



A preliminary investigation of racial differences in body talk in age-diverse U.S. adults



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ABSTRACT

To compare racial similarities and differences in conversations about body image, this online study surveyed U.S. adult men ($n = 1928$) and women ($n = 1965$) on 1) exposure to and 2) pressure to engage in body talk using vignettes featuring unfavorable body talk (e.g., “fat talk”) or favorable self-accepting body talk. Black women reported less unfavorable body talk compared to White, Hispanic, and Asian women. Conversely, Black and Hispanic women reported more experience with favorable body talk compared to White women. Asian men reported more experience with favorable and unfavorable body talk compared to White men, and Black men reported more experience with favorable body talk compared to White men. Findings for Black women and men are largely consistent with body image literature espousing personal individualization of beauty and style (e.g., “She’s got it going on”). Given the dearth of research on body talk among men, conclusions regarding racial differences among men are tentative. Further exploration of varying forms of body talk holds promise for the development of culturally-sensitive prevention and treatment efforts for body image and disordered eating among culturally diverse groups of men and women.

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1. Introduction

Fat talk is communication whereby people (Martz, Petroff, Curtin, & Bazzini, 2009; Nichter, 2000) say negative comments (i.e., unfavorable body talk or “UBT”) about their bodies in social conversations. Though Nichter initially proposed fat talk served positive functions, UBT has been linked to self-objectification (Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003), depression (Arroyo & Harwood, 2012), body shame and eating disorders (Clarke, Murnen, & Smolak, 2010) among White college women. Most literature has focused on UBT among White college women (Martz, Curtin, & Bazzini, 2012), but there are a few exceptions. Parker, Nichter, Vucovic, Sims, and Ritenbaugh (1995) found that Black girls reported more flexible and individualistic standards of beauty (i.e., favorable body talk or “FBT”; e.g., “She’s got it going on”) than White girls who endorsed a thin ideal. However, Engeln and Salk (2014) found no ethnic differences of fat talk frequency for Black, White, and East Asian women after controlling for age and BMI.

UBT may be the social expression of body image dissatisfaction and as such, is likely to echo ethnic differences found in the body image literature. Roberts, Cash, Feingold, and Johnson (2006) found that White women reported slightly more dissatisfaction with their bodies than Black women; while Black women possessed more acceptance of

fuller-figured body shapes and an individualized sense of beauty (Nichter, 2000; Parker et al., 1995; Webb, Warren-Findlow, Chou, & Adams, 2013). Findings among Hispanic women are less consistent (Schooler, Lowry, & Biesen, 2012), with some suggesting that family and maternal roles protect them from body image concerns (Hahn-Smith & Smith, 2001; Kronenfeld, Reba-Harrelson, Von Holle, Reyes, & Bulik, 2010, while others report equal or greater concern relative to White women (Grabe & Hyde, 2006; Ricciardelli, McCabe, Williams, & Thompson, 2007). Similarly, research among Asian women documents less body dissatisfaction and risk for eating disorders (Cachelin, Rebeck, Chung, & Pelayo, 2002; Nicdao, Hong, & Takeuchi, 2007), no racial differences (Marques et al., 2010), or negative consequences from a growing internalization of the Western thin ideal (Nouri, Hill, & Orrell-Valente, 2011).

Body talk research among men is in its infancy. Katrevich, Register, and Aruguete (2014) documented the presence of UBT in young Black men, and Sladek, Engeln, and Miller (2014) noted men’s body talk focused on fat and/or muscularity. Ricciardelli et al. (2007) found that Black men reported more positive body images and desire larger body sizes compared to White men, with no differences between Hispanic and White men (Miller et al., 2000). Asian men’s body satisfaction seems to vary, with some specific patterns by ethnicity (e.g., Japanese and Chinese men wish to be larger, while Filipino men prefer to be smaller; Altabe, 1998; Cachelin, Striegel-Moore, & Elder, 1998; Mintz & Kashubeck, 1999; Ricciardelli et al., 2007; Yates, Edman, & Aruguete, 2004).

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The current study seeks to bridge racial comparisons from the body image literature to public expressions of body image evidenced in both UBT and FBT body talk conversations. Accordingly, we surveyed a large, diverse, age-representative sample of U.S. adults (Martz et al., 2009) to examine intra-sex, inter-racial differences across several valences of body image conversations described in vignettes for two criterion variables: 1) exposure to and 2) pressure to engage in three forms of body talk (UBT; self-accepting FBT & positive FBT). We analyzed these data within sex given documented gender differences in this data set (Martz et al., 2009).

Given that White women report more body dissatisfaction than their other-ethnicity counterparts (Kronenfeld et al., 2010; Roberts et al., 2006) and because body talk is a public expression of body image (Tucker, Martz, Curtin, & Bazzini, 2007), we hypothesized that White women would report more experience with UBT and Black women would report more experience with FBT. Analyses for men were exploratory given limited literature examining racial comparisons in body image among men (Ricciardelli et al., 2007). We controlled for body mass index (BMI) as prior research suggests that larger individuals report more pressure to engage in UBT (Engeln & Salk, 2014; Martz et al., 2009).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants included 3983 age- and race-stratified U.S. adults (2001 women; 1982 men) aged 18–87 years ($M = 45.28$; $SD = 15.69$) recruited online where they had pre-registered for a *Health and Wellness Survey* and were awarded a \$1 PayPal™ credit. IRB approval for the use of this archival data was received.

