



# Challenging fat talk: An experimental investigation of reactions to body disparaging conversations



Suman Ambwani<sup>a,\*</sup>, Megan Baumgardner<sup>b</sup>, Cai Guo<sup>c</sup>, Lea Simms<sup>a</sup>, Emily Abromowitz<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology, Dickinson College, P.O. Box 1773, Carlisle, PA 17013, USA

<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychology and Human Development, Vanderbilt University, Peabody College, 230 Appleton Place, Nashville, TN 37203, USA

<sup>c</sup> Department of Psychology, Stanford University, 450 Serra Mall, Stanford, CA 94305, USA

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 22 March 2017

Received in revised form 21 August 2017

Accepted 21 August 2017

### Keywords:

Fat talk

Body talk

Social perception

Experimental research

Feminism

## ABSTRACT

Although “fat talk” is associated with increased eating disorder risk, the predictors of fat talk engagement and viable alternatives to these pervasive conversations remain unclear. The current experiment examined responses to *fat talk* versus feminist-oriented *challenging fat talk* scenarios. Undergraduate women ( $N = 283$ ) completed baseline questionnaires assessing body dissatisfaction, fat talk engagement, and positive impression management. One week later, they were randomized to view one of the two scenarios, followed by assessment of mood, fat talk engagement, social acceptability, and social likeability. Results indicated that the *challenging fat talk* vignette (versus the *fat talk* vignette) yielded less negative affect and fat talk and was perceived as more socially attractive with a more likeable target character. Baseline body dissatisfaction, baseline fat talk tendencies, and momentary negative affect predicted post-exposure fat talk engagement. Current findings highlight possibilities for implementing feminist language and psychoeducation in fat talk prevention efforts.

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

*Fat talk* involves degrading the body shape and weight of oneself or others (Nichter, 2000) and plays a normative role in conversations among women in Western cultures (Martz, Petroff, Curtin, & Bazzini, 2009; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011). In addition to body-disparaging statements such as “I’m so fat,” fat talk may also involve self-comparison and comments about improving physical appearance, eating and exercise habits, and fears of becoming overweight (Nichter, 2000; Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994; Ousley, Cordero, & White, 2008). Although fat talk occurs among women of all ages, research suggests that women participate in fat talk conversations most frequently during late adolescence and young adulthood (Engeln & Salk, 2014). In fact, as many as 90% of undergraduate women have reported both engaging in fat talk with friends (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011) and feeling pressure to engage in fat talk more often than self-accepting or positive forms of body talk (Martz et al., 2009; Payne, Martz, Tompkins, Petroff, & Farrow, 2010). Thus, reciprocating fat talk during conversations is perceived as normal and expected (Barwick, Bazzini, Martz, Rocheleau, & Curtin, 2012; Britton, Martz, Bazzini, Curtin, & LeaShomb, 2006).

Although fat talk is commonplace in conversations among women, exposure to and engagement in fat talk has been associated with harmful consequences, such as increased levels of body dissatisfaction, negative affect, depression, anxiety, and eating disorder symptoms (see Shannon & Mills, 2015, for a review). Indeed, the “Fat Talk Free Week” eating disorder prevention campaign posits that fat talk is a key contributor to body dissatisfaction and is thus an important target for prevention (Garnett et al., 2014). However, two important questions remain: (1) what predicts women’s engagement in these harmful conversations, and (2) could we develop a feasible conversation alternative to break the cycle of fat talk?

One possible function of fat talk is to allow individuals to express and cope with their feelings of body dissatisfaction (Nichter, 2000; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011). Studies suggest that body dissatisfaction is a significant predictor of engagement in fat talk (Arroyo, 2014; Clarke, Murnen, & Smolak, 2010; Sharpe, Naumann, Treasure, & Schmidt, 2013), and the most commonly cited reason for fat talk engagement is to relieve distress caused by body dissatisfaction and feelings of fatness (Arroyo, 2014; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011). Salk and Engeln-Maddox (2011) explained that “fat talk is not about *being* fat, but rather about *feeling* fat” (p. 27). Verbalizing body dissatisfaction via fat talk may thus offer an outlet for negative emotions, allow for social validation of feelings, and serve as a coping strategy (Nichter, 2000). For instance, in situations that evoke body objectification, such as trying on clothes, engaging in fat talk

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [Ambwanis@dickinson.edu](mailto:Ambwanis@dickinson.edu) (S. Ambwani).

may relieve discomfort by eliciting encouragement and reassurance from peers (Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003). Thus, fat talk offers a socially acceptable strategy for communicating body dissatisfaction and negative emotion in an effort to reduce distress.

Given that women with positive body image also participate in fat talk (Smith & Ogle, 2006), it seems to serve a purpose beyond expressing body dissatisfaction. One such function is social connection: participating in fat talk may allow women to bond with peer groups by expressing shared thoughts and values while eliciting social support (Gapinski et al., 2003; Nichter, 2000). Specifically, women may use fat talk to manage their impressions within a group and to avoid negative evaluation by fulfilling a social norm in a culture that values thinness (Martz et al., 2009; Nichter, 2000; Ousley et al., 2008). As explained by one interviewee in Nichter's (2000) seminal research, "[at] times I don't really feel that I'm fat but I still say it... it's not like I'm looking for a compliment, it's just I don't want to feel like I'm bragging about myself by not saying it." (p. 54). Indeed, a more recent study reported that women who departed from existing group norms during fat talk conversations were evaluated less positively than those who adhered to them (Cruwys, Leverington, & Sheldon, 2015). Similarly, women tend to perceive engagement in fat talk as a positive social aspect of peer conversations (Katrech, Register, & Aruguete, 2014) and are believed to be liked more by others if they reciprocate fat talk (Britton et al., 2006). Because failure to reciprocate fat talk could be misinterpreted as arrogance, fat talk engagement may therefore serve to prevent social rejection by peers (Nichter, 2000). Thus, exposure to fat talk statements that are perceived as likeable and socially acceptable may increase the likelihood of subsequent fat talk engagement.

