



Brief research report

## Connecting theory to fat talk: Body dissatisfaction mediates the relationships between weight discrepancy, upward comparison, body surveillance, and fat talk



Analisa Arroyo\*

Department of Communication Studies, University of Georgia, 613 Caldwell Hall, Athens, GA 30602, USA

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## ABSTRACT

The fat talk literature is meager in terms of offering theoretical explanations for women's self-disparaging communication. The research presented here sought to establish a relationship between three prominent body image theories – self-discrepancy theory, social comparison theory, and objectification theory – and fat talk by proposing body dissatisfaction as a potential mediating mechanism. Young adult women ( $N=201$ ) completed an online questionnaire. As predicted, results revealed that body dissatisfaction significantly mediated the relationships between weight discrepancy, upward comparison, body surveillance and fat talk. Effect size estimates indicated that the size of each indirect effect was medium in magnitude.

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### Introduction

Many women experience normative discontent with their bodies (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985), wherein such dissatisfaction is predictive of *fat talk* (Sharpe, Naumann, Treasure, & Schmidt, 2013). Fat talk refers to the self-disparaging conversations women frequently have with one another about their bodies (Nichter, 2000), including comments indicating fear of becoming fat, among others (Ousley, Cordero, & White, 2008). The goal of this research is to connect fat talk to self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), and objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). These prominent body image theories explain negative self-perceptions, but have not been examined alongside one another to establish their unique contribution to fat talk. In so doing, this work identifies body dissatisfaction as a mediating mechanism by which weight discrepancy, social comparison, and objectification are associated with fat talk.

Perceptions of body and weight are a product of influences, pressures, and ideals upheld by sociocultural messages and images that idealize women's bodies and emphasize an unattainable standard for beauty ideals (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Thus, interpersonally disparaging one's body is normative behavior among women. One study found that 93% of

women report engaging in fat talk (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011) and fat talk has been found to take place among women of all different ages and body sizes (Martz, Petroff, Curtin, & Bazzini, 2009). Research indicates that women engage in fat talk because it is an expected behavior: They feel pressure to make negative comments about themselves (more than positive or self-accepting comments) in order to “fit in” (Martz et al., 2009; Nichter, 2000). Other research suggests that women engage in fat talk as a way to express genuine concerns about their bodies: These comments appear to be rooted in and emphasize negative self-consciousness, with frequent engagement in fat talk leading to poor outcomes for the individual, including increased levels of depression (Arroyo & Harwood, 2012). As such, fat talk is thought to be the extension of body image and dissatisfaction into the realm of interpersonal relations.

### The Current Study

While different in their own respects, each of the following theories takes into account the larger context of women living in a society that emphasizes a narrow definition of physical attractiveness. Each theory also identifies a process that leads to body dissatisfaction, wherein such dissatisfaction is usually experienced when one strives to fit the thin ideal but does not. Consequently, body dissatisfaction is predictive of the denigration of one's self (e.g., via fat talk) rather than the ideal.

\* Tel.: +1 706 542 4893.

E-mail address: [arroyo@uga.edu](mailto:arroyo@uga.edu)

First, *self-discrepancy theory* predicts that people are motivated to meet their ideal standards and experience dissatisfaction when there is a discrepancy between the attributes they believe they possess (actual self) and the attributes that they hope to possess (ideal self). Internalizing ideals that are different from the attributes they actually have is common among women, with the actual-ideal discrepancy predicting 59% of the variance explained in women's appearance evaluation (Jacobi & Cash, 1994). Fat talk may be motivated by the dissatisfaction experienced as a result of this discrepancy, and it may be reflected in comments about "wishing" or "hoping" to be have a different body (e.g., "I wish I was thinner").

Second, *social comparison theory* posits that individuals compare themselves to others in effort to self-evaluate. When women engage in upward social comparisons with others whom they consider thinner or more attractive, it can lead to a number of negative outcomes, such as higher body dissatisfaction and pathogenic weight control methods (e.g., Ridolfi, Myers, Crowther, & Ciesla, 2011). Women likely become accustomed to making social comparisons, given that the social comparison process has been found to be automatic (Botta, 2000). It is possible that women use fat talk to express dissatisfaction and incorporate aspects of social comparison if they believe they do not adequately meet the standards of beauty (e.g., "Look how skinny she is and I am so fat").

