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Brief research report

Testing the norm to fat talk for women of varying size: What's weight got to do with it?☆

Amy Barwick, Doris Bazzini*, Denise Martz, Courtney Rocheleau, Lisa Curtin

Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608, United States

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ABSTRACT

"Fat talk" is the conversational phenomenon whereby people berate their bodies in social circles. This study assessed whether norms of fat talk differ for overweight versus average-weight women. Sixty-three women read a script depicting a fat talk situation during which an overweight or average-weight target woman engaged in positive or negative body talk. Regardless of the target's weight, participants perceived it to be more typical and less surprising if she engaged in negative body talk (fat talk) rather than positive body talk. Furthermore, fat talk from either weight group did not affect the likeability of the target, but women, overweight or of average weight, who engaged in positive talk were perceived to have more socially desirable personality characteristics.

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Introduction

Recent research documents a conversational norm whereby young women disparage their bodies in front of peers, or engage in what Nichter and Vuckovic (1994) call "fat talk." This behavior has been noted in Caucasian middle-school girls (Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994), in college-aged women (Britton, Martz, Bazzini, Curtin, & LeaShomb, 2006), and in older adult women and some men in the U.S. (Martz, Petroff, Curtin, & Bazzini, 2009). The present study was the first to assess the effects of body size on perceptions of a female protagonist engaging in positive or negative body talk.

Physical Size and Fat Talk

Overweight and obese people are negatively stereotyped and discriminated against in the United States in employment, educational, health-care, and social settings (Puhl & Heuer, 2009). They are thought to be "less attractive, popular, happy, healthy, intelligent and to have less success in jobs and their relationships" than their average-sized counterparts (Penny & Haddock, 2007, p. 679) and more lazy, stupid, and worthless (Teachman, Gapinski, Brownell, Rawlins, & Jeyaram, 2003). Overweight women, especially Caucasians, may endure greater stigmatization than men (Hebl & Heatherton, 1998; Hebl & Turchin, 2005). In contrast, thinness is often thought to lead to satisfying life outcomes (Evans, 2003). In the seminal ethnographic research, Nichter (2000) found that middle-school, Caucasian girls believed that fat talk belonged only in the social circles of thin girls. Nichter also surmised that large individuals would not participate in fat talk to avoid drawing attention to themselves. However, Martz et al. (2009) found that heavier compared to leaner women reported greater pressure to engage in fat talk initiated by others, as depicted in brief vignettes. As no study on fat talk has varied the size of the female target, and included a woman of larger-than-average weight, the present study included body type of the female target as an independent variable.

Fat Talk versus Positive Body Talk

Tucker, Martz, Curtin, and Bazzini (2007) had participants interact with an average-weight confederate who varied in her body talk valence in a "getting to know you interview." The confederate was dissatisfied (fat talked), self-accepting (neutral), or positive about her body. They found that participants' ratings mirrored the valence of the confederate (e.g., the participant fat talked if the confederate did so), and that valence of body talk did not impact likeability.

Furthermore, using a vignette, Tompkins, Martz, Rocheleau, and Bazzini (2009) varied the body presentational style of a group of college women (positive or negative) as well as the body presentational style of the target female, "Jenny." They found that participants' personal ratings of Jenny were higher when she talked

☆ The data collected for this study was part of master's thesis by the first author conducted under the direction of the second author.

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608, United States. Tel.: +1 828 262 2733; fax: +1 828 262 2974.
E-mail address: bazzinidg@appstate.edu (D. Bazzini).

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positively about her body. However, they thought the group members would like her more when she conformed to the body talk precedent of the group, regardless of the valence of the talk. Hence, there may be competing norms in U.S. culture, one to fat talk and one to express positive body image. Thus, in addition to varying the weight of a target female, the present study also manipulated valence of body talk as an independent variable.

Building upon past research, participants read a script depicting a fat talk situation among female undergraduates during which a target female (Jenny) replied to the conversation expressing either body degradation or body favorability. Participants were then shown a picture of Jenny, whose body type was either average or overweight. It was hypothesized that a larger woman who engaged in positive body talk would be judged to be in greater violation of conversation norms (e.g., her response would be rated as less likely) and would be rated as less likeable and socially desirable than a thinner woman. However, as fat talk is deemed normative for women, no differences in ratings of norms to fat talk, or ratings of interpersonal favorability were expected to emerge between women of varying body type in the negative body talk condition.

Method

Participants

Participants were 63 female, primarily Caucasian (90%) undergraduate students (M_{age} = 18.78, SD = 1.89), from a mid-sized, Southern university (M_{BMI} = 24.6, SD = 5.21). Participants were told that the study assessed normative conversations among women.

Materials

Vignette. A modified version of Britton et al.'s (2006) fat talk script described three female undergraduate students expressing a desire to be thinner (fat talk) in an casual setting. Response of the target varied according to condition. In the negative condition, she stated, *Yeah, I'm pretty unhappy with my weight also; I really should go on a diet. I don't think I look good*. In the positive condition, she stated, *I'm very happy with my weight. Why would I diet? I think I look good*.

