her break from the responsibilities in her life. Many participants agreed that even out-of-date issues were still fun to read. Winship noted in her study of women's magazines that when and where one reads a magazine determines the amount of pleasure experienced (1987). Reading a magazine while being pampered or during a child's naptime brings the greatest pleasure because contextually a mother is enjoying "time off" from her job of caregiving.

Several factors influence the decision to read celebrity magazines. Because the magazines are commonly read while simultaneously doing other activities, reading them is often interrupted. Participants reported that the writing style in the magazines – namely short, sometimes blurb-like articles – made having to start and stop reading the magazine easy.

I pick it up because I can read it for five minutes and when I'm finished it doesn't matter. (Katie)

I think I would pick [up a celebrity magazine] even before *Cosmo* and things like that because you don't have to pay attention to it. You can just read little snippets; you can look at the pictures. (Nina)

And you can find the article you want to read and not bother with anything else. (Claire)

The “mindless” (Mia) content of stories also impacted the choice of media; participants felt it offered something different than the other magazines they read. Indirectly and directly, participants indicated a social taboo associated with reading gossip magazines. The perceived low-brow nature of these magazines' content meant participants most often framed reading celebrity gossip as a leisure time activity that complemented other, socially acceptable activities and reading. While most of my participants subscribed to at least one or two publications, usually these publications were magazines such as a parenting magazine, a hobby or professional publication, or *Good Housekeeping*. As Sarah put it, her subscriptions are to “all the stuff I should get” even though a celebrity weekly magazine would be the first thing she'd pick up in a waiting room.

It's fluff and something that's not so serious and you are doing serious stuff and you realize it's something mindless to read. (Angela)

It is just kind of mindless reading to just kind of to pass the time. I definitely wouldn't do that kind of reading at home because I'd rather have something more. (Katie)

I just switched over my *People* subscription and now I get it on my iPad and so then I can read them and people don't know I'm reading them. You can't look down on me. You don't know what I'm doing over here. I might be doing something really important. (Madison)

Just as Ang's *Dallas* viewers reported (1996), celebrity media users felt a need to explain and justify their media use when other, higher-brow options existed. One way

participants were able to navigate outside opinions of (and internal standards for) celebrity magazines was by not buying or subscribing to them. Perhaps part of the guilty pleasure, for readers who did not read the magazines every week, was that they are a treat – something one can't quite justify in the budget – and must savor during a trip to the grocery store, nail, or hair salon. Though it appears many of my participants read the publications second hand (including some reporting high media usage), when users not loyal to one publication would buy a celebrity magazine, the cover story greatly impacted the decision. For Hayley, it was “the trashier the better.” For Angela, she would “choose based on the cover” and “gravitate to whatever story I'm interested in.”

An interesting final note regarding media usage was the social nature of reading gossip magazines. Participants reported discussing celebrity gossip with female family members and friends, as well as their husbands.

The part that scares me is that my husband, like, knows things. Like even before me. And, I'm like, how did you know? I'll be right back, I'm going to check my facts. (Madison)

I feel like I'm doing [my husband] a favor because then he has something to talk about with all of his female colleagues because they all talk about celebrity news. He can actually like, you know, be a part of it. He works with a lot of women. (Audrey)

I buy them; my mother buys *Star*. We both get away with, “There's something I thought you'd like,” or “I didn't think you had this one.” (Gloria)

My sister had somebody she knew in New York, so she would get the information before it came out and she got that information about Tom Cruise, about how he's gay and had an affair with a drummer. (Laila)

Woven into the focus group conversations was the interaction celebrity media had with real relationships. One light media user reported this as an incentive for keeping up with celebrity news:

I just like to be able to know what people are talking about. I hate that feeling when everybody's, "Oh, did you hear, blah blah blah." And I am clueless, although a lot of times I am in the know, but I just kind of look at stuff just so that I know what's going on and what people are talking about. (Ashley)

Therefore, the news of celebrities begins to intertwine with the reality of social interactions.

'Being Pregnant Is In': The Impact of Celebrities on Pregnancy

RQ7: How do audience members interpret messages about celebrity pregnancy?

Pregnancy, including celebrity pregnancy, was seen as trendy. Participants felt that coverage of celebrities during their pregnancies was more than simply an infatuation with the individuals, but a general cultural trend influenced by celebrities and perpetuated by 24 hour media news outlets. Participants believed social acceptance of pregnancy had changed over time.

Talk about bodies that I think may be the positive with the media and pregnancy; I mean even back to Demi Moore [showing the pregnant body] on the cover of a magazine. I think [celebrities] made it a little more accepted to show you're bigger pregnant and to be pregnant. (Katie)

Being a mom is in right now. It's so trendy. It's not, if you think back to 50 years ago in the 60s, it wasn't out there as much and now it's like "What does she wear when she's pregnant?" and "What kind of nursery are they going to have for the baby? And how are they going to dress the baby?" (Kristie)

I'd say six, seven years ago it was celebrity weddings. Everyone was getting married and it was all about their weddings and how big they were

doing it. And it seems like the celebrity weddings have kind of died down a little bit and now the big boom is having babies. (Hayley)

One participant noted celebrities' unique position to push social change, arguing their culture allows them to take on more "modern" behaviors because it is "easier to get away with" while the general culture changes at a much "slower pace" (Mia). Celebrity pregnancy was seen as a social catalyst that affected participants' experiences with pregnancy.

I think it's more and more accepted to be pregnant and show you're pregnant in your tight tee shirts instead of a big, old baggy shirts that you used to wear when you're pregnant. And I think [celebrity pregnancies in the media] maybe has something to do with that. (Katie)

The trend is to have a baby, to adopt children, or have a baby. Even older celebrity moms. It became trendy. (Caroline)

While celebrities were seen as impacting the way women experienced pregnancy in some positive ways, participants also cited the creation of a new, thin standard for pregnancy enforced by celebrity pregnancies.

I guess we were talking about after the baby, but so many of them, while they are pregnant, they are not the big swollen. They are thin pregnant. (Sarah)

They don't gain as much weight. I was looking at, Rachel Zoe's pregnant now and I'm just like, "Oh, what is she wearing?" because she's the stylist and all the winter clothes are so ugly. So, I was all excited to like, look and see. You can't even tell she's pregnant half the time. (Courtney)

The trendiness of celebrity pregnancy ultimately both positively and negatively influenced participants' actual experiences. The "thin pregnant" standard produces a cultural ideal for judging the pregnant body as "women are expected to look prettier their entire pregnancy" (Katie). Yet the improvement in clothing options and social

acceptance overall makes feeling attractive while pregnant more common. As Susan noted, “I loved my belly. It was beautiful.”

Another interpretation common amongst focus group members found that media coverage of pregnancy and parenthood tended to cover the extreme stories, leaving out stories that either cover less popular celebrities, celebrities who do not have dramatic weight loss stories post-baby, or typical, run-of-the-mill pregnancies. Often the images of pregnancy in gossip magazines portrayed a “sanitized version of parenthood” (Gloria) that leaves out what is “not pretty” (Nina). Participants noted that many parts of new parenthood were unexpected because celebrity stories did not include them.

They don't talk about epidurals and episiotomies and pain later and incontinence, or whatever might come afterward, they don't talk about those things and so theirs is very much like “You're pregnant and cute,” and in some very sanitary and clean way you have a baby, and then it's cleaned up and pretty and you take pictures and everyone is happy and thin and lives on. (Gloria)

The moms that seem to have gone with the more natural route, like Blossom from, what's her name, Mayim Bialik. And, the one from the *Wonder Years*. Like, they took more of the like sort of natural, no drugs and they're co-sleeping and you know. On-demand feeding. You don't see them as much as like, in the losing the weight, because it's more realistic. I think like they look more like a mom would look after two months, or four months, or six months. So, they're not in the Heidi Klum, Celine Dion, you know, I lost it all in six weeks category. (Audrey)

I think a lot of how the media does present it, you know, like they present everything, there is always kind of a lens. (Mia)

Finally, participants noted that media coverage of celebrity dads was “absent” (Angela), or only occurred when dad was the bigger celebrity (Mia). Many participants felt like this reflected social norms that continued to position the mother as the primary caregiver.

I sort of wish maybe celebrity news covered the dad's relationship with the kid more because I think – I think there are probably a lot of dads out there who do spend a lot of time with their kids but it's not getting captured as much. (Audrey)

It goes back to how do we view motherhood, and our society and motherhood? The mother is the primary caretaker. She is the one who disciplines, structures, you know, does everything for the child, and again, the dad has a supplementary role. So, you know, again, that is how does the media portray – you know, portray motherhood. How do we, you know, place that role, you know, even on celebrities. And that stereotype is still there. (Mia)

I think for all the leaps that we've made in all this other stuff, there's still this “women are the nurturers, women are the caregivers.” Nobody wants a picture of the dad with the kids, because it's not the image of family life. Pictures of mom, yes. Dad and baby is just not of interest to the American people. (Gloria)

Each of these interpretations of stories on celebrity pregnancy indicate the social norms being constructed and reconstructed as participants read about and discussed the experiences of celebrity families.

The Parasocial Dialectic: “Special” and “Ordinary”

RQ8: What role does identification and fandom play in celebrity modeling?

The fact that ordinary talk emerges from reading celebrity gossip highlights how celebrity gossip transitions from an individual media pastime to a social enterprise.

Especially for heavy users, reading celebrity gossip shifts from reading about strangers to reading about personal acquaintances.

I've been following this Tom Cruise/Katie Holmes story for years and now that you know, they are starting to have issues because he wants her to have another baby and she doesn't want to, you know unless she gets another million. (Claire)

[Reality star Kate Gosselin] browbeat her husband and because I've followed the whole thing I understand now that he's a bit of an idiot, but at the beginning she browbeat the poor man. (Gloria)

Like my husband gets so frustrated because I'll be looking at a picture [of Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie and their six children] and I can name all the kids and probably tell you their ages. (Madison)

The fluidity between talk about *reading* about celebrities and talk directly about them illustrates the foundation for my participants' parasocial relationships.

Within this project, strong evidence of desired and existing parasocial relationships was found throughout the groups, but especially amongst those who identified as frequent readers. These relationships were characterized by a celebrity's uniqueness and notoriety, yet based on a belief that the celebrity was like oneself. The values a celebrity communicated strongly impacted readers' interest in parasocial relationships.

Though not labeled a dialectic tension, researcher Jermyn identified Sarah Jessica Parker's ability to portray herself in the media as both a down-to-earth mother and a fashion icon and celebrity (2008). This earlier study identified two key frames for the actress' presentation in the media. Speaking with my participants, these frames become the context for the celebrities that are admired both for their work in the entertainment industry and for being good parents.