Race was reported as 83.4% non-Hispanic White ($n = 3348$), 5.7% Black/African American ($n = 229$), 5.1% Asian/Pacific Islander ($n = 205$), 3.5% Hispanic/Chicano/Latino ($n = 140$), 1.3% multiracial ($n = 52$), and 0.9% Native American/Indian ($n = 36$). Due to the low n -size in the latter two categories, only the first four groups were included in analyses ($n = 1928$ men, $n = 1965$ women). See Martz et al. (2009) for additional procedural information.

2.2. Materials

The following scenarios were presented: (1) UBT scenario—“Imagine you are in a group of friends/coworkers who were saying *negative* things about their bodies (e.g., ‘My butt is fat!’); (2) self-accepting FBT scenario—“Imagine you are in a group of friends/coworkers who were saying *self-accepting* things about their bodies (e.g., ‘I feel okay about my body!’); and (3) positive FBT scenario—“Imagine you are in a group of friends/coworkers who were saying *positive* things about their bodies (e.g., ‘I really like my body!’.”

2.2.1. Exposure criterion

After reading each scenario, participants reported, “How likely would this scenario occur in your life?” using this Likert continuum (1 = never; 2 = sometimes; 3 = usually; 4 = frequently; 5 = very frequently).

2.2.2. Pressure criterion

Participants reported, “How much pressure would you feel to say negative things (changed to ‘self-accepting things’ or ‘positive things’ for respective scenarios) about your body in this group?” using this continuum (1 = none; 2 = maybe some; 3 = some; 4 = a lot; 5 = extreme).

3. Results

Six ANCOVAs with BMI as a covariate were run within each sex for racial group comparisons for each of the three scenarios for both exposure and pressure criterion variables. If these were significant, post-hoc analyses compared each race to one another. BMI was a statistically significant covariate for 3 of 6 analyses for women and 4 of 6 analyses for men, with inconsistent patterns across races. BMI explained negligible (1–2%) variance for body talk criteria (Table 1).

3.1. Analyses for women

Groups did not differ on exposure to UBT, $F(3, 1961) = 2.46, p = .06, \eta_p^2 = .004$; yet they did for perceived pressure to engage in UBT, $F(3, 1961) = 6.58, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .012$ (Table 1). Post-hocs revealed that women of all other races reported more pressure to engage in UBT than Black women.

Groups differed on exposure to the self-accepting talk-FBT, $F(3, 1961) = 17.05, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .027$, with Black women reporting more exposure than White women. No differences were found regarding pressure to engage in self-accepting talk-FBT, $F(3, 1961) = 2.46, p = .06, \eta_p^2 = .004$.

Finally, there were differences for both exposure to, $F(3, 1961) = 10.67, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .018$, and pressure to engage in positive FBT, $F(3, 1961) = 4.5, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .007$. Post-hocs revealed that Black and Hispanic women reported more exposure to positive FBT than White women, yet only Hispanic women reported more perceived pressure to engage in FBT over White women. Overall, Black women reported less pressure to engage in UBT compared to other women and more exposure to FBT compared to White women. Hispanic women reported more pressure to engage in positive FBT than White women.

3.2. Analyses for men

There were differences among men in both exposure to, $F(3, 1924) = 4.64, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .007$, and pressure to engage in UBT, $F(3, 1924) = 7.65, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .014$. Post-hocs revealed that Asian men reported higher exposure and pressure to engage in both UBT and FBT than their White counterparts. Asian and Black men reported greater exposure to, $F(3, 1924) = 12.89, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .017$, and higher pressure to engage in, $F(3, 1924) = 10.07, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .014$, self-accepting FBT than White men. Similarly, Black, Asian, and Hispanic men reported more exposure to positive FBT than did White men, $F(3, 1924) = 17.90, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .024$. Pressure to engage in positive FBT also varied, $F(3, 1924) = 9.77, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .012$, revealing that Black and Asian men reported more pressure than White men. Overall, White men reported less experience with both UBT and FBT relative to the men of other races.

4. Discussion

This study adds to the small body of literature (Engeln & Salk, 2014; Parker et al., 1995) examining race in body image conversations among U.S. adults. Black men and women reported more experience with FBT than White men and women, and Black women reported less pressure to engage in UBT compared to women of other races. Hispanic women reported more experience with FBT compared to White women, but this was less evident for Hispanic men compared to men of other races. Curiously, Asian men reported the most experience with both forms of body talk; the literature fails to shed light on a possible explanation for this pattern, other than the fact that we did not account for intra-ethnic group differences (Ricciardelli et al., 2007).

Parker et al. (1995) found that White girls engaged in more fat talk and held themselves to a rather narrow interpretation of beauty; yet Black girls held more flexible and individualistic beauty ideals, praising each other with comments such as “she’s got it goin’ on.” Consistent

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