Although past research has identified social inclusion and the expression of body dissatisfaction as factors underlying fat talk engagement, effective strategies to shift the conversation away from fat talk require further investigation (Shannon & Mills, 2015). Despite the aforementioned social benefits of fat talk, other studies suggest that speaking positively about one's body (or, "positive body talk") may be more socially attractive than fat talk. For example, women rated a character in a vignette who spoke positively about her body as more likeable than a character who engaged in fat talk, even if the rest of the group was fat talking (Barwick et al., 2012; Tompkins, Martz, Rocheleau, & Bazzini, 2009). Moreover, there may be a tendency to mimic body-related conversation patterns in others: in one study, women mirrored the body talk of a confederate who either engaged in fat talk, promoted self-acceptance, or made positive statements about her body (Tucker, Martz, Curtin, & Bazzini, 2007). Given the apparent social acceptability of positive body talk and the tendency to mimic the body-related sentiments of peers, there is an opportunity to develop a conversation alternative to fat talk that offers a healthier strategy for social connection.

One conversation alternative to fat talk could utilize feminist theory to actively challenge and oppose body-disparaging statements. According to objectification theory, Western women are socialized to consider their bodies as objects, subject to the gaze of others and in need of monitoring and modification to match cultural beauty ideals that must be pursued to maintain one's worth in society (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Engagement in fat talk not only perpetuates these negative views and reinforces them as normal (Arroyo, Segrin, & Harwood, 2014), but merely replacing fat talk with positive body talk continues to emphasize the value of external (appearance-related) self-worth. Instead, feminist perspectives highlight the importance of gender inequity and other structural forms of privilege (Piran, 2010) and the centrality of body comfort and connection (or lack thereof) in shaping women's experiences with their bodies (Piran, 2016). Research suggests that women with strong feminist identities report more body

satisfaction and greater ability to resist cultural pressures to be thin (Clarke et al., 2010; Murnen & Smolak, 2009). Moreover, there is some, albeit limited evidence that actively challenging fat talk is a useful endeavor. Specifically, one study reported that exposure to a confederate who challenged the concept of fat talk reduced the likelihood of engaging in fat talk and yielded less body dissatisfaction than exposure to two confederates mutually participating in fat talk (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2012). Thus, challenging fat talk via feminist theory-inspired principles that empower women by (1) discouraging internalization of the thin-ideal and (2) actively opposing body objectification may be an effective strategy for countering and reducing fat talk.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate women's reactions to fat talk and feminist theory-inspired opposition to fat talk conversations via experimental vignettes. This study is the first, to our knowledge, to specifically assess the utility of applying feminist-inspired principles toward breaking the cycle of fat talk among college women. Given the reciprocal nature of fat talk, we hypothesized that participants exposed to fat talk would be more likely to subsequently engage in fat talk than those exposed to the feminist-inspired challenging fat talk scenario (H1). We also expected that participants in the challenging fat talk condition would rate the target character as more likeable, the conversation as more socially acceptable, and would experience decreased negative affect compared to participants in the fat talk condition (H2). Finally, we hypothesized that higher levels of baseline body dissatisfaction and fat talk tendencies, higher social likeability and social acceptability ratings, and higher levels of momentary negative affect would predict participants' post-exposure engagement in fat talk across both conditions (H3). We also evaluated open-ended responses to the fat talk versus challenging fat talk scenarios but did not specify *a priori* hypotheses given the exploratory nature of our qualitative inquiry.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants ( $N=283$ ) were undergraduate women at a small liberal arts college in the Northeastern United States. Participants were 18–23 years old ( $M=19.13$ ,  $SD=1.22$ ) and self-identified their racial/ethnic background as 4.2% Asian American, 6.5% African American, 72.9% European American, 2.3% biracial, 2.7% Hispanic/Latina, 5.3% other, and 8.8% international. To increase the representativeness of the sample, participants were recruited from the entire campus community via fliers, emails to peer networks and on-campus organizations, classroom announcements, and social media advertisements, and received course credit or \$10 in compensation for their time. The research was approved by the local institutional review board (IRB) prior to data collection.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Demographic information sheet

Participants self-reported age, class year, race/ethnicity, height and weight (to estimate body mass index–BMI).

#### 2.2.2. Eating Disorder Inventory – 3rd Edition – Body Dissatisfaction subscale (EDI-3-BD; Garner, 2004)

The 10-item EDI-3-BD self-report subscale assesses overall body dissatisfaction (e.g., "I feel satisfied with the shape of my body") and dissatisfaction with the shape and size of specific body parts (e.g., "I think my hips are too big"). Consistent with past non-clinical research (e.g., Bailey & Ricciardelli, 2010; Tylka, 2004), responses were rated on a 1–6 scale (rather than the original 0–3 scale) to capture greater variability in responding. Item responses

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5038352>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5038352>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)