[Heidi Klum is] like a combination of both – she's normal and yet she's so elegant and classy. She had fabulous clothes while she was pregnant. (Claire)

I think at the same time we can identify with them, it's also, at the same time it's the opposite, they're *stars*. What are they going to do, you know with their nursery, what is their nursery going to look like and you know

they are going to have beautiful babies, because they are beautiful people.
(Sarah)

I feel like a lot of times we say that and we want them to be normal, but then when they are we are like, “Oh my gosh, what the heck, cellulite?”
(Laughter from the group) You need to take care of that stuff. At the same time we say that we want them to just be relaxed, we want them to be like us and stuff, but you know we kind of do and we kind of don’t. It’s like they are somehow supposed to be held to a higher standard of beauty. (Kristie)

Feeling like a celebrity was “normal” or someone you could be friends with often meant they were more likeable. Jennifer Garner and Reese Witherspoon consistently emerged as down-to-earth, “good” celebrity moms within my focus groups, though a variety of actresses were named.

I’d like to see more of Amy Adams because I love, love her. I think we were separated at birth or something. I love Amy Adams and I think she’s wonderful. She seems like the kind of person you’d want to be friends with and you’d want to have her come to your parties and stuff. And you couldn’t hate her because even though she’s beautiful and wonderful, she is just so darn nice. It seems like that’s how she is to me, but it doesn’t seem like she does – and that’s why she seems so much more like us. (Kristie)

[Bethenny Frankel’s reality television show] is just fun and she seems like a woman I would like to be friends with in my real life. (Mia)

[Jennifer Garner] just seems more real and like, you can tell she plays with her kids. She’s with them a lot and she takes them with her a lot. They seem happy, they seem normal. (Laila)

In one group, participant Courtney said: “What I find interesting, everybody they’ve mentioned are all likeable actresses. They have not said one annoying or horrible person. Like Jennifer Garner is really nice and so is Reese Witherspoon. Like the wholesome, girls next door.”

As fans, my participants followed certain stories more closely, especially when the story adhered to the person's own value system, and discussed those celebrities using first-person, intimate language.

Brooke Shields. For a while, I had some issues with post-partum when my daughter was born and with her, and the Tom Cruise thing, I got very, for some reason I held her banner high. I was all about, "that asshole." You're going on television and talking about your experience, so I took her story really personally for a while. (Gloria)

I like Heidi Klum and Seal because it seems to me like they are a parenting unit. It's not just Heidi Klum had a baby, it's Heidi Klum *and* Seal had a baby. It seems like they are a couple and I think that is important for kids to have - parents. (Kristie)

I actually kind of think Kourtney Kardashian [is a good mom]. She did a bunch of things about breastfeeding, she was a great advocate for breastfeeding. (Hayley)

The salience of these topics for my participants – who could relate on a personal level – meant that they paid closer attention to the stories and how they were treated in the media. The end result was an intensified parasocial relationship.

Just as real life is peppered with friends, enemies, and associates, my focus groups supplied evidence that parasocial relationships exist with disliked celebrities. These parasocial relationships do not appear to be those of friends, but rather enemies or rivals. Adding this element pushes the celebrity gossip world into a new, more dimensional realm different from selective fan encounters.

I'm not going to lie, some of the celebrities I find irritating. I kind of like laugh at when they make mistakes. Then some of the ones I have more empathy for like, I'm like "Oh that's a bummer." I think it also depends on how you feel about the particular person who is being discussed. (Mia)

I laugh at a lot of them. Because you live your life in public, there are cameras on you 24 hours a day. Anytime you set foot out of your house,

like Paris Hilton is my ultimate train wreck. Why are you surprised that you are getting caught like that? Why are you going out without underwear and a short skirt? I mean if you are making those decisions as a sane and rational human being, adult, I get to laugh at you. (Gloria)

Like [Gisele Bundchen saying] mothers should be required to breastfeed their babies for a certain amount of time. And I'm like okay, I am nursing, but I still, I think that's horrible and judgy and you don't know individuals. And it's just none of your business because you happened to have a baby and aren't having problems with nursing. How dare you, you know? (Audrey)

The existence of non-friend parasocial relationships develops a dynamic encounter more similar to everyday life – and more interesting. Celebrity “villains” become a critical part of participating in this parasocial world by offering a contrast to those one admires. Other researchers have called relationships with disliked people “nonvoluntary relationships” (Hess, 2000) because participants do not choose them, but instead the relationship results from a shared community where people must interact. Hess identified what he calls the negativity effect that occurs during impression formation. Theoretically, the negativity effect impacts media interaction with disliked characters; as viewers determine their feelings about the character, the negative characteristics of a disliked media character will be more memorable than their positive (Shaw & Steers, 2000). For the present study, participants’ commentary on disliked celebrities demonstrated similar qualities to the relationships with liked celebrities, such as deep knowledge about the celebrity’s life or career including an ability to repeat intimate details about him/her. Negativity effect might explain the appearance of a parasocial relationship, as well as the significant recall. Though some participants might say they have no interest in reading about a celebrity, nonvoluntary relationships may occur

because of a celebrity's obtrusiveness within this medium. However, comments such as Gloria's and Mia's indicate that rather than skip stories about disliked celebrities, preferring instead to engage with a liked celebrity, participants do choose to maintain relationships with disliked celebrities – ultimately showing these relationships may too be voluntary on some level.

Finally, these focus groups indicated one key area where parasocial relationships differed from real relationships – the ability to “judge” celebrity friends/enemies differently than you would your face-to-face acquaintances.

I feel that how we would judge our peer group is different than how we would judge a celebrity. (Mia)

Claire said something very profound a minute ago – it's kind of something I've been thinking about. That we judge, we judge and it's okay to judge celebrities. If I were to say, “Oh my god, Kristie's such a horrible mom everybody, because she hangs her kid over the catwalk,” everybody would go, “Oh my gosh, Susan, I can't believe you are saying that about Kristie.” But you know if I go, “Michael Jackson's horrible because he hung his son over the balcony.” “Oh yeah, you are right, I saw that, he's horrible.” It's okay to talk about celebrities because we don't know them. Since we know the person next door, it's not, bless their heart, we feel bad saying bad things about them. (Susan)

These comments point to the distance within the parasocial relationship. A comfortable anonymity within the one-way, parasocial relationship allows participants to more freely judge celebrity parents. Just as these comments indicate a different standard for judging celebrities, they point to the fact that readers continually frame celebrity news stories through their own perspective and experiences. While assessing celebrities, participants also essentially consider themselves.

How Celebrity Parents Measure Up: Social Comparison

RQ9: How do audience members engage in social comparison with celebrities?

A major goal of this project was to better understand how participants interact with celebrities. Social comparison offered an area rich with data as participants wove comparisons throughout the focus group discussions on celebrity families. Social comparison theory stipulates that people engage in a process of self-evaluation through comparison with others. Festinger's upward comparisons refer to comparisons with a person one deems superior while downward comparisons occur with a person to which one feels superior. These evaluations can result in changes to how one feels about oneself. While one might expect comparisons with celebrities to most frequently evaluate the celebrity as superior, often participants concluded their own abilities were equal or better than the celebrity. This finding surprised me as a researcher, offering at least one dimension of reading celebrity gossip magazines in which readers consistently evaluate themselves in a positive way: parenthood. Engaging in social comparison for my participants involved a highly contextual, value-laden thought process in which participants judge their own parenting experience to be more authentic.

Analyzing the focus group transcripts, social comparison with celebrities most often occurred in relation to parenting, finances, and leading a public/private family life. Celebrities were discussed as people who share the commonality of parenthood, yet operate very differently from my participants – because of the unique lifestyle, financial situation, and notoriety associated with being famous. When asked why they thought

celebrity pregnancy and parenthood had become such a frequent story in the media, participants' often stated that parenthood was a relatable part of the human experience.

It's something we can relate to. Like, that's not something reserved for celebrities. I can get pregnant just like you can get pregnant. It's just something you have in common. They are going to go through the exact same thing during those nine, ten months. They are going to be looking for the same baby gear. It might, you know obviously they are going to be spending a lot more money and have a lot more support, but sort of at the most basic level it's a shared experience. (Audrey)

People can identify with it because you know there's tons of parents out there, there's tons of mothers. And we have to dress our children, so it's like well, what's [Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie's daughter] Shiloh wearing today? What's Jennifer Garner's daughter wearing? (Claire)

It is just one part of their lives that we can relate to, whereas most of their life we can't relate to. You know, because we just don't have houses and servants and drivers and planes and all of those things. (Destiny)

Discussing celebrities as parents yielded interesting responses indicating participants idealize some elements of the celebrity lifestyle while shunning others.

Frequently, issues relating to the work of parenting were vetted amongst group members as they compared "normal" parenting experiences with perceived celebrity experiences. The following interaction occurred during the first focus group:

Claire: I liked watching [a reality show where the family was struggling] because I was like my life is not that hard right now. But sometimes watching celebrities makes me feel better about myself as opposed to worse. Because it's like, ok well yeah, they may have two drivers, a chef and a personal trainer, two nannies, but they also have all of that, plus everyone looking in. Everyone scrutinizing them and no time with their children, and they still have to be who they are and it's like ok, well I just get to be me.

Susan: And then they all may not get to do the little things that we get to experience. Because they have the nannies and everything like that, you were able to watch your daughter play with your hands. When you have your first child and they discover all that stuff, it's like oh my god, you

smiled at me, you giggled at me. I never thought I could get so kooky over the smallest thing. How often do they get to experience the little things like that that actually make that time special?

Claire: Bath time. Kendra loves her bath time. She could be screaming her head off and we put her in the bath and she's all smiles. If we were hiring someone to do that, we would miss out on that, like you said. And that's what parenting is to me – capturing those little bitty moments with your children.

Kristie: David loves to be outside, so we try to go outside as much as possible. There are some days where you know, I finally gave up. Last year, I tried to be good, but now I'm like, you know what? If I'm in sweats and haven't put on anything, who cares? We are going to the park, I don't care. We are going to the park because he wants to go outside and go slide, slide, slide. Well you know if I was Sarah Jessica Parker, I couldn't do that because somebody standing outside my door going okay, here she comes, no makeup score! They don't just get to be a mom.

This conversation highlights what many participants communicated – that their hands-on parenting experience was preferred to the perceived celebrity experience where the work of parenting is outsourced or restricted. While Claire, Kristie, and Susan engage in comparison with celebrities' parenting experience and ultimately find their own to be more desired, they also importantly view the celebrity's environment as a critical element. Even though Kristie initially finds herself failing to meet the beauty standards that celebrities adhere to, she ultimately concludes that putting her son first is more important as part of parenting. Instead, Kristie's comment that celebrities "don't just get to be a mom," is one example amongst many demonstrating empathy for the culture in which celebrities must mother. The reverse of this statement then frames what these women appreciate about their own parenting situations – that they do "just get to be a mom." Within these conversations, the celebrity parent lacks agency in a situation

where he/she cannot control their environment. This upward comparison ultimately leaves participants feeling better about their own parenting situation in which a child's needs come before one's personal needs.

