



## Is fat talk more believable than self-affirming body talk?



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### ABSTRACT

Two experiments tested the extent to which the believability of women's body statements (fat talk or self-affirming) depends on their body type (thin or overweight). Experiment 1 ( $N = 130$ ) revealed fat talk was more believable than self-affirming talk regardless of body type. Experiment 2's ( $N = 125$ ) results showed, as hypothesized, that overweight women's fat talk was significantly more believable than fat talk by thin women and self-affirming talk by either thin or overweight women. Consistent with Experiment 1, there was a trend in Experiment 2 toward thin women's fat talk being more believable than their self-affirming talk. Overall, fat talk generally may be perceived as more believable than self-affirming body talk, and overweight women's fat talk may be perceived as most authentic. These results have implications for increasing understanding of fat talk's potential role in body dissatisfaction as well as the development of positive body image campaigns.

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### Introduction

“Fat talk” – the self-abasing, conversational exchange about food, weight, or the body in which especially girls and women engage – is garnering increasing empirical attention. Fat talk is important to understand because not only is it correlated with elevated body image concerns (e.g., Arroyo & Harwood, 2012; Clarke, Murnen, & Smolak, 2010; Corning & Gondoli, 2012), but it can actually increase body dissatisfaction (Corning, Bucchianeri, & Pick, 2014; Stice, Maxfield, & Wells, 2003; Tucker, Martz, Curtin, & Bazzini, 2007) and is correlated with eating pathology (e.g., Clarke et al., 2010; Ousley, Cordero, & White, 2008). Moreover, one person's fat talk causes conversation partners to engage in fat talk (e.g., Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2012).

To what extent, however, does the listener believe the fat-talker actually thinks herself “fat”? Nichter and Vuckovic (1994) inferred from their observations of adolescent girls that others often do not believe fat-talkers' self-abasing body statements. They proposed that fat talk comments such as “I'm so fat” are often construed as symbolic of other needs (e.g., calls for reassurance one is not fat).

The extent to which women believe that other women mean the content of their body-related statements may have both theoretical and practical implications. Believability may be important to

better understanding the contagious nature of fat talk, the relation between fat talk and subsequent increases in body dissatisfaction, as well as how to best focus programmatic efforts to promote body positivity. First, the contagious nature of fat talk may be owed in part to the extent to which the listener perceives the fat-talk remark as authentic. Because disclosures perceived as authentic tend to prompt reciprocal responses (e.g., see Cialdini, 2001), if a woman perceives her conversation partner's fat talk as how she actually views herself, the listener may then respond in kind. Second, that fat talk can increase others' body dissatisfaction may be owed to the degree of credibility ascribed to others' fat talk. Because a source's credibility enhances its persuasive potential (Pornpitakpan, 2004), if other women's fat talk is perceived as authentic, she may in turn scrutinize her own body for perceived “flaws,” leading thus to an increase in her own body dissatisfaction. Finally, the benefits of body positivity programs would be enhanced by better understanding the extent to which participants believe the content of body statements made by spokespersons.

Compounding matters, within the context of a thin-idealizing culture, women who are overweight are expected to feel negatively about their bodies. Thus, their fat-talk statements likely would be perceived as highly believable due to the widespread, negative bias and prejudice overweight persons experience (Puhl & Heuer, 2009); this could have implications for the perpetuation of both fat talk and weight stigma.

We presented women with photos of thin or overweight women, each accompanied by either a fat-talk or self-affirming body-related statement the woman in the photo ostensibly made.

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Participants indicated the extent to which they believed each woman's statement. Because body image concerns are commonplace in our thin-idealizing culture and negative bias toward fatness is pervasive, we hypothesized that the believability of women's body statements is dependent on both the type of statement made (self-abasing or self-affirming) and the speaker's body type (thin or overweight). Specifically, we hypothesized that fat talk, especially by overweight women, is significantly more likely to be believed than thin women fat-talking or thin and overweight women making self-affirming statements.

## Experiment 1

### Method

**Participants.** Participants ( $N = 130$ ) were undergraduate women ( $M_{\text{age}}, SD = 19.09, 1.21$ ). The majority was European American (72.09%) and one-fifth was Latina (20.16%); smaller numbers were Asian American (13.95%), African American (3.88%), Native American (3.1%), and Middle Eastern (1.55%). The average body mass index (BMI) fell within the normal range,  $M (SD) = 22.18 (3.49)$ . Most (80%) were normal weight, whereas another 6.92% was underweight, 10.77% was overweight, and 2.31% was obese.

