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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.

Article

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.

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 et al., 2003 K.D. Gapinski, K.D. Brownell and M. LaFrance, Body objectification and “fat talk”: Effects on emotion, motivation, and cognitive performance, *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 48 (2003), pp. 377–388. Full Text via CrossRef | View Record in Scopus | Cited By in Scopus (27)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 responses were coded into frequency of observed fat talk verbal behaviors. We predicted participants would respond for Jenny with negative body comments signifying an awareness of the fat talk norm.

Study 1 methods

Design

Study 1 was a descriptive, analog study using a vignette that asked participants to indicate forced-choice responses on behalf of a target female in a social situation involving body self-degradation (fat talk).

Participants

One hundred and twenty-four participants (males $n = 58$, females $n = 66$) were recruited from the general psychology participant pool at a mid-sized, primarily Caucasian (i.e., >95%), southeastern university. Average age was 19 (SD = 1.1) and average BMI was 22.9 (SD = .36) for females and 25.4 (SD = .78) for males. Institutional Review Board approval was received on September 23, 2003.

Materials

The vignette

A vignette described four college females studying for a biology exam during which their conversation transformed into a discussion of weight and body dissatisfaction (fat talk). Three of the four females contribute to the conversation by speaking negatively about their bodies. Participants were asked to choose the target female's (Jenny's) response to the group from three options:

Self-accept: “Guys, I’m pretty happy with my weight, I don’t think I should diet or anything.”

No information or control: Plays with her pen and makes no comment.

Self-degrade: “Yeah, I’m pretty unhappy with my weight also, I should really go on a diet too.”

Norm for fat talk assessment (NFTA)

The NFTA is a self-created questionnaire containing the four dependent variables that assessed the likelihood of a target female's response in reference to different audiences. The first item prompted female participants to indicate which of the three responses (i.e., self-accept, no information, self-degrade) they would most likely say if they were in Jenny's position in the script (I-Would-Say). The second item prompted male and female participants to indicate which response they believed most women would offer if they were in Jenny's position (Most-Women-Would-Say). The third item asked both male and female participants to choose the response option that they believed would lead women to like the target female (Attractive-To-Women), and the fourth item asked male and female participants to choose the response that would lead men to like the target (Attractive-To-Men).

Procedure

Data were collected by research assistants (RAs) for extra credit in small group sessions lasting 30 min. Participants completed an informed consent, read the vignette, completed the NFTA, and a brief demographic questionnaire.

Study 1 results

The first item, I-Would-Say, asked only female participants to choose their own response from the three options. No significant differences were found between any of the three force-choice options for this item (Self-Degrade versus Self-Accept and No-Information, $\chi^2(1, N = 47) = 1.72, p = .190$; Self-Accept versus No Information, $\chi^2(1, N = 38) = 0.0, p = 1.0$; see Fig. 1).