As demonstrated above, the celebrity's environment and professional demands are interpreted by some readers as impacting their freedom to parent. Expanding that, issues of privacy continually shaped participant comparisons with celebrity parents; a lack of privacy from 24-hour media added challenges normal parents do not face. Again, participants compared their own experiences with celebrity experiences and communicated both empathy for, and a lack of desire for public life.

It is just like they are normal people, but then I have sympathy for them because they are normal people at the park getting photographed.
(Angela)

Just in the last few weeks, Nicole Richie had to get a restraining order because the paparazzo were breaking into her daughter's day care and taunting her daughter to get a reaction so they could take pictures. And her daughter's like 2 ½ and I've never liked her, but I've been like, "Oh my gosh, what would that do to you?" This has been stuck in the back of my head for weeks, going poor woman. (Gloria)

I feel like I am under so much pressure to be the perfect mom and I'm still worried about what other people are thinking. And so, to be a celebrity mom and have it, I don't have cameras around me and I don't have millions of people looking at every move I make and every mistake that I make. I don't know that I could handle it. (Morgan)

The constant watch of the media meant that normal activities such as a trip to the park or day care might become ripe opportunities for the paparazzi. Again, the celebrity is not seen at fault, but rather as trapped by an intruding media.

Other participants framed issues of privacy not as an impossible reality, but instead an element the celebrity must manage. Participants respected celebrities whose children were not frequently photographed.

I think maybe it's the lack of organized media around [celebrity parents that I admire]. They are not as much the ones on the cover, or a cover shot of them and their kid in the living room that's perfectly manicured. That's not, the staged paparazzi shots like Ashlee Simpson or Nicole Richie where they are bringing it into their lives. (Gloria)

A lot of the good celebrity moms we don't hear about much because they keep their children protected. (Caroline)

I remember Julia Roberts was on *Oprah* quite a while ago and when she talked about her family, I almost forgot that she had twins. I just like her as an actress anyways, so I kind of, I like her. I think she's one that's not in the media. (Brooke)

I feel like Sarah Jessica Parker is probably a really, she seems really down to earth. I kind of forget that she has children. Like she just seems to keep the mother part of her out of the media. But the couple of pictures you do see, they just seem like -- . Like she talks about, you know, going home to tuck the kids into bed and feed the children. And I'm just like, oh, that seems like more of a priority. (Audrey)

In describing the children as “protected,” Caroline communicates that obtrusive celebrity children in the media may *not* be “protected”. In these comments, the celebrity parent becomes responsible for understanding the media environment and successfully managing it. Even though shielding their own children from paparazzi does not affect my participants' daily existence, understanding it as a given element for celebrities allows readers to organize the celebrities they read about into categories of involved parenting.

Rather than using language of comparison when considering the celebrity lifestyle, often participants instead commented on whether they could relate to that lifestyle at all. As I touched on in the beginning of this section on social comparison, participants negotiated understanding of the many people celebrities employ: nannies, assistants, nutritionists, personal chefs, and personal trainers. For participants, the existence of these employees was alternatively necessary and luxurious. Notably, they often provided the pivot point from which social comparison emerged.

Here I am, this stay-at-home mom. And Angelina's got how many people to take care of her bevy of children? And you know, they've got a chef and a dietician and a whatever, and a personal trainer. They don't have a *real* life. (Kristie)

(Asked whether parenthood makes her feel like she has more in common with celebrities) I would have to say absolutely not because their parenting life involves trainers and millions of dollars in nannies and mine absolutely doesn't. (Morgan)

They have their nanny, they have their personal chef, but do they have grandparents? Do they have siblings? Do they have friends, or do they need that because they have all these other people who help them take care of it? I have said so many times, I would have lost my mind if I didn't have [my playgroup on] Thursdays. I am paranoid that I'm going to get kicked out in March. I mean, do they feel the same way, or do they get to be adults because they have nannies who hang out with the kids? (Nina)

Again, the question of authenticity emerges in these comments. The “distant” nature of celebrity relationships and their day-to-day life almost made social comparison impossible for participants. And yet, comments demonstrating a validation from finding similarities with celebrities make clear that constant comparison occurs.

I use cloth diapers and I found out Alison Sweeney uses the same brand of cloth diapers. I was like, wow. Ok. That's pretty cool. Maybe these are pretty good ones out there. Validation, that's the word. (Kristie)

[Kourtney Kardashian's son] Mason has a little Sophie the giraffe and I was like, "Oh, Chris has a Sophie the giraffe!" (Susan)

These upward comparisons left participants feeling better about their own parenting choices. While some participants appreciated seeing celebrities make the same choices as them, often these choices were framed by another participants' comment:

"[Celebrities] are just going to get what their child needs. That is what we do too. Not everything has to be really expensive. They are going to get what they need and what's best for their kid" (Claire).

Media stories on new celebrity lifestyles elicited the most longing from participants. When comparisons were simple, the celebrity's life was idealized.

I look at the nurseries and it's like "Oh look, someone's decorated their nursery" and then I look at ours, and I'm like "Oh yeah, I'm sorry." (Madison)

Their nurseries are so nice and clean. Crystals and feathers and drapery fabrics. No vomit anywhere. Not a single Diaper Genie to be found. (Gloria)

Now as a mother, I've found that I have like, not that I feel jealous, to see these mothers having these elaborate birthday parties for their one-year-olds and you know taking them skiing and just doing everything for them. You know, it's just like, we can't all do that. Sometimes I'm like, wouldn't it be nice to have a full time nanny and just fly to Hawaii? (Caroline)

I'd love to take my kids on fabulous vacations. (Angela)

While participants appreciated the luxuries of celebrity parenthood, they also proved to be critical media consumers aware that these images are often a planned, media creation. As Emma noted, "The only problem is that picture was taken at a certain time." Once the conversation shifted to more detailed comparisons, participants again found their

own experience to be more desirable. The photo opportunity that becomes media news was often deconstructed to reflect a lowest-common denominator to parenting.

At the end of the day, what I have is real. It's nifty to read *People*, and all this stuff and go, ah, you know it would be nice to wear designer clothes while I'm pregnant and you know, granted I can only wear them for nine months, but what's two or three hundred dollars on a dress? It's fun to say, "Oh look, Mason is in a \$300 baby bouncy seat." But at the end of the day, it doesn't make a difference. Chris won't know the difference between his bouncy seat and you know whatever Mason has. (Susan)

It's not realistic and I'm sure you all understand that they are not really happy at all. (Laila)

I kind of get the opposite feeling because I feel like you know, Mario Lopez is great when you know she's new, she's little, she's cute. But 16 years from now, is he still going to be the doting dad? And you know what, [my husband is] still going to be the doting dad, and I know that. I get this feeling that they are all such wonderful dads when the kid is first born, woohoo photo opp. How often do you see Tom Cruise with his older kids? (Kristie)

Each of these participants evaluates the celebrity experience as less predictable and more fabricated. These comments indicate both the pleasure of escape involved in reading about celebrities and the boundaries for those thoughts. The fun of imagining living a celebrity's life ends when looking at the bigger picture of celebrity existence.

Even discussion of the body before and after having a baby was framed by an understanding that celebrities must adhere to a different standard and exist in a different reality. As participants considered stories about post-baby weight loss, most felt the stories either represented the fact that a celebrity's livelihood comes from their image or that the celebrity utilized their access to resources that made getting in shape possible.

Like I said, trainers and a lot of money. I don't think Jessica Alba looked like that overnight without help from somebody. (Mia)

It just amazes me that they can devote the time and they can focus on getting, on dropping their baby weight and getting back in shape and that's what they do. You never hear about, Jessica Alba was my favorite story because she dropped her baby weight in like four or five weeks and I'm like, you've got to be kidding me. To me, that is not natural. That is a perk of being a celebrity when you can have a personal trainer, a personal chef, and a nanny and your job for those eight weeks is to get your body back. Not parenting, that's secondary, but it's to get your body back in shape because your livelihood depends on it. (Claire)

They make it seem simple. All you have to do is eat right and work out with my yoga guy two times a week, and now I'm smaller than before the baby. (Gloria)

These comments indicate that social comparison is occurring, but that evaluations are influenced by the perception that celebrities' lives are very different. Generally, participants felt that actresses must lose the baby weight faster than regular moms because regular moms are not expected to adhere to the same rigid standard.

I would never, even though it's great for them, I would never hold myself up to that standard even though it's tempting to. They just have a different life. (Angela)

We may put pressure on ourselves. I don't think society necessarily puts pressure on the regular mom to be right back in her clothes, you know, immediately. (Morgan)

You know I go back to work, and everybody says "Oh Susan you look great." But if they are not the size zero, nobody goes "Oh Jessica Alba, you've got fifteen pounds to lose. How come you haven't lost it?" (Susan)

I do think there's extra pressure – that's their job. They are paid based on their looks and based off their looks. (Hayley)

Because of the perceived difference in a celebrity's day-to-day existence and my participants' existence, participants used this dissimilarity to attribute the celebrity's success to external factors rather than internal capabilities. Unlike the other comparisons

identified in the research, body after baby proved to be one area where celebrities were clearly superior (unlike parenting ability or the benefits of endless resources).

Attribution theory answers the question of “why” something happened (Kelly, 1973) – and for my participants, understanding why celebrities get in shape and lose baby weight faster than they do comes through attributing it to the celebrity’s culture. Underlying my participants’ comments is the belief that with the same resources, they could be equally successful at weight loss. Rather than making an evaluation that might lower self-esteem, viewing the situations as incomparable allowed my participants to make sense of their own post-baby body (unlike the previous topics in which the environment did not preclude comparisons). Celebrity weight loss was interpreted as a result of the means available to them, and not as an inherent quality making them better qualified than my participants.

A similar, secondary external attribution for celebrity weight loss success identified the media as perpetuating myths of celebrity weight loss. Reality star Kendra Wilkinson’s bikini shoot for *Playboy* post-baby was discussed by several groups who had seen the shoot on her television show as well as the printed magazine cover. The heavily airbrushed final image greatly differed from Kendra’s body shape at the time. As one celebrity who had openly discussed the challenges of “getting her body back”, having her image touched up and thinned down frustrated participants who had found validation from her struggles.