Target photo. The target was represented by a full-body picture of an overweight or average-weight college-aged model selected from online clothing advertisements. Four photographs of female models, two blondes and two brunettes (equally distributed across conditions) were pre-rated by a sample of 31 (20 females, 11 males) independent raters using a 7-point rating scale assessing heaviness and attractiveness. Overweight models were judged as heavier than the average weight models (ps < .001). Additionally, no differences emerged across ratings of attractiveness for photos of average versus overweight models (ps > .05).

Dependent measures. A three-item Norm to Fat Talk Scale (Britton et al., 2006) was used to assess how body talk of the target was viewed on a 7-point scale (1, *not at all* to 7, *extremely*): *How surprising was Jenny's response?, How typical was Jenny's response?,* and *What is the likelihood that most women would respond this way?* A single item assessed likelihood of the participant replying similarly to Jenny: *Think about Jenny's reply to the conversation, how likely would you be to make a similar comment?*

Likeability was assessed using a five-item, modified version of Rudman's (1998) Social Attraction Index. Items were scored on a 7-point Likert scale (1, *not at all* to 7, *very much)* (e.g., *How much would you like to get to know Jenny better?*; *How likable was Jenny?*). Scores were summed; lower scores reflect lower likeability. Cronbach's alpha was .93.

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and F, p and partial η^2 values for ANCOVA across levels of the norm to fat talk for female participants.

	M	SD	F	p	η_p^2
How surprising was Jenny's response?					
Positive body talk	4.89	1.58	12.78	.001	.18
Negative body talk	3.53	1.83			
How typical/likely was Jenny's response?					
Positive body talk	2.74	1.13	140.15	.001	.71
Negative body talk	6.17	1.08			
Likelihood that another woman would respond this way					
Positive body talk	2.29	.99	285.17	.001	.83
Negative body talk	6.38	.87			
How likely would you be to make a similar comment?					
Positive body talk	2.70	1.59	22.24	.001	.29
Negative body talk	5.15	2.19			

Perceptions of the target's personality was assessed by the 10-item (each on a 7-point bipolar scale), Interpersonal Favorability Index (IFI): *Unfriendly/Friendly, Confident/Unconfident, Naïve/Sophisticated, Outgoing/Shy, Immature/Mature, Assertive/Cowardly, Boring/Interesting, A Follower/A Leader, Polite/Rude, Responsible/Irresponsible*, and *Masculine/Feminine* (Britton, 2005). Scores were summed; higher scores indicate more favorable traits. Cronbach's alpha was .82.

Procedure

Participants were weighed and measured for their height to prime body consciousness and to compile Body Mass Index (BMI) as a covariate (cf. Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003), then randomly assigned to read a hardcopy version of the script describing either the negative body talk (n = 36) or the positive body talk scenario (n = 27). Participants completed the dependent variable measures and manipulation check and were then debriefed and awarded research credit.

Results

Manipulation Checks

To ensure that body type of target was not confounded with attractiveness, a 2 (body type: overweight vs. average) × 2 (target hair color: brunette vs. blonde) ANOVA was calculated with the attractiveness rating as the dependent variable. No significant differences emerged across factors, for all tests, $F(1, 59) < 2.0$, $p > .05$, $\eta_p^2 < .03$. Additionally, participants were asked to estimate the target's weight if she was 5′3″ and responses were converted to BMI scores. Participants perceived the photos in the average-weight condition to have a mean BMI of 20.9, falling into a "normal weight" category, but the overweight photos to have a mean BMI of 27.6, consistent with being "overweight" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). All participants accurately identified the manipulation check for valence of body talk. A Bonferroni correction yielded an adjusted α of .03 to reduce the family-wise error rate.

Test of Main Hypotheses

The three items measuring norm to fat talk were submitted to a 2 (body presentational style: positive vs. negative) × 2 (body type: overweight vs. average) MANCOVA, with participant BMI as a covariate. A significant main effect for body presentational style occurred, $F(4, 52) = 98.52$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 < .88$. Females found it less surprising, more typical, and likely that most women would speak negatively rather than positively about her body (see Table 1).

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A significant multivariate effect also emerged for body type of the target, $F(3, 55) = 3.61$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 < .17$, resulting from a single, univariate effect for the item assessing how surprising they found Jenny's behavior, $F(1, 62) = 4.84$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 < .08$. The conversation was rated as somewhat more surprising when the target was of average weight ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.76$) than when she was overweight ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.79$). However, no significant interaction emerged between body type and body presentational style, $F(3, 55) = 1.75$, $p = .17$, $\eta_p^2 < .09$. The BMI covariate was not significant, $F(3, 55) = .32$, $p = .81$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$.