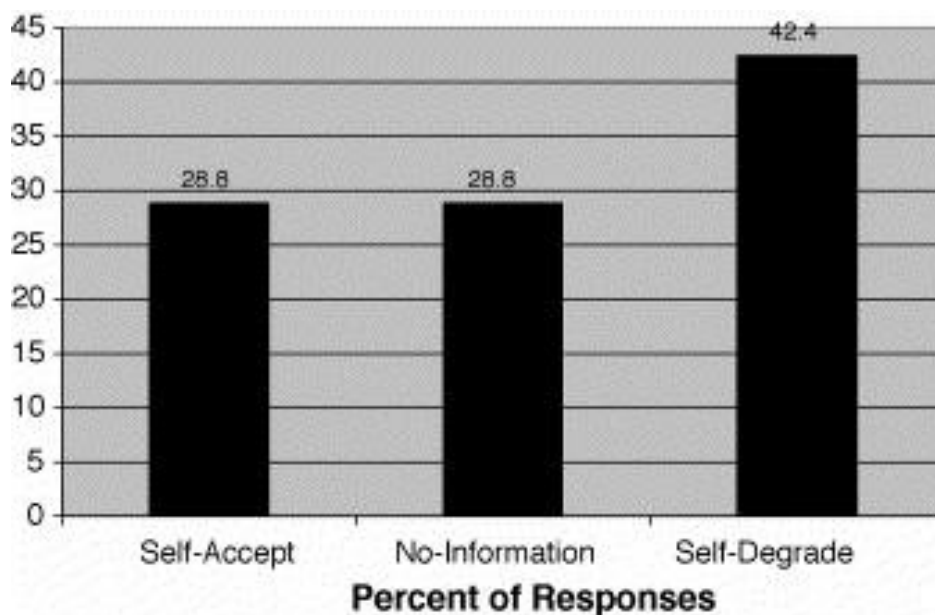


Fig. 1. Percent of female participants who said each option would be most like how they would have responded if they were in the target female's position.

The second item on the survey, Most-Women-Would-Say, asked all participants to identify which response option corresponded to what they believed most women would say. As Fig. 2 demonstrates, males endorsed the Self-Degrade option significantly more frequently than the Self-Accept option, $\chi^2(1, N = 51) = 47.08, p < .001$, and selected the Self-Degrade option over the No-Information option, $\chi^2(1, N = 57) = 32.44, p < .001$. Likewise, males preferred the No-Information option as more common for women than the Self-Accept option, $\chi^2(1, N = 8) = 4.50, p = .03$. Females also endorsed the Self-Degrade option more frequently compared to the No-Information option, $\chi^2(1, N = 66) = 58.24, p = < .001$ as the most likely response for most women in the fat talk situation. No female participants selected the Self-Accept option as the way most women would respond; thus, this option was clearly different from the Self-Degrade option. Thus, both male and female participants thought most women would self-degrade in this fat talk situation.

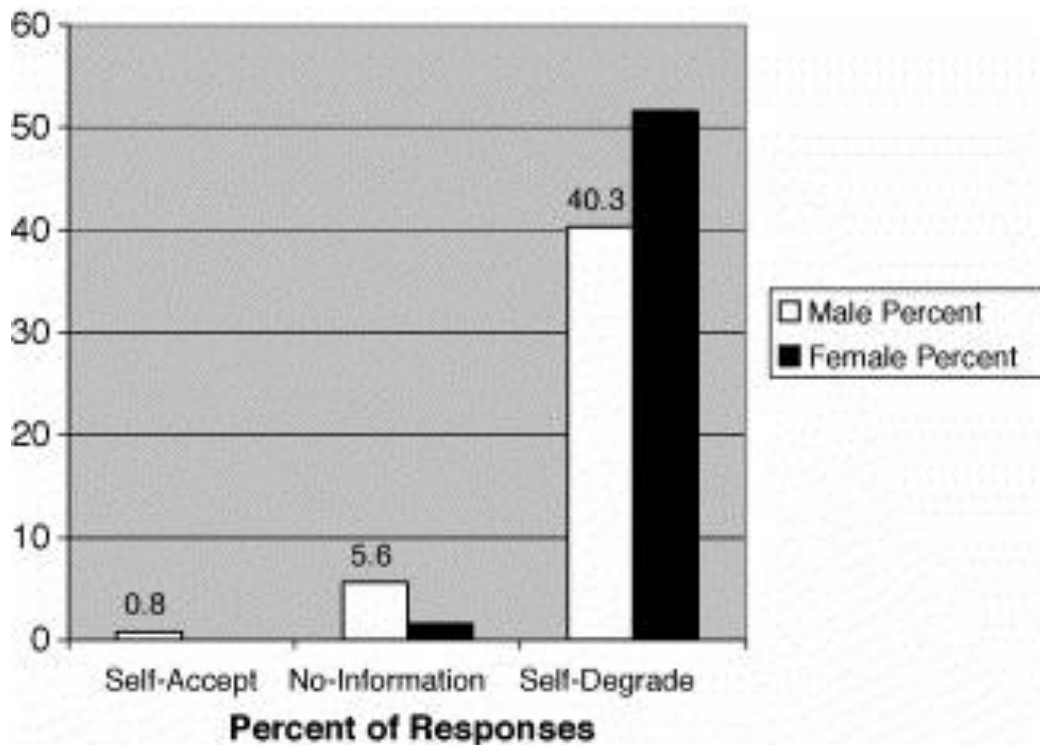


Fig. 2. Percent of male and female participants who said each option would be like what most women would say.

