



A naturalistic study of fat talk and its behavioral and affective consequences



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ABSTRACT

Fat talk is a style of verbal expression among young women involving negative self-statements, complaints about physical appearance, and weight management. This research used ecological momentary assessment to examine the impact of naturalistic fat talk experiences on body dissatisfaction, body checking, negative affect, and disordered eating behaviors. We examined trait self-objectification as a moderator. Sixty-five female college students completed a baseline questionnaire and responded to questions when randomly prompted by palm pilot devices for five days. Results indicated fat talk is common and associated with greater body dissatisfaction, body checking, negative affect, and disordered eating behaviors. Fat talk participation was associated with greater body checking than overhearing fat talk. Greater trait self-objectification was associated with greater body dissatisfaction and body checking following fat talk. These results suggest that fat talk negatively impacts the cognitions, affect, and behavior of young women and has increased negative effects for women higher in self-objectification.

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, a distinct style of verbal expression has become prevalent among adolescent and young adult women. This form of expression, referred to as “fat talk”, can be used to describe a highly ritualized conversation involving negative self-statements, complaints about physical appearance, and weight management (Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994). Fat talk often involves self-statements about being fat or overweight, even when not objectively true (Clarke, Murnen, & Smolak, 2010). It may also be accompanied by statements regarding behaviors women might use to change their bodies, such as dieting or exercise. Examples include: “I’m so fat,” “My legs are huge,” and “I’ve gained too much weight. I should really start going to the gym.”

Research suggests that fat talk is much more common among women than men (Martz, Petroff, Curtin, & Bazzini, 2009; Payne, Martz, Tompkins, Petroff, & Farrow, 2011) and more common among adolescent and young adult women than older women (Martz et al., 2009). The practice of engaging in fat talk often begins in middle school, but persists into the high school and college years (Nichter, 2000). Women report more perceived pressure to engage

in fat talk compared to men, regardless of their level of body dissatisfaction, and it is well recognized as a norm for females in adolescent and young adult populations (Britton, Martz, Bazzini, Curtin, & LeaShomb, 2006). Women with eating disorders engage in fat talk more frequently than their non-eating-disordered counterparts (Ousley, Cordero, & White, 2008), suggesting a relationship between fat talk, body image disturbance, and disordered eating practices.

Although Nichter (2000) suggested that fat talk may have positive functions, such as building and maintaining social relationships, creating and maintaining group affiliation, and providing positive feedback and reassurance to others, laboratory research indicates that exposure to fat talk primarily has a negative impact. In a study by Stice, Maxfield, and Wells (2003), participants engaged in a pre-scripted conversation with an attractive female confederate, during which the confederate either engaged in fat talk or discussed a neutral topic. Participants exposed to the fat talk conversation experienced significant increases in body dissatisfaction from pre- to post-conversation, whereas participants exposed to the neutral topic experienced no significant change in body dissatisfaction. Neither group experienced significant change in negative affect, nor did trait thin-ideal internalization, body dissatisfaction, or social support moderate the relationship between fat talk and body dissatisfaction or negative affect (Stice et al., 2003).

In a later study, Tucker, Martz, Curtin, and Bazzini (2007) videotaped participants during an interview with a confederate research

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assistant who provided either a negative, neutral, or positive comment about her own body. While participants with lower trait body esteem had significantly lower body satisfaction ratings, of major interest to this research were findings that participants in the negative body talk condition had the lowest body satisfaction ratings during the interview (Tucker et al., 2007). Finally, Salk and Engeln-Maddox (2012) assessed participant responses following fat talk exposure from two confederates while viewing a picture of a thin, attractive female model in a bikini. Results found overall negative effects of fat talk, with participants exposed to two confederates engaging in fat talk providing higher ratings of body dissatisfaction and guilt compared to a condition in which a confederate challenged fat talk and a control condition characterized by neutral responses. Participants were also more likely to engage in fat talk when exposed to others participating in fat talk and women who chose to engage in fat talk had higher trait body dissatisfaction than those who did not engage in fat talk.

Only one study to date has examined the effects of fat talk longitudinally. Arroyo and Harwood (2012) conducted a study focused on the communication mechanisms underlying fat talk to explore both the causes and outcomes of engaging in fat talk. Participants in the first part of this two-part study completed frequency measures of fat talk at six time points over a three week span in addition to completing several psychological measures at the first and last of these time points. They found that fat talk frequency at time one predicted decreased levels of body satisfaction and higher levels of depression at time six, but found no evidence that fat talk impacts self-esteem or sociocultural pressure to be thin. Participants in the second part of this study completed the same fat talk frequency and psychological measures as those in the first part of the study, but completed all measures at two time points spaced two weeks apart. Participants indicated how frequently they themselves made fat talk comments as well as how frequently they heard others use fat talk comments. Increased frequency of using fat talk at time one predicted higher levels of depression and pressure to be thin at the later time point and hearing fat talk at time one predicted higher perceived pressure to be thin at time two.