When asked the likelihood of responding in a similar manner to Jenny, a significant main effect for body presentational style emerged, $F(1, 55) = 22.24$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 < .29$. Participants thought that they were somewhat more likely to make a similar comment in the negative talk as compared to the positive body talk scenario (see Table 1). Again, there were no significant effects for body type, $F(1, 55) = .02$, $p = .90$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$, the body type × body presentational style interaction, $F(1, 55) = .37$, $p = .55$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$, or participant BMI, $F(1, 55) = .71$, $p = .40$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$.

Likeability and Interpersonal Desirability

A 2 (body presentational style) × 2 (body type) ANCOVA, with participant BMI as a covariate, demonstrated no significant differences for the composite likeability score; for all tests, $F(1, 58) < .91$, $p > .03$, $\eta_p^2 < .03$. However a similar test for the IFI showed that Jenny was found to possess more favorable personality traits when she engaged in positive body talk ($M = 54.60$, $SD = 8.80$) versus negative body talk ($M = 43.36$, $SD = 6.62$), $F(1, 55) = 30.97$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 < .36$. For all other tests, $F(1, 55) < 2.0$, $p > .05$, $\eta_p^2 < .03$.

Discussion

Previous research on weight-related perceptions led to the prediction that positive body talk by overweight female targets would result in greater perceived violation of norms surrounding fat talk, as well as harsher interpersonal judgment. However, college women perceived fat talk as equally normative for women of varying weight and they judged targets similarly on likeability and interpersonal desirability, regardless of body type. Furthermore, independent of weight, the target female was rated as more interpersonally appealing when engaging in positive versus negative body talk.

These findings appear consistent with research demonstrating that perceptions of an average-weight woman's likeability in a face-to-face interaction was not affected by her initiation of positive, neutral, or negative body talk (Tucker et al., 2007). Thus, despite women's awareness of social expectations about fat talk, the fact that likability did not vary by target weight when she violated the fat talk norm adds credibility to the notion of a competing norm to express positive self regard (Tompkins et al., 2009). This is in contrast to Nichter's (2000) observation among middle-school-aged girls that those who did not fat talk would be considered "stuck-up."

Consistent with Britton et al. (2006), women thought that it was more typical and likely that a female would engage in self-effacing rather than favorable dialog about her body, and thought that it was more surprising when a woman promoted her body versus self-derogated, regardless of whether she was overweight or average weight. They did, however, perceive an average-weight woman's body-focused conversation more surprising than an overweight female's suggesting that weight is relevant to these types of communications between women.

Interestingly, judgments of fat talk as being more normative than positive body talk were not qualified by the target's body type—possibly contradicting Nichter's (2000) proposal that overweight females generally do not fat talk, as it draws attention to their weight. Although this study did not directly address Nichter's proposal (participant's predisposition to fat talk was not assessed), it does suggest that overweight women are not held to a different standard of pressure with regard to participating in or contributing to fat talk dialogs. It may be that beyond middle school (Nichter's sample), as women age they place less importance on weight and appearance (Tiggemann, 2004). Also, recall that Martz et al. (2009) found that overweight/obese adult women reported more pressure to contribute to a fat talk conversation as compared to leaner women. Hence, larger females may not want to draw attention to themselves with fat talk, yet feel they must "acknowledge their perceived body flaws" if others have initiated such dialog.

College women reported that they, as well as other women, would be more likely to make a comment similar to Jenny's self-derogating reply rather than her self-promotional reply to the conversation. This contradicts Britton et al.'s (2006) findings that females believed that *other* women would respond to the fat talk conversation by self-derogating their bodies, but that they themselves would not respond in such a way. However, Britton et al.'s "self-accepting" body talk was not as self-promoting (*I think I look good*) as the response used in this investigation. Encountering a woman who engages in overt positive body talk may be relatively novel and unfamiliar to college women. This might explain why they were likely to rate the positive talk favorably on the interpersonally desirable dimensions. They may have found Jenny's confidence refreshing. Future research is needed to more fully evaluate how novelty of responding influences these types of judgments.

The failure to find support for overweight stigma on normative perceptions of fat talk and social attractiveness may be the result of the relatively small sample size and the inherent confounding of attractiveness and weight. However, the effect sizes for tests of body size of the target are quite small, arguing against low power alone accounting for the lack of significance. Recall, physical attractiveness was intentionally controlled by using models who were rated as equally attractive but different in perceived weight. Wilson, Tripp, and Boland (2005) propose that an overweight woman might have to compensate for her weight by being more facially attractive than an average weight woman. Since we used plus-sized models as overweight targets, it is possible their facial attractiveness exceeded that of other models to compensate for their weight.

Future investigations could utilize digital software to modify weight but not facial attractiveness in the same model and should include an obese target in addition to average and overweight targets. Although these results suggest that target weight may be negligible in college women's perceptions of another woman when she engages in body talk, in vivo manipulations rather than vignettes would be helpful in more fully understanding weight's influence on these interactions. Finally, future research should include more demographically, and culturally diverse samples.

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