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Nature and consequences of positively-intended fat talk in daily life

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ABSTRACT

The current study used ecological momentary assessment to explore the frequency, trait predictors, and momentary consequences of positively-intended fat talk, a specific sub-type of fat talk that involves making negative comments about one's own appearance with the view to making someone else feel better. A total of 135 women aged 18–40 completed trait measures of appearance-based comparisons, thin-ideal internalisation, body shame, and body surveillance, before completing a state-based component, involving six short surveys delivered via a smartphone app at random points during the day for seven days. Findings indicate that both self- and other-fat talk are common in daily social interactions, and that individuals with higher levels of trait negative body image were more likely to engage in fat talk. Self-fat talk negatively impacted state body satisfaction levels. Possible theoretical and practical implications are outlined.

1. Introduction

Well-established body image theories emphasise the importance of sociocultural factors in the development and maintenance of body image issues among women, such as dissatisfaction with one's physical appearance, i.e., body dissatisfaction. The tripartite influence model (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999) and objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) both posit that women are repeatedly exposed to messages – from media, friends, family, and even strangers – about the importance of appearance, and how one measures up to the idealised standards promoted by society. These messages may be conveyed directly via teasing, instruction, and other comments intended to convey the importance of physical appearance, and also via more subtle and indirect means such as overhearing appearance-related conversations, inferring the importance of appearance from media messages or via non-verbal exchanges, such as glances, gestures, or facial expressions (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2006; Herbozo & Thompson, 2010; Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001; Menzel et al., 2010; Paxton, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006; Tiggemann, 2011). Cumulatively, the mass propagation of these messages emphasising the importance of appearance encourages adoption of these values and, in turn, prompts a range of behaviours designed to establish whether one is meeting these appearance goals, such as appearance self-surveillance and appearance-based comparisons. In light of the unrealistic nature of the idealised physique that is promoted in westernised cultures, this self-focus on appearance may give rise to negative body image (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2014; Rodgers, McLean, & Paxton, 2015), body change behaviours (Mercurio & Rima, 2011; Rancourt, Schaefer, Bosson, & Thompson, 2015), eating disorder symptomatology (Dakanalis et al., 2016; Juarascio et al., 2011), and mental illness (Johnson & Wardle, 2005; Miner-Rubino, Twenge, & Fredrickson, 2002). The present study focuses on one form of communication of appearance-related information known as fat talk.

1.1. Fat talk

First described in 1994 by Nichter and Vuckovic, fat talk was originally defined as conversations involving negative comments about one's appearance. Although, as the name suggests, fat talk most often focuses on weight and shape, it can also involve comments being made about other features of appearance, such as hair (Nichter, 2000). Accumulated literature suggests that fat talk is a common experience for women, with one study finding 93% of the sample of young women claimed to engage in fat talk (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011), and another showing 31% of women reported a high likelihood of experiencing a fat talk situation with others, as compared to 11% of men (Martz, Petroff, Curtin, & Bazzini, 2009).

Fat talk has repeatedly been linked with detrimental effects on body image, such as increased thin-ideal internalisation, self-objectification, body surveillance, body shame, appearance-based comparisons, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating (Arroyo,

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2014; Cory & Burns, 2007; Engeln-Maddox, Salk, & Miller, 2012; Royal, MacDonald, & Dionne, 2013; Rudiger & Winstead, 2013). Furthermore, one's typical level of engagement in fat talk is predictive of subsequent onset or worsening of these body image disturbances in longitudinal studies (Arroyo & Harwood, 2012), and lab-based studies have demonstrated that exposure to an instance of fat talk can produce increases in state body dissatisfaction (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2012; Stice, Maxfield, & Wells, 2003). Partaking in fat talk appears to be particularly common for individuals with high trait-level body image disturbance. For example, those who adopt society's thinness-related appearance ideals, i.e., thin-ideal internalisation, regularly engage in appearance-based comparisons, tend to view themselves from a third-person perspective, i.e., body surveillance, or who often feel ashamed for failing to meet societal appearance standards, i.e., body shame, are more likely to engage in fat talk (Arroyo & Anderson, 2016; Engeln-Maddox et al., 2012; Royal et al., 2013; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011). Collectively, these findings indicate not only that fat talk may influence the development of body image disturbance, but also that it may play an important role in maintaining these negative body image issues.