Third, *objectification theory* posits that, in Western culture, women's bodies are treated as objects used for the pleasure of others. This often leads women to self-objectify, meaning they treat their own bodies as objects that should be evaluated. Self-objectification has been previously linked to fat talk, such that women who experience self-objectification describe their appearance more negatively than women who are not exposed to those images (Aubrey, Henson, Hopper, & Smith, 2009). Accordingly, fat talk is thought to be a manifestation of body dissatisfaction and body ideals wherein women communicatively evaluate their bodies (e.g., "I hate my stomach").

Toward that end, self-discrepancy theory, social comparison theory, and objectification theory may provide fruitful avenues for understanding fat talk, as the fat talk literature is limited in terms of offering theoretical explanations for why women engage in such talk. Each theory explains a cognitive process by which women make sense of their bodies in the midst of sociocultural pressures, and each theory identifies a process that leads to body dissatisfaction. Because "fat talk uses weight as a reference point for feelings" (Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003, p. 278), such talk may provide an outlet for negative emotions and allow women to obtain social validation (Nichter, 2000). Negative self-perceptions may therefore motivate women to engage in fat talk in effort to seek feedback, cope with, and express their concerns. Thus, the current research utilizes each of these theories to identify body dissatisfaction as a motivation to engage in fat talk. Specifically, it is hypothesized that weight discrepancy, social comparison, and objectification are associated with fat talk *through* body dissatisfaction.

## Method

### Participants

Undergraduate women ( $N=201$ ) were recruited from communication classes at a large university in the Southwestern United States. Participants completed an online questionnaire and received extra credit from their instructors for their participation. A majority of the women were White (83.10%; 7.50% Latina, 3.50% African American, 3.00% Asian, and 3.00% other), young adults ( $M=20.15$ ,  $SD=1.39$ ), and were of average body size (BMI:  $M=26.05$ ;  $SD=3.97$ ).

### Measures

Means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alphas for each study variable can be found in Table 1. Unless otherwise noted, items were rated on Likert scales and were averaged, with high scores denoting higher scores on the corresponding measures.

### Predictor Variables

**Weight discrepancy.** The absolute value of the difference between participants' self-report ideal weight from their self-report actual weight was used as an indicator of self-discrepancy theory; higher scores indicate a larger discrepancy between one's actual and ideal weight.

**Upward comparison.** O'Brien et al.'s (2009) 10-item Upward Physical Appearance Comparison Scale was used as an indicator of social comparison theory (e.g., "I tend to compare myself to people I think look better than me;" 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

**Body surveillance.** The 8-item Body Surveillance subscale from McKinley and Hyde's (1996) Objectified Body Consciousness Scale was used as an indicator of objectification theory (e.g., "During the day, I think about how I look many times;" 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

### Mediating Variable

**Body dissatisfaction.** Garner's (2004) 10-item Body Dissatisfaction subscale from the Eating Disorders Inventory-3 was utilized (e.g., "I think my stomach is too big;" "I think that my thighs are too large;" 1 = *never* to 6 = *always*).

### Criterion Variable

**Fat talk.** The Body Concerns subscale from Engeln-Maddox, Salk, and Miller's (2012) Negative Body Talk Scale was utilized. Participants rated the frequency of saying similar comments to seven different weight-related statements in the past week (e.g., "I need to go on a diet;" 1 = *never* to 6 = *always*). Engeln-Maddox et al. (2012) found evidence of convergent, discriminant, and incremental validity and satisfactory reliability across a series of five studies with samples of U.S. undergraduate women.

## Results

Zero-order correlations can be found in Table 1. Hypothesis testing was conducted using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS Macro for SPSS, wherein each model used 5000 bootstrapped resamples that generated 95% bias corrected and adjusted confidence intervals for the indirect effect. Three mediation models were conducted: Weight discrepancy, upward comparison, and body surveillance were predictors in separate models, body dissatisfaction was the mediator, and fat talk was the criterion variable; BMI and each of the other predictor variables were covariates in each model.

As shown in Table 2, body dissatisfaction significantly mediated the relationship between weight discrepancy, upward comparison, and body surveillance and fat talk. A  $k^2$  statistic - which is the recommended effect size for indirect effects (Preacher & Kelley, 2011) - was also calculated for each of the mediation models.  $k^2$  can range from 0 to 1 and represents the size of the indirect effect relative to what it could theoretically be. Results indicated that the sizes of the indirect effects of weight discrepancy, upward comparison, and body surveillance were .18, .15, .12, respectively.  $k^2$  can be interpreted as small ( $>.01$ ), medium ( $>.09$ ), and large ( $>.25$ ; Preacher

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