To summarize, exposure to fat talk is associated with increases in body dissatisfaction (Arroyo & Harwood, 2012; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2012; Stice et al., 2003; Tucker et al., 2007) and negative emotional states (Arroyo & Harwood, 2012; Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2012). For those women higher in risk for body dissatisfaction, fat talk likely has greater negative consequences. However, these studies have not investigated the behavioral consequences of fat talk, including body checking and eating and weight control behaviors, and findings regarding the consequences of exposure to fat talk in laboratory studies may not generalize to the naturalistic environment. The limited research available to date has not found support for trait body dissatisfaction as a moderator of the relationship between fat talk and outcome variables; however, given the centrality of appearance to women's self-worth in conjunction with the appearance-focused nature of fat talk, self-objectification theory may provide a useful framework for understanding the function and effects of engaging in fat talk.

Objectification Theory

Fat talk has been described as a “social extension of body objectification” (Martz et al., 2009). Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) suggests that women's bodies are sexualized by our society and culture and by men as a whole. This sexual objectification involves viewing a woman's body or sexual functions as representative of her person. According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), sexual objectification of women exists in the media, culture, and everyday situations. They argue that the current culture

socializes women to view and value themselves based on their physical appearance and to treat themselves, to some extent, as objects. Self-objectification occurs when this practice becomes incorporated into a woman's self-concept. The tendency for women to self-objectify often begins during or shortly after puberty and continues throughout the lifespan (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Although the extent to which an individual experiences self-objectification varies, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) conclude it is a common experience.

Self-objectification has many consequences that affect women's mental health and psychological well-being (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). When individuals do not measure up to an internalized or cultural ideal or standard, they may experience shame (Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama, 2002). Many women also experience appearance-related anxiety regarding the evaluation of their bodies by others, particularly when they are uncertain of how and when their bodies will be evaluated (Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama, 2002). When a woman becomes self-conscious as a result of objectification, whether self- or otherwise, her concentration may be derailed, interfering with her ability to fully engage in productive and rewarding activity (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Fitting in with the standards of the self and culture often requires ignoring internal cues, such as disregarding hunger signals during periods of strict dieting, which may result in a lack of awareness of internal bodily states (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Myers & Crowther, 2008). Self-objectification is also believed to contribute to depression, sexual dysfunction, and eating disorders (e.g., Miner-Rubino, Twenge, & Fredrickson, 2002; Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama, 2002; Myers & Crowther, 2007; Noll & Fredrickson, 1998; Slater & Tiggemann, 2002; Tiggemann & Kuring, 2004; Tylka & Hill, 2004). Given that women who experience self-objectification have a greater focus on physical appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), it seems likely that fat talk would have more negative effects among women who engage in self-objectification.

Gapinski et al. (2003) examined the impact of fat talk exposure on women in objectifying situations by having participants overhear a confederate engaging in fat talk while trying on a swimsuit. These effects were compared to the experience of individuals in a control condition, who were instructed to try on a sweater rather than a swimsuit (Gapinski et al., 2003). As hypothesized, participants in the objectifying condition experienced higher levels of negative emotional states compared to those in the non-objectifying condition. Somewhat surprisingly, for women in the objectifying condition, hearing fat talk resulted in less negative emotion than when the confederate made neutral comments. In contrast, women in the control condition experienced greater negative emotion when the confederate used fat talk compared to overhearing neutral comments. Although fat talk appears to have a negative impact on women's affective state at times, Gapinski et al. (2003) suggest that it may serve as a protective factor when women are in objectifying situations (e.g., trying on a swimsuit in a fitting room) because fat talk seems normative and appropriate and may feel reassuring in that context.

Present Study

Despite the prevalence of fat talk (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011), the negative implications that fat talk has for women, particularly adolescent girls and college students, and the context within which it seems to occur, very little empirical research has examined the nature of this type of conversation and its emotional and behavioral consequences. While the laboratory research conducted in this area maximizes internal validity, thus enabling researchers to draw conclusions regarding causality, Stice et al. (2003) noted that their experimental condition might have been too subtle in

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