The cover was obvious. I was like, “Oh my god.” It was extremely obvious that it was airbrushed. And she made a bit of a comment on it, but she’s not really going to say much when they take the roll over your swimsuit off. (Hayley)

Participants acknowledged the coercion that occurs when the media airbrushes a photograph to improve a celebrity's appearance and ultimately concluded that even celebrities who do not immediately lose the weight are still presented with idealized post-baby bodies. While most participants somehow demonstrated a desire for the thinness of celebrities, they did not see their inability to lose baby weight as a failure. Instead they reframed their current bodies as part of the overall impact of being a mother:

If you work whatever job, you have that time [off for maternity leave]. But they don't. They have that kid and they are working. In a way, I kind of pity them for that. That they are not getting to spend that time and really bond and it makes me feel a little more distanced they are getting the whole mother experience which the first three months for me, I mean it was a terrible experience for me, so maybe they are lucky. But they are not getting the whole thing. Ok boom they have the kid, drop the weight. Work out, do what you do to get back to being thin. (Kristie)

Once again, the new identity of mother allows for exceptions to previous standards to be acceptable.

The role of social comparison highlights the ways in which readers are considering celebrities. The dimensions of comparison demonstrate that while readers may fantasize about certain aspects of celebrities' lives, ultimately in many ways they see celebrity mothers as a group that overlaps and diverges from the universal experience of parenting.

Casting Your Role Model: Social Learning from Celebrities

RQ10: How do celebrities act as role models and how do audience members alter their own behavior in response to celebrity models?

Closely related to theories of social comparison, social cognitive theory pushes beyond comparison and examines how people learn from their environment. Just as participants engaged in parasocial relationships and social comparison, this research found ripe examples of the ways that celebrity role models shape parenting behaviors. As Audrey commented, “[Celebrities] are going to go through the exact same thing during those nine, ten months...at the most basic level, it’s a shared experience.” While some participants said they were more likely to turn to family or friends for advice, others noted that “it’s the same reason we read books about, you know, like, *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*. Because, you know, there’s other moms that have gone through that kind of thing” (Morgan). The impact of celebrity media on parenting behaviors was communicated through the admiration of generic role models, as well as specific parenting situations. Being a parent made participants more empathetic to celebrities who are criticized by the media; participants reported a change in the way they interpreted stories of celebrity pregnancy and parenting after experiencing it themselves. “Oh, I don’t know of good mom, bad mom. We’re all good mom/bad mom. It just depends on the day and what we are being faced with,” said Claire.

One way that focus group members indicated both the change in how they read a story and the occurrence of social learning was discussing the post-baby body. Frequently, the women in this study commented that they were surprised at the actual

appearance of the post-baby body and the challenges of losing the baby weight based on what they had learned from the media.

Before I had David, I was reading those stories and I was like “Well shoot, I can do that. Oh yeah, I’ll be able to do that no problem. I mean heck, my mom was up and walking two hours after she had me. I’ll be working out the next week. I’ll be fine.” And then you have the kid and you have the c-section and you can’t walk and you can’t work out and then you read the stories and you’re like no. No, no, no, no. (Kristie)

I didn’t know that’s not the way it was until I had a baby and then it was like it can take months to [lose baby weight]. (Courtney)

I’m like “I look like a deflated balloon.” Even though I watched plenty of those *Bringing Home Baby* shows, and stuff like that, and those women for whatever reason, they looked five months pregnant, but not a deflated balloon, they had a nice taut belly. I wasn’t taut! Not at all! (Susan)

And then they tell you you will lose [weight] with breastfeeding and then you don’t! (Laila)

These participants held expectations for the birth and post-birth experience – and the differing reality proved to be a disappointment. The discord between media presentation and reality of pregnancy may be one reason why so many participants framed celebrity weight loss not as a personal achievement, but as a result of access and need in a culture demanding ideal bodies.

Reality television shows, and their complementary celebrity news coverage, proved to be a surprising source of parenting information for my participants. Many of them appreciated seeing “real people,” even though often those reality families became famous, such as Kate Gosselin. Though participants felt they had little in common with reality families, they still learned from them.

I watch what they eat. I watch what they are feeding their kids. Say what you will about having that many kids, I don’t necessarily agree with it

myself, *but* I do like some of the values that they install on their kids.
(Nina)

I do use that format for my time out. It's a warning. It's in time out, while you're out, the time, tell them again why they're there and a hug and a kiss and I'm sorry, you know. I got that from reality TV. (Camila)

Can I tell you, when I was pregnant and I would have these like, "Oh my gosh, can we handle this?" I would watch the show [*16 and Pregnant*]. It was like, "Okay, they may have issues, but their babies are, like, alive."
(Madison)

Focus group discussions indicated that participants both watched reality families on television and read about them in gossip magazines and other media. Reality families and other celebrities often offered participants an expanded social world with access to others experiencing the same parenting situation.

So, yeah, I do watch [parenting reality shows] to see – Okay, how did they handle this situation? 'Cause there's times when I'm, like, I don't know what to do and somebody I know hasn't necessarily gone through the same thing. (Ashley)

There's a story on Jennifer Garner, she'd gone somewhere where she was getting her daughter out of her car, but the car automatically locked. So they had all these paparazzi pictures of her talking her daughter into taking her car seat, her seat belt off and unlocking the door. And I had a short in my alarm and three weeks later locked my kid in the car and she couldn't figure it out. But it was one of those moments, I was like I should have taught her. Jennifer Garner taught her daughter. Her hands were too small to undo the slots and we had to call the tow truck and it was horrible. Jennifer Garner did better than me. And I really like her. I don't think any of the mothers in my mothers' group would ever admit that it happened to them, so having somebody publicly crying outside of her car made me feel slightly better. (Gloria)

I think that it's great that she is willing to share that with other moms who maybe, you know, are, like, "Oh, my gosh. I just want to, you know, why doesn't somebody write a book about this because I would love to – even if I don't agree with her all the way – to be able to identify with somebody that's going through the same thing." (Morgan)

Identification played a key role in visualizing a celebrity as a role model. The same mothers were consistently listed: Jennifer Garner and Reese Witherspoon. Often participants felt these moms seemed “hands-on” wearing jeans and sneakers to the park with their kids, who always looked happy.

I like Jennifer Garner. I really like Jennifer Garner and the way she’s raising her girls. Um, I don’t know why because all I ever see in the pictures if they’re at the park, they are getting coffee, but it seems like she’s got a good head on her shoulders. (Claire)

[Jennifer Garner’s] kids always have these huge smiles on their faces. They look identical to their mother, so it’s kind of funny. They always seem like genuinely happy. Not these sullen children walking around being paraded. (Madison)

The relatable “girl next door” nature of Garner and Witherspoon was contrasted by participants’ sense-making process for drama-prone actress Angelina Jolie.

Angelina Jolie, I mean I don't know if she's really a good mom, I would like to think she's a good mom. I mean she seems to love her children, but sometimes you wonder what her motives are, like you were saying, with seven children. How many do they have, six, eight? (Hayley)

I heard an article, and who knows if it’s true or not, but they were saying that they don’t have any overnight nannies. Like they don’t have any overnight help. They have, don’t get me wrong, they have plenty of help during the day, but I read in an article somewhere that they don’t have any overnight help. And, so I always think about that when I see pictures now. Trying to figure out if it’s true or if they can handle that. It sparked my curiosity, like really. (Madison)

I don’t see why [Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie] don’t get married. It’s like they’re making a statement by not getting married. (Courtney)

I think that Angelina Jolie gets a hard time at the same that she is glamorized. Even in the realm of celebrities doing something that’s atypical. The size and the way the family developed. I think it cuts both ways, in some ways they are very, they laud her for being willing to take in a child that isn’t her child, but at the same time being, criticizing her motives. (Angela)

While participants were willing to consider Jolie's parenting, they could not easily classify it as admirable or odd the way they could with more traditional celebrity moms. Known for "weird" (Mia) behavior, Jolie was seen as pushing social boundaries. Because her actions did not clearly follow social norms, participants did not see Jolie as a role model.

This response by participants was typical when celebrities either violated the participant's value system or expectations. Other celebrities "taking things too far" lost credibility as role models.

Even in [play group], there are some people, this is horrible, but I kinda tune them out because I know that I don't necessarily agree with their philosophies and it's the same people every time, and it's the same stuff every time. I think it's kind of the same thing with celebrities. There are certain celebrities that I don't agree with you, so you can pretty much bite me, and I'll listen to people I agree with. (Nina)

I think it gets excessive. The whole Angelina Jolie/Brad Pitt thing. I think it's a little overboard. To have six children in six years. Is that realistic? I know there are people with four, five, six kids, but not in that short span, you know, and they have nannies, you know? They have help and that's the only way that that can really happen. So I think that's a little bit excessive. That's too much. (Hayley)

It just seems like that to me, Hollywood always does that though. This is where the normal people are (using hand motions), and then they go like that step further. Okay, now you are entering the Tom Cruise, Katie Holmes example wackadoodle and that's just ok, we can't relate to that. We can relate to you up to this line, as real people, but you've overstepped it and now you're no longer in the realm of reality. (Kristie)

Actions outside of social norms are often met with social sanctioning – an element of social cognitive theory which stipulates that behaviors resulting in punishment, rather than reward, are less likely to be imitated. Media criticism of non-normative behavior serves to reinforce a participant's own negative conclusions about the celebrity. These

comments also highlight the existence of normative parameters regulating modern parenting.

The critical role the media plays as regulator most often surfaced not in discussions of parenting approaches, but rather in parenting behavior. Participants identified the media as once again applying a “lens” (Mia) to its coverage of parenting noting, that some parents were constantly being “judged” more than others (Audrey). Several years ago, Britney Spears was spotted by the media driving her car with her child on her lap. This action violated several well-known child safety rules, including children should ride in the back seat and be buckled into an appropriate car seat for their age. Every focus group brought this behavior up as one representing “bad parenting.” As participant Susan responded, “That is pretty ‘bad mom’ though.” Others called her parenting “awful” and “irresponsible.” The combination of Britney’s actions and the media’s lens clearly impacted my participants who internalized this message, what Katie called one of the “Britney Spears’ Moments” of (bad) parenting. This instance of both celebrity as role model and the media as punisher resulted in an across the board lesson for the mothers in my focus groups.

Other distinct instances of the impact of media framing on behavior were reported by participants.

I remember the baby’s name. Jessica Alba didn’t put the sunshade on top of her little baby in the stroller, BAD MOMMY. You know good mommy had a little baseball cap on her baby so the sun wouldn’t get in her eyes. So now I’m constantly like, “Oh my gosh, am I a good mom or a bad mom?” (Susan)

We have a two story house; we have a catwalk and every time I go get David ready for bed and then we wave to daddy downstairs, I’m like “Oh

my gosh, this is Blanket!” I’m just holding him and we are waving, but I’m like, “Ok, shake the Michael Jackson image.” Every single night, you’d think I’d get over it. (Kristie)

Days that I wear heels carrying my daughter up to daycare, I’m glad people don’t have a camera because there are certain days like, I made it back to the car and we all lived. (Madison)

These media stories each resulted in the mother questioning her own behavior or feeling subconscious when her behavior mirrored the criticized celebrity behavior. Each of these stories occurred years ago and yet these anecdotes point to the vividness of the learning experience.