Item three, Attractive-To-Women, asked all participants to select the response option they thought would be most likely to lead other women to like the target female. Here again, as Fig. 3 demonstrates, significantly more males chose the Self-Degrade option over the Self-Accept option, $\chi^2(1, N = 53) = 23.11, p < .001$, and the Self-Degrade option over the No-Information option, $\chi^2(1, N = 49) = 31.04, p < .001$, while there was no significant difference between the Self-Accept and the No-Information options, $\chi^2(1, N = 14) = 1.14, p = .29$. Females' responses showed a similar pattern, as significantly more chose the Self-Degrade option over the Self-Accept option, $\chi^2(1, N = 59) = 34.32, p < .001$, and the Self-Degrade option over the No-Information option, $\chi^2(1, N = 58) = 36.48, p < .001$. However, there was no significant difference between the Self-Accept and No-Information options, $\chi^2(1, N = 13) = 0.08, p = .78$. Therefore, both male and female participants thought self-degrading would be most attractive to women.

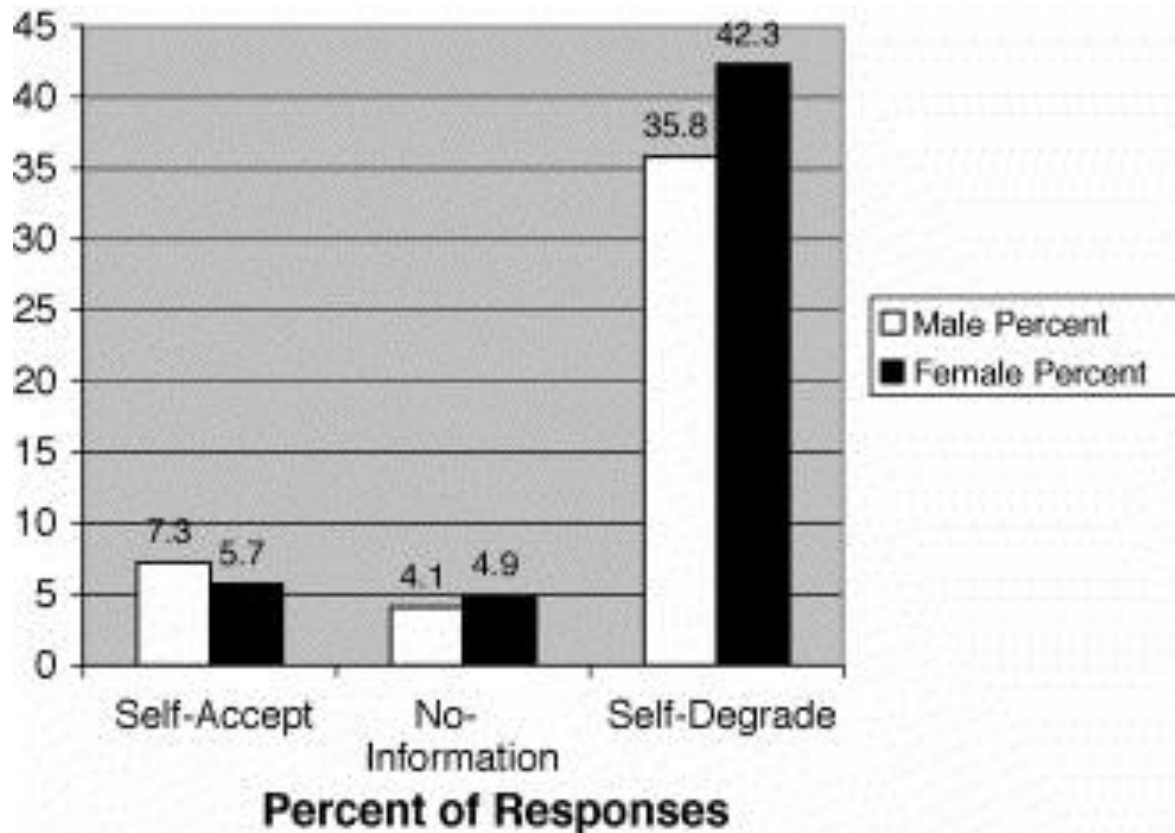


Fig. 3. Percent of male and female participants who said each option would most likely lead other women to like the target female.

The last item, Attractive-To-Men, asked participants to choose the option that would most likely lead men to like the target female. As demonstrated in Fig. 4, significantly more males chose the Self-Accept option over the No-Information option, $\chi^2(1, N = 49) = 9.00, p < .001$, and the Self-Accept option over the Self-Degrade option, $\chi^2(1, N = 43) = 16.95, p < .001$, but there was no significant difference between the No-Information and Self-Degrade options, $\chi^2(1, N = 22) = 1.64, p = .20$. Females' responses were similar, with significantly more choosing the Self-Accept option over the No-Information option, $\chi^2(1, N = 61) = 22.44, p < .001$, and the Self-Accept option over the Self-Degrade option, $\chi^2(1, N = 54) = 35.85, p < .001$, with no significant difference emerging between the No-Information and Self-

Degrade options, $\chi^2(1, N = 17) = 2.89, p = .09$. In summary, both male and female participants thought a self-acceptance response by Jenny would be attractive to men.