One possible explanation for the findings regarding fat talk and body image disturbance is that engaging in fat talk, as with engaging in appearance conversations more broadly, constitutes a subtle social situation capable of eliciting self-focus (Slater & Tiggemann, 2014; Tiggemann & Boundy, 2008). Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) dictates that, in social interactions such as this, one's appearance remains the focus, which may induce self-objectification and act as a reminder of being evaluated based on one's external appearance. More specifically, it is possible that fat talk encourages self-surveillance, and may activate appearance-related schema, emphasising the importance of one's appearance, specific appearance-related goals one is striving for, and any disparity between one's current and desired appearance, potentially encouraging appearance-based comparisons and allowing dissatisfaction with one's appearance to arise. It is also possible that, through concentrating on how one looks, the individual may feel self-conscious about her/his appearance, leading to feelings of anxiety (Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003).

Despite findings linking fat talk with negative body image outcomes, there has been limited evaluation of fat talk experiences in daily life. A key problem with cross-sectional and prospective studies is their reliance upon measures that ask respondents to appraise their general tendency towards fat talk. As a consequence, although relationships established with trait-like measures indicate that people who engage in fat talk also tend to exhibit greater body image disturbances, they do not directly link an *instance* of fat talk to momentary experiences of these body image constructs. Further, while experimental studies (e.g., Cruwys, Leverington, & Sheldon, 2015; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2012; Stice et al., 2003) more effectively isolate instances of fat talk, they typically cannot inform about the frequency of fat talk in daily life or the duration of fat talk's influence on state body image, given the time and practical constraints of lab-based testing.

With a view to understanding the role fat talk plays in everyday life, Jones, Crowther, and Ciesla (2014) explored the social phenomenon through an ecological momentary assessment (EMA) design. Fat talk was defined as "conversations involving negative-self statements, complaints about physical appearance, and weight management" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 340). Participants' amount of fat talk and levels of body dissatisfaction, disordered eating behaviours, and body checking were randomly assessed five times per day for a total of five days via a personal data assistant (PDA). Jones et al. found that an overwhelming majority (96.9%) of participants had engaged in at least one episode of fat talk, whether saying or hearing fat talk, over the 5-day testing period. These findings indicate that the habit of making self-derogatory comments about oneself (80.0% of fat talk instances) and hearing these comments (74.2% of fat talk instances) were both common among this sample of young women. Increased body dissatisfaction, body checking, and disordered eating behaviours were more common following participants' reporting of fat talk exposure than at non-fat talk times. Furthermore, the effects of fat talk may be more pronounced for those with heightened trait body image concerns, as participants with high trait self-objectification levels experienced greater dissatisfaction with their bodies and engaged in body checking behaviours more often after an episode of fat talk than those lower on trait self-objectification.

1.2. Gaps in the literature

Although Jones et al.'s (2014) study provides evidence for fat talk fluctuating in daily life, a number of gaps remain. First, it remains unclear whether the motivations for fat talk determine its impact on body image. Based on the existing literature regarding fat talk motivations, there appear to be some motivations that are perhaps designed to elicit negative body image, for example, self-deprecation and self-effacement to avoid appearing arrogant (Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994), and others that are designed to reduce negative body image, such as providing empathy to others, displaying a common vulnerability, and enhancing social bonding (Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011). It is possible that these different motivations may have differentiated impacts on body image. Second, even if positively-intended fat talk still leads to negative body image, the psychological processes that lead to negative body image from fat talk require further exploration. As previously mentioned, it is likely that focusing on appearance encourages individuals to reflect on how they look, and to possibly engage in comparisons with others. Although previous findings from Jones et al. are consistent with this proposed mediation model, by showing significance of several of its key components, this model has not been directly tested. Finally, although Jones et al. identified trait self-objectification as a predictor of fat talk occurrence, there are a range of other trait body image characteristics that may also predict engagement in fat talk, such as tendency to engage in appearance-based comparisons, thin-ideal internalisation, and body shame. Whilst these body image disturbances often co-occur (Choma, Shove, Busseri, Sadava, & Hosker, 2009; Myers, Ridolfi, Crowther, & Ciesla, 2012), evaluating a broader array of trait-based body image predictors of fat talk may help to identify those trait body image experiences that are most predictive of risk of fat talk.

1.3. The current study

The present study seeks to build upon the findings of Jones et al. (2014) by exploring the nature and impact of positively-intended fat talk in everyday life. Firstly, the current study aims to investigate the prevalence, consequences, and trait-level predictors of positively-intended fat talk. However, unlike Jones et al., a wider range of conceptualisations of fat talk will be used in order to ascertain how common these forms of fat talk are, and whether they are all relevant for state-based body image outcomes. Specifically, making fat talk comments about other individuals, for example, a stranger or a media image, (e.g., "Look at her thighs – they're huge! Yours don't look anything like that") will be explored, in addition to making fat talk comments about oneself, and overhearing fat talk. Trait measures beyond self-objectification will also be included to investigate whether they are also predictive of fat talk occurrence. Further, a mediation model will be explored to test the possibility that fat talk leads to decreased body satisfaction via appearance-based comparisons and appearance self-consciousness.