While social learning did occur with participants, other comments within the focus groups returned to the idea of empathizing with celebrities constantly under the media’s gaze. Some celebrity behaviors criticized by the media were given more leeway with my participants.

Katie Holmes wasn’t complaining or concerned about the bottle. It’s the media that’s saying, “Hey, look, still got the bottle.” (Ashley)

[The celebrity baby] was the same age as my oldest daughter and I remember seeing her on the news or something and it was the day she was carrying the baby and the baby just launched backwards. Well, mine was doing the same thing, I mean, I would come down the stairs just holding her like this and she would launch out of my arms. And they made such a big deal of out it. They just crucified her as the worst mother ever to have almost dropped her kid on the sidewalk. And I thought, “Well, mine does that seven times a day,” you know? And I really felt like it was incredibly unfair implying that she was not paying attention and just, you know, dropped her child. When actually it was at the age they just go backwards. And I still feel bad for her for that one incident. (Destiny)

I think it depends on what it is too. If they are being judged because their wearing princess heels that’s one thing. But, if you’re Britney Spears and you’re holding your child in the seat of your car while driving then, you know? (Emma)

Here, we see that lived experience supersedes media sanctioning. Participants used their own personal experiences to make sense of media stories, and when they had direct experience they used this information to make sense of new information. The pressure noted by participants to embody a perfect mother impacted their own interpretation of relatable media stories about parenting. As Mia noted, “I just dropped a cell phone on my baby’s head yesterday. So who am I to point fingers?”

Concluding Thoughts

The goal of this chapter was to better understand the interaction between celebrities and people who read and follow celebrity news. The expanding genre of celebrity news, and its great popularity, made this study easy in some ways – almost any young mother could have sat down and spent an hour discussing the media’s coverage of celebrity parents. The inclusion of celebrity gossip on traditional news programs, including the local evening news, means that most people who read any news are exposed to celebrity parenting stories. Decidedly, the participants who indicated being the heaviest media users had the most involvement with celebrity gossip – following stories closely, authoritatively repeating knowledge of celebrities, and voicing stronger opinions than lighter readers. These participants also often became the dominant speaker within a focus group due to their comfort with the topic and high involvement in the stories being discussed. As the moderator, I worked to make sure quieter participants’ voices became part of the conversation. Though heavy users had the widest range and deepest knowledge, medium and light users also showed significant story

recall including details and names. Considering the theories involved in this study, this finding implicated the power of social learning with celebrity exemplars.

This chapter ultimately found that readers of celebrity magazines interpret and use information about celebrity families to examine themselves, broaden their social world, and learn about appropriate parenting behavior. The celebrities become friends and enemies, particularly as participants' increase their media usage. Focus group discussions wove together participants' sensemaking to both demonstrate the pleasure involved in reading celebrity magazines, and the constant comparison with celebrity life. Ultimately, the term "escapism" proved to be just what my participants wanted and got from celebrity news magazines – a temporary break from their own day-to-day existence.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

This dissertation project sought to understand how gossip magazines frame messages about celebrity parenting and how those messages impact the experiences of real parents. *People* and *Us Weekly* are not parenting publications, intended to instruct parents on parenting behaviors; instead these are lifestyle publications that talk about celebrities' personal lives. Yet, the initial analysis of content identified at least 1/3 of stories in gossip magazines focus on family life. With this information, I was drawn to the question: Do readers learn about parenting from these stories? And if so, what do they learn? Explanation for how this learning might occur was theorized using social cognitive theory, which states that people learn appropriate behaviors from watching the world around them including role models performing the behavior. This theory paired nicely with my original observation and one documented by other researchers: that celebrity mothers had become an extremely popular and fine-tuned story in the media (Douglas & Michaels, 2005). The indication that parenting stories might be a dominant part of gossip magazines offered the chance to broaden Hermes' initial, general work on gossip magazines by focusing on a particular readership and topic. The application of media effects theories such as framing, social cognitive theory, social comparison, fandom, identification and parasocial relationships expanded the initial research idea into a more complex and interesting dissertation project. During this chapter, key research findings will be discussed for both the magazines' communications and the focus group discussions with audience members, including their relevance to previous scholarship

and theoretical implications. I will then address the cultural implications and conclude with my thoughts on directions for future research and limitations of the current project.

Textual Analysis Key Findings and Theoretical Implications

My first step in addressing how gossip magazine audiences interact with the celebrities they read about was to analyze the content of 36 issues of *People* and *Us Weekly* to determine what these publications were communicating about pregnancy and parenthood. Visual analysis of the images in this sample found that most articles included pictures of both celebrity parents, a finding which differs from previous research pointing to an absence of visual representations of fathers (Wall & Arnold, 2005; Dworkin & Wachs, 2004). The great inclusion of celebrity fathers offers evidence for celebrity news outlets' influence in shaping how audiences think about parenting gender roles, especially as compared to traditional parenting information media outlets. However, stories featuring only one celebrity parent (a much smaller portion) most frequently focused on the mother, communicating that visually mothers still remain central to parenting. Positioning women in domestic settings such as the nursery or kitchen reinforced the gendering of household activities (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Though Chodorow argued both men and women can "mother", images of parenting in these publications continued to reinforce women as performing the mothering behavior of caregiving (1998). Some images of egalitarian parenting existed, but were most commonly found in families with more than one child.

Materialism is positioned as central to being a good celebrity mom (Douglas & Michaels, 2005). In this data sample, the celebrity pregnancy announcement signaled

the start of the consumption process for mothers-to-be and their friends. The close tie of consumption and pregnancy identified the celebrity's baby as "special" while simultaneously serving as a euphemism for good mothering. The good-mom-as-consumer appears in previous research as well (Coffey, Siegel, & Livingston, 2006). Because women carry the child during pregnancy, consumption becomes gendered – a female act in preparation for the new family member (Taylor, 2000; Thomsen & Sorenson, 2006). Within this study, celebrities performed this ritual through baby showers and decorating nurseries for their children and while gifts were for the baby, it was the mother who selected and received them.

Stories about early parenting in celebrity magazines were most often framed as positive, life changing experiences with minimal conflict or anxiety. This occurred during pregnancy and after the birth, a portrayal of parenthood that contrasts previous studies showing women struggle with the changing body shape during pregnancy (Bailey, 2001; Earle, 2003) and new identity of being a mom (Earle and Letherby, 2007; Freud, 2008; Bailey, 1999). Celebrity motherhood therefore appears stripped of the real challenges new mothers face, instead projecting an idealized pre- and post-birth experience. For fathers, the reported "accomplishment" of becoming a parent often is communicated as a central part of identity, unlike research demonstrating this identity as subordinated to professional identity for most men (Keene & Quadagno, 2004; Wall & Arnold, 2007). Again, this projects a positive, if unrealistic, parenting message being sent by these publications.

While maternity leave was rarely directly discussed, the post-baby body was a frequent topic of discussion. Dworkin and Wachs (2004) identified getting your body back after pregnancy as women's "third shift" of work after housework and paid labor. For celebrities, the close tie between the body and paid labor prioritizes body work over caregiving, a different scenario than what non-celebrity mothers face. The "second shift" of unpaid caregiving work (in addition to the "first shift" of paid labor) is outsourced (whether shortly after birth or when the child is older) as celebrities manage social expectations for the "third shift" of body work. Stories assumed that celebrities would return to the pre-baby body shape, or even an improved physique. Articles on celebrities who did not immediately lose all of their "baby weight" framed their bodies as a work-in-progress rather than a new, accepted post-baby body. Celebrities become morally culpable for maintaining a socially acceptable body, just as pregnant women reported feeling in Earle's study (2003). The third shift of body work therefore becomes required as opposed to encouraged.

When returning to work, articles on celebrity family life indicated that celebrity mothers remain the primary caregiver, a conclusion mirroring the visual analysis. While fathers may help out, hiring a nanny was what truly allows celebrity mothers the freedom to continue the demands of celebrity life, including working. The role of the nanny in celebrity families is not unlike the role of nanny studied within other contexts (Macdonald, 1998). Instead of pushing our culture toward shared parenting duties, women must outsource the caregiving labor in order to participate fully in the workforce. Combined with cultural expectations idealizing mothers and pressuring them for

perfection, the management of the nanny relationship falls under the celebrity mom's activities.

The invisibility of the nanny is an important part of the celebrity mother's media depiction, an aspect of mother as "superwoman" working and caring for her family without needing help (Hertz, 1996). Working celebrities must simultaneously acknowledge the existence of help and perform as a superwoman – a contradiction. Macdonald noted that working mothers maximized time with their children by making it special with unique activities and outings (1998), a description that innately characterizes many of the images of celebrity families found in *People* and *Us Weekly* such as park and shopping outings. Not to be overlooked, however, is the magazines' own vested interest in portraying successful celebrity parents enjoying time with their families; images of child and nanny detract from the sellable celebrity child's popularity and the importance of the parental relationship.

The textual analysis identified many family types represented within the data set. Readers are exposed to a great number of celebrity families that either have same-sex or unmarried parents, in addition to married couples. In a society where the normative behavior retains traditional values, media coverage of non-traditional family structures has the opportunity to impact social norms and change beliefs about what families should look like. A report from the Williams Institute at UCLA found that same-sex families grew 30% from 2000 to 2005 (Gates, 2005), a number indicating that celebrities are not the only ones identifying and coming out as same-sex families. These families are presented by *People* and *Us Weekly* the same way traditional, nuclear families are

covered. Elton John and his partner's recent birth-via-surrogate received excitement just as any other celebrity baby would have. This normalizes same-sex families in a constructive way.

Addressing the magazines' content had a simple goal: to establish what celebrity news outlets were saying about celebrity pregnancy and parenthood. While others have presented research based on their own assumption of content, a gap existed in the literature that methodologically approached gossip magazines' content. The findings from this portion of the dissertation supported the initial motivation for this project: to understand whether parenting messages existed, what those messages were, how they framed parenting, and how they differed from other media messages on parenting. These findings summarize some of the messages about parenting being communicated; the use of focus groups offered the chance to learn how audiences interpreted them.