**Materials and measures.** The stimulus materials and measures were a pre-piloted set of photos of women making body-related statements, each followed by a question set which included the target item assessing how believable each woman's statements were, followed by a demographic questionnaire.

**Photo-statement stimuli.** The substantive stimulus materials comprised eight photos of women's bodies and eight accompanying body-related statements (Corning et al., 2014). The photos were of four thin women and four overweight women. The body-related statements comprised four fat-talk and four self-affirming statements. Detailed description of their development and piloting is provided in Corning et al. (2014), and briefly summarized below. The photos and statements were crossed to derive eight, unique photo-statement pairs: two were of thin women fat-talking, two of overweight women fat-talking, two of thin women making self-affirming statements, and two of overweight women making self-affirming statements. The presentation order of the photo-statement pairs was varied to avoid a patterned sequence. To increase the stimulus materials' relatability, participants were told the photos and statements were from women who had participated in a prior study and were used with their permission.

**Body-type photos.** Four of the photos depict a thin body type and four depict an overweight body type, with a very large difference in the pilot sample's ratings of those judged as thin versus overweight (Cohen's  $d = 9.45$ ; Corning et al., 2014). The women in the photos were depicted full-length or from at least mid-thigh to top of head (these were distributed evenly across conditions). All photos had been piloted to ensure they depicted women who were of college age and were of equivalent facial attractiveness.

**Body-related statements.** Four of the eight statements represent fat talk (e.g., "Every time I look in the mirror, I can pick out something about every part of my body that I'd like to change. I can't remember the last time I was happy with the way I looked.") and four represent self-affirming body statements (e.g., "Other women talk about their weight in numbers, but I look in the mirror, and I like what I see! This is my body, and I'm going to own it."). There was a very large difference in the pilot sample's ratings of those judged

as representing fat talk versus self-affirming body talk ( $d = 33.3$ ; Corning et al., 2014).

**Believability.** Below each photo-statement pair was a set of items. The set included the target believability item along with distractor items asking about, for example, the target's likeability and happiness levels. The target item read, "How much do you believe that she really means the statement she made about her body?," from 1 (*don't believe at all*) to 7 (*completely believe*).

**Demographic information.** The demographic questionnaire included self-reports of age, year in school, race/ethnicity, height, and weight.

**Procedure.** Participants were recruited from introductory psychology courses at a Midwestern university. The solicitation, posted to the department's electronic bulletin board, described the study as examining women's attitudes, behaviors, and feelings. Participation was voluntary and compensated with class extra-credit. All materials were administered online at a quiet location of the participants' choosing. The study was approved by the university's institutional review board.

Upon logging on, participants were greeted by a welcome page followed by an informed consent form. They were then directed to one of three counterbalanced versions of the study materials. Before exiting, they were presented with a debriefing statement and the experimenters' contact information.

The counterbalanced study measures and materials were administered in the following way. Each page displayed a photo of a woman paired with a statement she ostensibly made, followed by the item assessing the believability of the statement, which was embedded within distractor items. (To familiarize participants with the task, prior to presentation of these stimuli, they were presented with a pre-trial, unscored, neutral photo-statement pair depicting an average-weight woman who made a neutral body statement followed by the set of questions.) Following the last question set, participants completed the demographic questionnaire.

**Design.** Experiment 1 employed a  $2 \times 2$  mixed-factorial design. The between-subjects factor was body type (thin vs. overweight) and the within-subject factor was body statement type (fat talk vs. self-affirming). Participants were randomly assigned to either the thin ( $n = 65$ ) or overweight body type condition ( $n = 65$ ). In each condition, participants were presented with four pictures of women (either thin or overweight), two of whom made fat-talk and two of whom made self-affirming statements. The two believability scores for each photo-statement pairing (e.g., the two thin women fat-talking) were averaged to derive a believability mean for each of the four conditions.

To provide a further check of the body-type manipulation beyond that offered by the pilot data, the substantive materials were followed by a manipulation-check question. It read, "As a group, I'd say these past participants generally had bodies that, to me, looked \_\_\_\_." Participants selected a value ranging from 1 (*thin*) to 9 (*overweight*) (with all intervening points provided and the midpoint, 5, labeled *average*).

### Results

Prior to conducting the main analyses, we conducted several checks of the data. First, we found one missing datum. It was in response to the race/ethnicity query and thus unimputable. Second, as expected, the photos of the thin ( $M, SD = 2.82, 1.26$ ) versus overweight ( $M, SD = 6.95, .89$ ) women were perceived accordingly,  $F(1, 128) = 466.75, p < .001, d = 3.79$ . Finally, as expected, participant BMI did not differ across conditions,  $F(1, 128) = 1.47, p = .23$ .

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