



## Fat talk and self-presentation of body image: Is there a social norm for women to self-degrade?

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### Abstract

The current investigations build upon previous ethnographic research, which identified a social norm for adolescent females to engage in “fat talk” (informal dialogue during which individuals express body dissatisfaction). In Study 1, participants were shown a vignette involving women engaging in fat talk dialogue and were subsequently asked to choose one of three self-presentational responses for a target female: (1) self-accepting of her body, (2) providing no information, or (3) self-degrading about her body. Male and female participants believed the target would be most likely to self-degrade, and that this would lead women to like her, while the self-accepting response would lead men to like her most. Study 2 used the same vignette but participants were asked to respond in an open-ended fashion. Participants again expected the target female to self-degrade. The present findings suggest college students perceive fat talk self-degradation of body image as normative.

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### Introduction

Female role models including dancers, fashion and artistic models have become significantly slimmer in the past 50 years (O’Dea, 1995). Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, and Thompson (1980) noted that while these female role models were getting thinner, average women in the United States were becoming larger; therefore, fewer women have been meeting this cultural ideal. Hence, sociocultural pressures and the discrepancy between the reality of women’s bodies versus the cultural ideal has contributed to body dissatisfaction as a normative experience (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-

Moore, 1985) with nearly 50% of adult women reporting negative evaluations of their appearance (Cash & Henry, 1995).

Evidence of widespread body dissatisfaction can be found daily in the numerous individual and collective weight-loss rituals in which women engage, including the discussion of bodies and weight control (Hope, 1980). Women socializing in female social circles frequently complain about their bodies or trade weight management tips. This weight discourse, termed “fat talk” by Nichter and Vuckovic (1994), typically includes speaking negatively about one’s body and is heard at varying ages in diverse female social groups. Fat talk has even been documented in female athletes who paradoxically seem to have a positive body image (Smith & Ogle, 2006). In this context, fat talk is a means of engaging or joking with the team and eliciting validation from team members.

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If body dissatisfaction is considered normative (Rodin et al., 1985), women may self-degrade in an attempt to conform to a perceived social norm that will help them “fit in” with a group (Nichter, 2000). Further, Dindia and Allen (1992) found that females versus males tend to disclose more about themselves to others in group interactions, potentially providing women with more opportunities for body dissatisfaction to surface in their discussions. Moreover, Carli (1982) and Tannen (1990) found that women tend to act friendly and agreeable, emphasizing similarities among group members in small group discussions. Eagly (1987) adds that female conformity may reflect a commitment to preserve group harmony and enhance positive feelings among group members. Complaining about one’s body may be adaptive for adjustment in many female groups (Hope, 1980). Furthermore, Nichter and Vuckovic (1994) emphasized that females not only criticize their bodies, but they discuss attempts to improve their bodies, whether or not they actually are.

The tendency to engage in fat talk may be further augmented by the extant norm for women to act and speak modestly (Janoff-Bulman & Wade, 1996; Miller, Cooke, Tsang, & Morgan, 1992). Nichter (2000) ethnographic study of middle-school girls engaging in fat talk found that some girls believed that if they were silent when in a group of girls speaking negatively about their bodies, their silence would imply they believed themselves to be perfect, or could be misinterpreted as a form of bragging. Thus, they justified their modesty by complaining about their personal body image.

Hence, negative body image presented verbally as fat talk fits within established principles of social psychology, especially conformity to social norms (Schlenker, 1985) and impression management (Leary et al., 1994). Impression management is the attempt individuals make to influence the impressions others construct of them through the manipulation of their actions and speech (Schlenker, 1985). Typically prevailing norms and roles have an effect on the impressions people try to create (Leary et al., 1994). Therefore, women may engage in weight discourse to conform to the norms outlined above, as well as to project concern with their appearance and create the positive impression of being a responsible person (Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994).

Fat talk has only been studied experimentally in two studies. First, Stice, Maxfield, and Wells (2003) studied the negative effects of social pressure to be thin by having women engage in a conversation with a thin, attractive confederate who either complained about her

body and talked in great detail about her dieting regimen or who talked about a neutral topic. They found that women felt worse about their bodies after hearing the confederate talk negatively about her body than they did after hearing her talk about a neutral topic. The authors attributed these findings to the effects of pressure to be thin.

Additionally, Gapinski, Brownell, and LaFrance (2003) led participants to believe they were completing a study about consumer preferences in seasonal clothing by trying on either a swimsuit or a sweater and filling out several questionnaires. Participants who tried on the swimsuit reported greater frequency of body concern statements in an open-ended sentence completion task relative to participants in the sweater condition. Gapinski et al. also included a conversational independent variable whereby a confederate in a neighboring dressing room engaged the participant in either fat talk or neutral condition (control). In the fat talk condition, the confederate complained about her body. In the control condition, the confederate complained about computer problems. Women who were exposed to fat talk while in a swimsuit experienced lower levels of negative emotions compared to women who were exposed to fat talk while in a sweater. The results suggest that women may feel comfortable with fat talk when experiencing concern about their own bodies, but may feel uncomfortable when exposed to fat talk in a less body-focused setting. Perhaps these women felt pressure to self-derogate in a situation where they were not experiencing body dissatisfaction.

Although the theory that women may engage in fat talk as a means of fulfilling social motives has been studied in ethnographic research (Hope, 1980; Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994), there is limited empirical evidence of fat talk in young adults. The current investigations assessed whether college students perceive verbal body degradation as normative in “fat talk” social situations. Both Study 1 and Study 2 used a vignette involving four women studying for an exam during which their conversation gravitated into a discussion about weight. A female protagonist named “Jenny” was singled out in the vignette. Study 1 assessed whether male and female college students were able to identify a norm for women to self-degrade about their bodies by asking them to choose among three possible responses on Jenny’s behalf. It was expected that participants would be more likely to choose the self-degrade option as the most normative for women and as the most socially attractive to women in Study 1.

Study 2 asked college students to respond on Jenny’s behalf in an open-ended fashion. These qualitative

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