Audience Reception Key Findings and Theoretical Implications

Celebrity gossip magazines glamorize the celebrity lifestyle for readers who report escapism as their main purpose for reading them. The language participants used to describe the guilty pleasure of gossip magazines reflected the transported state discussed by Potter (2009), one in which readers "lose their sense of separateness from the message, that is, they are swept away into the world of the message" (p. 26). While this research expands and builds previous work on women's magazines (Winship, 1987; Hermes, 1995), as well as work on more general genres of media targeting women, such as romance novels and soap operas. In many ways, the content of gossip magazines mimics the fictional tales that characterize romance novels and soap operas (Radway,

2008; Modleski, 2008), a conclusion Hermes determined as well: “gossip magazines appear to offer the pleasure of fiction in the guise of journalism” (1995, p. 124). Their portrayal of parenthood begins to feel fictional as readers immerse themselves in tales of perfect nurseries, ideal children, involved fathers, and sunny days at the park. Each week, readers are updated on their favorite characters or families. Of romance readers, Radway notes: “As she assembles the plot, therefore, the reader learns, in addition to what happens next, that *she* knows how to make sense of texts and human action” (2008, p. 496). This happens because plots are predictable, just as the narratives for gossip magazine story types, identified in the thematic analysis, become predictable to readers. And even as these narratives are seen as extreme, possibly even unreal, ultimately, audiences enjoy and believe the gossip they read.

Focus group participants consistently noted what they read may not be true per the nature of gossip, often highlighting the constructed nature of these stories as part of celebrities’ manufactured public images. However, they do not directly question journalistic integrity – in fact, the accepted lack of integrity at times seemed to increase the pleasure found from reading these gossip publications. This “suspension of disbelief” is a core part of Potter’s definition of an audience member in the transported state (2009, p. 26). Audiences want to read about the drama, to wonder whether the story is true, to speculate along with the rest of our culture. Celebrity watching has become a cultural phenomenon (Cashmore, 2006) and to read these publications is to participate.

Supporting Ang (1995) and Hermes' (1995) findings with their respondents, participants in this study made excuses and rationalizations for their choice of media. Reading about celebrity gossip, an activity perceived as low-brow, was something participants accepted about themselves, but defended publicly. The "moral hierarchy" Alasuutari (1992) defined for television applies to this project, as participants framed parenting magazines and professional journals as more "appropriate" ways to spend time than reading gossip magazines. However, when participants knew others who read or enjoyed celebrity gossip, comments about the value of celebrity magazines took on different meaning. Calling celebrity news "trashy" with someone who also engaged this media insinuated a shared pleasure, rather than an admittance of poor media choice. Fan communities often receive judgment as deviant groups (Jenson, 1992); recognizing a fellow fan allowed gossip magazine fans a comfort in freely discussing celebrities without fear of public judgment. "Much of the pleasure of fandom lies in the fan talk that it produces," Fiske argues (1992, p. 38). The social nature of celebrity gossip created a shared culture amongst family members and friends offering a way for participants to relate and evaluate shared belief systems (Foster, 2004) through third party behavioral role models. Sharing the pleasure of gossip magazines with fellow fans supported what Hermes also found amongst gossip magazines readers: "the confirmation of what is usually considered 'low taste' as a taste culture in its own right" (Hermes, 1995, p. 142).

As a culture emerged for participants, parasocial relationships existed with the many celebrities covered in these publications. The most desired parasocial

relationships often occurred with celebrities whom audience members saw as similar to themselves, a result supporting previous research identifying perceived similarity as increasing the likelihood of parasocial relationships (Tian and Hoffner, 2010).

Participants identified a parasocial dialectic for these celebrities – the feeling that a likeable celebrity must be both special and ordinary. This supports and expands Jermyn’s identification of celebrity mom Sarah Jessica Parker as simultaneously framed by the media as down-to-earth and glamorous (2008). Participants reported that while being special elevates the star (making her an appealing parasocial friend), being ordinary offers common ground for feeling that one could actually be friends with that celebrity.

Alternately, some celebrity relationships did not appear to be friendships, but rather relationships characterized by dislike and disagreement. Parasocial relationships with disliked characters are only now beginning to emerge in scholarship, as Tian and Hoffner identified in their recent study on the popular television show *Lost* (2010). In traditional relationships, Hess defines interactions with disliked partners: “One inevitable byproduct of community living is the creation of nonvoluntary relationships, that is, relationships that people feel they must maintain whether or not they would prefer to do so” (Hess, 2000, p. 459). Tian and Hoffner (2010) used this definition to explain the interactions participant audience members continued to have with disliked characters from the show. The negative opinions of certain celebrities yet detailed story recall involving those persons, communicated by this project’s participants, offers an additional example supporting the existence of nonvoluntary parasocial relationships

within the community created by celebrity gossip magazines. The existence of these relationships was supported by the effects of negative framing on participants, discussed later in this chapter.

Parasocial relationships naturally expanded to comparing commonality and experiences with celebrities. Participants felt parenthood was a shared experience that offered commonality between themselves and celebrities – social comparisons about the parenting experience often resulted in an evaluation that the participant's own experience was preferred to the celebrity's. For example, the perceived demands faced by Hollywood mothers left participants feeling like celebrity mothers did not get to experience many of the day-to-day interactions that made parenting meaningful for them. Though initial research on social comparison indicated that upward comparisons with higher-esteemed individuals often results in feeling worse about oneself (Festinger, 1954), newer projects have shown that sometimes upward comparisons improve mood and self-esteem (Alicke, LoSchiavo, Zerbst & Zang, 1997). In fact, most comparisons of parenting with a celebrity role model resulted in positive self-evaluations. This initial finding indicates audience members perceived celebrities as possessing similar performance and skill levels as parents, making rational social comparison possible (Festinger, 1954).

As other studies of social comparison have found (Kelley, 1973; Jones & Berglas, 1978), participants in this study often felt aspects of celebrities' lives (other than parenting) were decidedly different than their own and attributed evaluations to external factors, negating an equal starting point for those being compared. Some

participants' perceived celebrity parents as trapped in the Hollywood culture of paparazzi and red carpet demands, while others framed celebrities as responsible for navigating media coverage and shielding their children from it. These attributions shaped how evaluations concluded by positioning the celebrity either as an agent of change in control of his/her situation or as a person without agency. These findings point to the interrelated history of Burke's dramaturgical perspective, attribution theory, and social comparison theory (Hewstone, 1989). Attributions framed participants' understanding of celebrity success losing weight after baby as well. Freud's research participants felt surprise at the challenges of losing weight post-baby (2008); this project documented her suggestion that celebrities in the media create an expectation of easy weight loss postpartum. Though the textual analysis portion of this research found these stories often emphasized hard work on the part of the celebrity in re-sculpting the body, simplifying weight loss into before and after pictures undermines these messages for readers by creating an almost instantaneous effect.

Rather than being seen as admirable, participants instead attributed weight loss success to environmental variables including celebrity culture, access to nannies, and use of personal trainers. Many participants indicated that with the same support, they too could achieve the same results – a reflection of perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 2002). However, the social (and financial) rewards celebrities receive from “getting their bodies back” differ from the rewards my participants anticipated, impacting participants' motivation to repeat the modeled behavior. If, as Goethals and Klein argue, comparisons should be done with people who are “similar on related attributes” (p. 26)

then the evaluations made by participants identify similarity in terms of basic parenting ability, but dissimilarity in terms of support systems, cultural expectations, and work/life balance.

This project demonstrated that women readers compare themselves to stories of celebrities, look for parenting ideas, find meaning in celebrity role models, and empathize. Sometimes, a celebrity may be the only person in one's real or unreal world going through what a reader is going through, allowing participants to "transcend the boundaries of their own environment" (Bandura, 2002, p. 271). Research has shown that when a media user does not have direct experience, the media's portrayal of that experience takes on greater meaning and is more likely to be perceived as real (Bandura, 2002). Previous research on celebrities as role models found them to serve as aspirational role models (Martin & Bush, 2000), and my analysis of magazine messages supported that finding. However, after analyzing the data from focus groups, I argue instead that celebrities serve as fantasy role models for participants. The known differences between participants' worlds and that of celebrities tempered the effect of celebrity role models on participant action. The term fantasy is employed to highlight the impossibility communicated by participants of ever truly being like a celebrity. However, fantasy also points to the desire intertwined with that impossibility – though it cannot be attained, it may still be desirable on some real or imagined level. This term blends Bandura's ideas of self-regulation and self-efficacy (2002): some elements of the fantasy were accessible to participants (taking your children to a public park) while others were not (flying on a private jet), a combination that required constant evaluation

of self-ability. The fantasy is fueled by periodic achievement of some celebrity modeled behaviors retaining an element of belief that fantasy can be reality.

Unintentional audience learning, an element of mediated social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2002), occurs both anticipatively before becoming pregnant and during pregnancy, and after when one's own family faces similar stages. The act of anticipatory socialization is one element of planning that occurs during pregnancy; Steffensmeier identified that greater anticipatory socialization eases the transition to parenthood (1982). Celebrity role models play a part in this socialization process as symbolic models for parenting behavior – a learning that complements other traditional messages on parenting. The mere existence of celebrity parents, including parents that were not role models, increased participants own self-efficacy. However, role models usually were chosen because participants could relate to them, most frequently actresses Jennifer Garner and Reese Witherspoon. Though all but one of my participants were married, it is interesting that the divorced Witherspoon (she remarried after focus groups concluded) was consistently reported. Her inclusion and high-level recall may point to the fact that either parenting work is still assumed to fall on the mother's shoulders, or indicate that a variety of factors influence the selection of role models. Some variables which seem important for role model identification such as situational identification, a term I introduce here to reference relating to a model based on marital status or other situational factors, may actually be less important when considering the task of parenting. Celebrities such as Angelina Jolie, who defies social norms with behaviors such as quickly expanding her family to six children and refusing to marry partner Brad

Pitt, were less likely to be seen as a role model for participants who were unable to make sense of her actions.

When messages about celebrity parents reinforced participants' own beliefs or values, the celebrity was more likely to be viewed as a role model or exemplar, a finding reinforcing previous research on the selection of role models (Bandura, 2002). Recency of behavior appeared to impact participants' categorizations of desirable and undesirable celebrity parents, similar to Austin, Ruble, and Trabasso's work with narratives and moral judgments (1977). They found that the most recent narrative element impacted moral judgment of character behavior; if the most recent story was positive, judgments tended to be less harsh (1977). Similarly, violations of value systems, even for long-term role models, off put participants who felt some celebrities pushed boundaries socially and morally.

One of the most strongly reported ways participants learned about parenting from celebrity media was through negative framing of role models. Negative frames portrayed role models performing parenting actions that endangered the child or were irresponsible in some way. These unforgiving frames leave no room for discussion or empathy, but rather pass judgment on behaviors which may lack context. Criticizing a celebrity parent, particularly for risking a child's safety, was internalized by participants who gained knowledge from the situation. Mothers reported distinct awareness of their own behavior when it mirrored condemned celebrity behaviors. However, the nuanced experience of parenthood shaped their reading of media stories when the experience was one a reader had recently gone through. Again this finding demonstrates Bandura's

work on social cognitive theory; parents who have experienced a media-criticized parenting behavior have additional information from which to make a conclusion (2002). These findings point to the media's influence on our understanding of self, community, and behavior, a reflection of the many cultural parameters defining American parenthood.

Cultural Implications

The findings of this project point to the continued cultural emphasis on motherhood as an appropriate embodiment of femininity and fatherhood as an appropriate embodiment of masculinity. When celebrities arrive at motherhood, be it through artificial, accidental, or natural means, that destination is almost always an approved choice, a right decision. This may be because our society has long intertwined motherhood as part of successful adult women's identity, reflected in deprecating labels used for women without children such as old maids or spinsters. For some, the decision not to have children that is called a choice may likely be a result of an inflexibility within the career world for women whose paid labor pushes them past the windows of fertility or whose success makes them unappealing to male suitors.⁵

In Hollywood, the relatively frequent pregnancies of 40-year-old-plus actresses demonstrate the potential difficulty reproduction presents amidst a demanding career, while simultaneously communicating a need for fulfillment satisfied only by having a child. To not have children is to not be complete according to the cultural social system

⁵ This assumes a middle to upper-middle class socio-economic status based on the income of celebrities and the reported lifestyles of focus group participants and may be experienced differently by women of other backgrounds.

of reward that implicitly sets these standards. Within the pages of gossip magazines, these depictions of motherhood, and on a different level fatherhood, show readers that becoming a parent offers the missing piece to a life otherwise unfulfilled. Actresses who do not have children or who have not yet had children often are assumed to want them. An excellent case study is Jennifer Aniston, who remains childless at 42. The actress' husband Brad Pitt left her for Angelina Jolie and her existing adopted children, then immediately grew the Jolie-Pitt brood with the arrival of a biological child, confirming Pitt's desire for children. Speculation regarding the demise of the Pitt-Aniston relationship then shifted, questioning Aniston's desire to have children. Aniston's lack of desire for children became a media frame for explaining the failed marriage through failed femininity. Yet Aniston was quick to comment that she did in fact want children – a comment restoring her image to that of appropriate womanhood and innocent victim.

The celebrity media cannot be absolved of their role in the structuring of cultural norms. Because of their symbiotic relationship with stars, the celebrity news media only resorts to negative frames (with regard to parenthood) when necessary so that stars will continue to supply stories. The preponderance of positive coverage illustrates the media's need to see working actresses maintain interesting, traditional personal lives. Though social critique does not fall under these magazines' mission statements, its absence says just as much. Davis and Smith (1998) point to the fact that during her pregnancy, Lucille Ball's work status was never discussed – a full-time working mother in the era of nuclear families with stay at home moms post-World War II. This blatant exclusion by the press in covering the popular star demonstrates the long-standing nature

of the media to promote an unrealistic ideal of celebrity mothers that ignores their work commitments. Instead, fiction and reality merge, sometimes in great strokes of luck such as the arrival of Ball's real son in conjunction with the pre-planned arrival of her television son.

Motherhood as a set of tasks ultimately impacts women most significantly in the family structure by creating a new set of responsibilities and obligations for the work of home. Magazine depictions of emphasized femininity through motherhood and traditional parenting roles and behaviors work to continue this hegemonic relationship in which men realize more freedom and reap greater social rewards than women. Celebrity fathers face no recovery period and rarely communicate that the time away from their child on the road is unacceptable. Therefore, these fathers accept the status quo – even if they may be more expressive or involved than previous generations when off work. Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, the couple identified in the thematic analysis as the most balanced relationship in terms of child care, were a challenge for participants decoding whether or not they were good parents. The depiction of their non-normative gender roles, both as compared to the real world and other celebrities, present the couple as one unique example, rather than role models for a different type of behavior.

Identity comes from many different influences – family, community, experiences and the media. Women who read about celebrity parents use that information to make sense of their own lives, particularly their own mothering identity. That identity is bolstered by both the feeling that one is equally or more successful at parenting as compared to a socially-superior role model, and by learning about the communicated

cultural expectations within stories of celebrity parenthood. Evaluations about oneself shape identity; the literature review pointed to the fact that feeling like one is a “good mother” is important for women with children. Therefore, the need to seek out multiple cultural models of motherhood from which to understand that identity often comes in the form of media, including celebrity gossip magazines. Gossip magazines ultimately both propose change in social norms and reinstate existing values for parents. They show families together, identify both parents as an important part of children’s lives, and work to normalize the variety of combinations that make up families. Yet they do this within a traditional framework – one which repositions non-traditional families into a two parent structure often with one parent being the dominant breadwinner identity and the other as caregiver. The structure actresses must navigate as working mothers appears to be much more developed than those faced by other working women, with its system accommodating women in the workforce as far back to Ball’s 1952 reality. Yet glossing the hard decisions of motherhood with nannies, trainers, and other help perpetuates the ideal of motherhood for women without serving to show how that ideal can be realized for regular women working in a world set up for men.

Directions for Future Research and Current Limitations

This project indicated that celebrity studies, and particularly studies of celebrity parenting, remains a field mostly untouched, primed for significant future research. Ferris and Harris argue the relatively young field has been “neglected” by disciplines such as sociology (2011, p. 2) noting that “the bulk of contemporary research on celebrity is not empirically focused on the lived experience of fans and consumers” (p.

7). This project combined a qualitative methodology with theories historically grounded in quantitative work – ultimately continuing the process of negating Ferris and Harris’ remark by speaking directly with audiences about their knowledge of celebrities. As evidenced by the conclusions of this study, expanding our understanding of media effects theories such as social cognitive theory, social comparison theory, media uses and gratifications, parasocial relationships, fandom, and framing can be successfully accomplished with qualitative, audience-oriented approaches. This opens up a great many avenues for future research that increase both our understanding of celebrity gossip magazines and celebrity pregnancy and parenthood.

Three specific projects emerge from this study as important areas to continue building our understanding of both the media theories employed in this study and celebrities as parenting role models. First, the discussion of role models in this project indicated that participants categorized celebrities as “good” and “bad” parents based on reported behaviors and approaches, indicating that certain characteristics contribute to the selection of role models. A deeper understanding of this process might contribute to the general understanding of celebrities as role models and exemplars. One indication that this might be a particularly fruitful project was the continual mention by participants of divorced Reese Witherspoon as a parenting role model. All but one participant was married and had no children from previous relationships; additionally, Witherspoon was a comparatively young mother when she had her children, around 20 years old versus my participants’ average age closer to 30. This pointed to the fact that when people identify with celebrity role models, attributes such as religious or personal values and

parenting approaches may be more important than marriage or age. This selection and identification process appears to be relatively unexplored in previous literature.

A second suggestion for future research relates to the influence of celebrity media on anticipatory socialization of parenthood. The process of anticipatory socialization describes the learning and knowledge attained before becoming part of a social group or performing an activity. Participants pointed to certain expectations about parenting that were learned from the media. How the media shapes parents' beliefs about parenting prior to having a child may demonstrate the ways in which participants gain knowledge from the media and what strengths and weaknesses various media are perceived as having.

Finally, this project pointed to parasocial relationships with disliked characters similar to Tian and Hoffner's recent finding (2010). A continued exploration of the characterizations of these relationships offers important knowledge about the nature of parasocial relationship formation and continuation. Tian and Hoffner's (2010) work, supported by this project, identified nonvoluntary parasocial relationships in a community context. That is, these relationships existed because audiences were simultaneously interacting with multiple characters – liked and disliked – within one environment. Research that looks at different environments or the dominance of characters might offer insight into how these relationships are formed and sustained (or terminated).

More general future projects also would continue to contribute to the initial work done by Joke Hermes on audience reception of modern gossip magazines. Hermes'

broad focus was narrowed by my research to address coverage of celebrity families in these publications (rather than all topics covered in the magazines). The focus groups conducted for this study spent only a portion of the hour specifically discussing social comparison. However, the topic continually resurfaced throughout the conversation indicating a constant comparison by readers – relating it to themselves and their situations. Research focused on expanding such comparisons would benefit this topic.

Additionally, this project spoke with new mothers, but the varying ages of children appeared to affect participant responses. Manipulating variables further, such as child's age, may shed light on how audience readings differ. Meeting with women currently pregnant, immediately after childbirth, and a year or more past childbirth might demonstrate how comparison or social learning changes as women transition through parenting phases and gain comfort with their new identity as mother. While self-identified regular readers of celebrity magazines were selected for this project, future research may address how differing levels of media exposure affect media message impact for social learning or parasocial relationships by specifically including light media users.

The role of celebrity fathers also provides an untouched terrain for future research. Audience members indicated that images of celebrity dads both reinforced and re-interpreted normative, gendered parenting behavior. The great difference in presence given to fathers within these publications as compared to research on parenting magazines may indicate a communication channel with the power to impact our modern understanding of fatherhood.

Finally, while analyzing the data, the usefulness of other data collection techniques and methods of analysis continually recurred. Participants frequently paraphrased during focus groups, often retelling a story or thought process. Methods that emphasize structural analysis might introduce alternate readings of the data that deconstruct power relations, personal identity, or attributions. Suggestions for these methodologies include William Labov's structural narrative analysis or Kenneth Burke's pentadic analysis. Future data collection for continued research might return to the individual interview used by Joke Hermes when topics could elicit either embarrassment or self-consciousness from participants. Some topics which were expected to be discussed at length were quickly vetted by participants and discarded. Probing did elicit useful data for this study, yet it was clear that participants' varied experiences with pregnancy periodically silenced them. This was most noticeable during the topic of weight loss, as some participants seemed to struggle with their post-baby image more than others. Often the initial comment set the tone for this topic, and while alternate voices were heard, the personal nature of the topic meant participants' respect and sensitivity for others ultimately appeared to restrict the conversation. A one-on-one conversation might improve communication about this topic, as well as topics such as breastfeeding, parenting philosophies, and family values.

Additionally, continued research can expand what this study learned about the content of gossip magazines. The story types identified by my project cited over 20 different repeating topics within the selected publications. Expanding the issue sample but restricting the focus even further might allow greater understanding of the messages

being communicated about parenting. One example might be coverage of celebrities who breastfeed and how the media frames or portrays the decision. Similarly, a comparative study looking at parenting communications in gossip magazines and traditional parenting magazines might also prove to be an interesting project.

This project analyzed the content of gossip magazines and spoke with female readers about their interpretations of celebrity parents in the media. One clear finding from the focus group discussions was the interchangeable nature of current celebrity media. Different formats – smart phones, Internet, magazines, television – satisfied different needs. While different formats were seen as presenting slightly different information, overall participants felt that celebrity news was celebrity news regardless of the media outlet. One limitation of this research was that some mothers reported no longer having the time to read magazines every week or bi-weekly (instead reporting reading them at least every one to three months). There was still a significant portion of the participants who identified as heavy readers – reading every week. Yet, finding parents who were heavy readers and could come to the groups was more difficult than expected. However, though medium or lighter media users reported reading magazines less frequently, they clearly got celebrity news from nightly news programs such as *Entertainment Tonight*, cable channels such as E!, phone applications, and even traditional news outlets that often run stories that originate in celebrity news outlets. Though reading *People* or other gossip magazines less frequently did not appear to hinder my results, speaking with a group that only contained heavy readers might elicit even more information on sensemaking and relationships with celebrities. Approaching

this with readers who have older children or pregnant women might find different media habits and yield complementary results with easier recruitment.

Because this project utilized qualitative methods with theories that have been predominantly studied using quantitative approaches, the findings supporting social cognitive theory, social comparison, and parasocial relationships can only be generalized to women similar to my participant pool: mostly white, average age of 32.5, and college educated. Even lighter media users within the focus groups indicated that levels of social learning and comparison varied with media use. Many participants had an advanced degree or were working towards an advanced degree. All but one participant were married to the child's father and had no other children from previous relationships. This limitation leaves out many groups of readers whose input and opinions would greatly increase our understanding of celebrity media's impact, such as women of different races and ethnicities, women under 20 or over 40 having a child, and women from different socio-economic backgrounds. Because the participants were recruited from organized mothers' groups, members of that group might naturally come from a certain background or socio-economic status allowing them to stay at home longer and invest their time in a parenting group. Additionally, their education level may have predisposed them to seek out community support resources as a new parent.

Limitations for the sample of magazines studied within this project center on the media outlets analyzed, *People* and *Us Weekly*. As the celebrity weeklies with the longest running publication and greatest readerships, these publications present the most stable magazines of this sort. Newer, less regarded publications might offer different

story types or journalistic styles – particularly for the more sensational or even untrue gossip stories. Future research might address how these publications compare – especially with newer magazines competing for readers through headlines and photographs. While the sample was substantial, some story types were not represented very often within the sample. A larger sample might have shown greater variation in the type of coverage given to some story types, such as death in the family, that do not happen as frequently as pregnancies or birth announcements.

Concluding Thoughts

The completion of this project serves to fulfill several holes in the academic literature on parenting and celebrity life. First, it provides a qualitative analysis of parenting communications in celebrity gossip magazines. This thematic analysis proved that messages about parenting – delivered in a format different from traditional parenting sources – exist and deliver information about parenting techniques, values, and appropriate behaviors. Readers learn through framing what constitutes “good” and “bad” parenting behavior. Second, it looks to connect the idea that celebrities act as role models for fans and audience members and that this includes modeling parenting behaviors through media coverage of everyday, family activities. In fact, the everyday nature of celebrity coverage is what lends power to the celebrity as role model presenting him or her in an “ordinary” setting doing “ordinary” things. Seeing a celebrity at the park or buying groceries with accompanying text presents modeled behavior in an explicit form often with an accompanying social sanction or reward. Finally, it demonstrates how audiences make sense of messages – through anticipatory

socialization, comparison, parasocial relationships, and social learning. Even as the world of celebrity parenting is most often presented as a gilded and ideal experience, readers aware of this framing are willing to suspend disbelief for the pure pleasure of escape. And in between, readers may even learn something useful about parenting or gender roles.

Just as Princess Diana's wedding was credited with influencing and increasing coverage of celebrity moms (Douglas & Michaels, 2005), thirty years later the nuptials of her son Prince William to Kate Middleton demonstrate the continued obsession with famous families. Days after the couple's engagement was announced, celebrity news websites began speculating about their plans to have children. Five months later, the April 2011 cover of gossip magazine *Star* proclaimed Kate a "Pregnant Bride!" with plans to name the baby Diana if it was a girl, a story dismissed by a Buckingham Palace spokesperson. Magazines and websites have polled how long the couple should wait before having a child, what the child should be named, calculated the math on the child's succession to the throne, and even created computer generated pictures depicting what William and Kate's future baby would look like. Certainly, whatever direction William and Kate decide to take their new union in will be closely covered by the media. Maybe the Royal Wedding will reestablish the celebrity wedding as en vogue. Regardless, if celebrity babies are the current trend, the question remains: where will the media go from here?

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APPENDIX A

FOCUS GROUP PRE-SCREEN QUESTIONS AND INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Pre-Screen Questions

Communication with participants prior to meeting (via email is ideal) for the focus groups will address the following pre-screen questions:

1. Do you have a child that is younger than five years old?
2. Within the past three months, I have read or flipped through celebrity magazines:
 - a. Frequently, almost every week or every week
 - b. Often, at least 2 times per month
 - c. Periodically, at least once per month
 - d. Rarely, maybe once in the past three months
 - e. Never
3. When I read a celebrity magazine, most often I read:
 - a. People
 - b. Us Weekly
 - c. Life & Style
 - d. InTouch
 - e. Okay!
 - f. Other
 - g. I do not read celebrity magazines
4. Age: _____
5. Relationship Status: _____
6. Number of Children: _____
7. What is your occupation?
8. What is your spouse's occupation (if applicable)?
9. What is your highest level of education?
10. Please describe your race/ethnicity.

Participants who have not had a child or who do not read celebrity magazines at all will not be included in the focus group.

Interview Schedule

This is a general idea of the types of questions I would like to ask during the focus groups. Upon completion of the textual analysis, I will use that information to improve upon these questions and fine-tune my focus.

Introduction

Moderator explains research project briefly, describes participants rights and IRB necessities (a handout will be prepared for participants about the study to be handed out at the end of the focus group to provide basic information and address follow up questions or comments). Moderator explains that we will be taping the conversation, but that the tapes will only be for the use of transcription and no one but the moderator will have access to them.

Participants will be asked to introduce themselves to the group and tell the group about their children briefly (how many, how old). If groups are not able to be divided by work status (working mothers together/non-working mothers together), then participants will be asked to mention whether they work and if so, what they do for work.

Moderator Opening: “I am interested in talking today about celebrities and the media. In particular, I’d like to talk about “celebrity moms” and magazines like *People* and *Us Weekly* that often cover these women and talk about their families. To begin, I’d like you to tell us about how you read celebrity magazines. Do you have a subscription? Do you pick them up in the grocery store line or at the nail salon? How often?”

Questions (potential probes indented):

1. When you do read celebrity magazines, why do you read them?
 - a. What times of day do you read them?

- b. Are you doing any other activity simultaneously?
- 2. Why do you think these media outlets are interested in celebrity moms?
 - a. Can you remember any particular story types that you often see about celebrity moms?
 - i. Why do you think these story types were included?
 - ii. Do these stories have a general theme or attitude towards the celebrity that you have noticed?
 - 1. Have you noticed any counter examples?
 - b. When you see media coverage of celebrity moms, do you think it is excessive, just the right amount or not enough?
- 3. What celebrities come to mind when you think of celebrities that are moms?
 - a. Why did those celebrities come to mind?
- 4. Can you describe any details of these celebrities and their families that come to mind?
 - a. Do you think of those celebrities in a positive way or negative way?
 - b. How did you learn that [X] celebrity was a mom?
 - c. Is there a celebrity you identify with or consider a role model?
 - d. Do you have any celebrity moms you particularly like to read about?
- 5. Are their celebrity moms that you consider to be examples of a good mom or a bad mom?
 - a. Describe why you have that impression.
 - b. Have there been particular stories in the media that have influenced this opinion?
 - c. Do you think the media treats these moms fairly?
 - d. When you hear a story portraying a celebrity as a [good][bad] mom, does that impact at all how you act as a parent?
- 6. Tell me why you are interested in celebrity moms.
 - a. Is this something you share or talk about with other moms?
 - b. What is an example of what you might talk about?
 - c. Why do you like to read about celebrity moms in particular?
- 7. When you were pregnant, do you remember any particular instances when you read about or thought about celebrity moms?
 - a. What did you think when you saw pictures of celebrities during pregnancy?
 - b. Was there an example of a picture that you remember distinctly?
 - c. Tell me what you think about stories that discuss celebrity bodies post-baby.
 - i. Are these stories realistic or typical of your experience?

- ii. What do these stories make you feel?
8. Tell me about a time when you compared yourself to a celebrity as a mom.
- a. What did you feel when comparing yourself as a mom to a celebrity?
 - b. Often magazines like Us Weekly and People include features like “Celebrities, they’re just like Us!” showing celebrity parents out and about with their kids. When you see stories like this, do you ever get ideas about activities you could do with your kids, or feel like you could also do the activity pictured?
 - i. Is this feeling greater than before seeing the article/celebrity activity?

Finally, is there anything else that you want to mention that I have not asked about here?

APPENDIX B

CATEGORY DEFINITIONS AND FREQUENCIES

Category Name	Description	Frequency
Adoption	A celebrity adopting a child	1
Baby Shower	A baby shower for the celebrity	2
Baby Personality/Style	A piece that focuses on celebrity babies and that highlights itself as a special editorial section; usually parents are not the focus of these stories, but the child him/herself	5
Baby Update	An update about a new celebrity baby	2
Birth Announcement	The first story on the birth of a new baby born to a celebrity	31
Breastfeeding	A story about breastfeeding	2
Career	A celebrity's career is discussed in an article that combines this with talk of home life	8
Death	A celebrity parent or child dies	3
Divorce	A celebrity couple with children divorces	7
Home Life	An update story that focuses on the family's home life	3
Lifestyle	A look at a celebrity's lifestyle including travel or shopping, usually focuses on luxury or fashion	5
Other (General)	A general story about a celebrity family, often with toddlers or young children	21
Outing	A family outing is documented, usually through photos	16
Parents' Baby Preparation	Celebrities discussing preparing for baby	5
Paternity	A question of paternity comes up for a celebrity	1
Pregnancy Announcement	The announcement or confirmation of a new pregnancy	7
Pregnancy Rumor	An unconfirmed pregnancy	2
Pregnancy Update	An update to a previously announced pregnancy that does not focus on purchasing or preparing for baby, but more on how the mom feels or how the pregnancy is going	10
Relationship	A focus on celebrity parents' relationship with each other after kids	7
Tragedy	Coverage of tragic events other than death or divorce	13
Wanting to be Pregnant	A story about a celebrity who wants to have a child	1
Weight Loss/Fitness	A celebrity "getting her body back" after having a baby	8

VITA

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