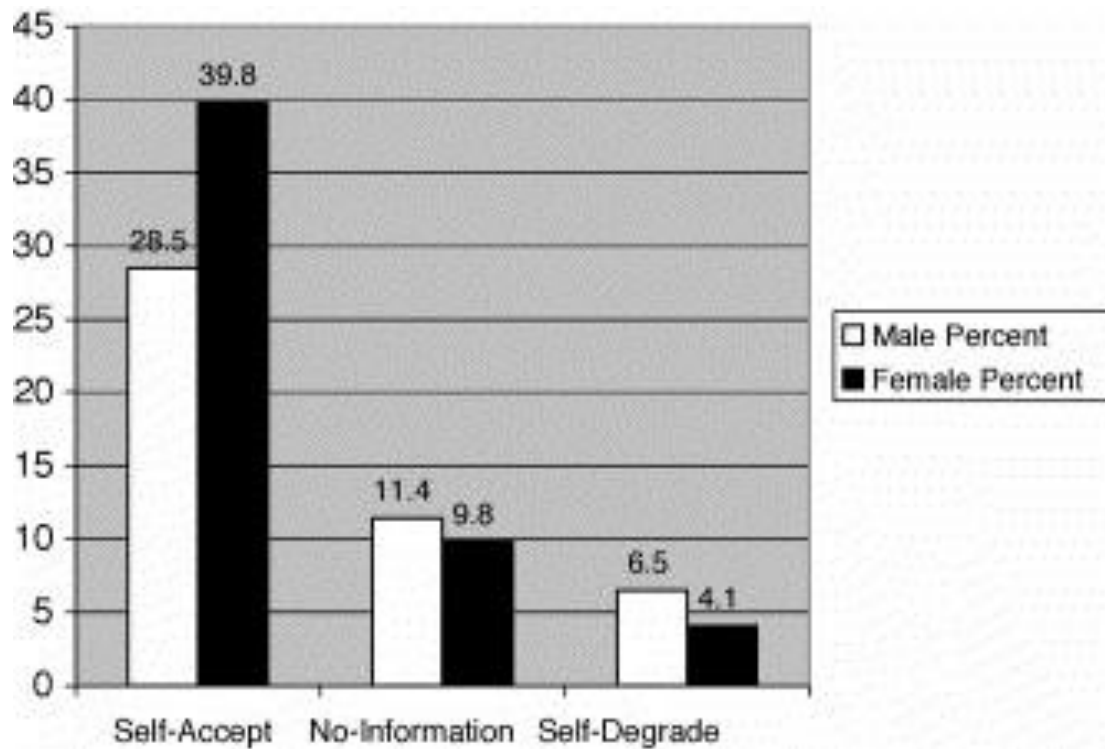


Fig. 4. Percent of male and female participants who said each response option would most likely lead men to like the target female.

Study 2 methods

Design

Study 2 was a descriptive, analog study using a vignette identical to the one used in Study 1, but asked participants to provide open-ended responses on behalf of a target female in a social situation involving fat talk. These responses were coded by two independent raters, blind to hypotheses, into frequency of observed fat talk behaviors.

Participants

Eighty-five college students ($n = 29$ males and $n = 56$ females), who were primarily Caucasian (90%), from the same mid-sized southeastern university participated in the study for course extra credit. The female average age was 20.4 (SD = 2.3) with a BMI of 23.0 (SD = 4.4). Males' age was 20.0 (SD = 3.9) with average BMI of 25.4 (SD = 3.9). This research was exempted from the Internal Review Board (IRB) review on September 20, 2005.

Materials

Vignette

The same vignette from Study 1 was used in Study 2. In Study 1, participants were asked to choose from three options for the target female "Jenny." In Study 2, participants were asked to indicate in an open-ended fashion what Jenny would say about herself to the group of women engaging in fat talk.

Coding Scale

A scale was developed to code the qualitative responses into a quantitative format for analysis. Two college student RAs were trained to code the content of open-ended participant responses. The raters independently coded whether Jenny Agreed, Disagreed, Neither Agreed nor Disagreed, Self-degraded, and Did Not Self-degrade. Each open-ended response was coded in a dichotomous fashion with a "1" coded if the behavior was observed and a "0" coded if the behavior was not observed. The variables were separate and independent of one another (i.e., not Agreed was not necessarily coded as Disagreed). Thus, a participant was given a score for each of the five variables. These were operationalized as follows for the raters:

Agreed – Jenny's response agreed that body image is important or relevant.

Disagreed – Jenny's response disagreed that body image is important or relevant.

Neither – Jenny's response neither agreed nor disagreed that body image is important or relevant.

Self-degraded – Jenny's response included negative comments about her body, looks, size or image.

Did Not Self-degraded – Jenny's response did not include any negative comments about her body, looks, size or image.

Study 2 results

Coding of participants' responses was subjective in nature; thus, inter-rater reliability was determined using a Cohen's kappa, a chance-corrected measure of agreement for dichotomous variables, between the two independent raters' coding across each variable. Agreement for Agreed was only $\kappa = .184$, $p = .013$ with Disagreed $\kappa = .424$, $p < .001$ and neither at a mere $\kappa = .092$, $p = .091$. Only Self-derogate $\kappa = .838$, $p < .001$ and Did Not Self-derogate $\kappa = .803$, $p < .001$ reached a level of inter-rater agreement of 80% and above. Only the reliably coded variables of Self-derogate and Did Not Self-derogate were analyzed.

To determine whether participants produced responses consistent with the norm for fat talk, chi-square analyses were conducted on yes (observed) versus no (not observed) for the reliable response variables. When participants were prompted to respond to what Jenny would say about herself to the group, the majority (85% versus 15%) thought she would self-degrade in this situation, $\chi^2(1, N = 85) = 38.22$, $p < .001$. Inversely, participants thought Jenny would be significantly less likely to Not Self-degrade (15% versus 85%), $\chi^2(1, N = 85) = 38.22$, $p < .001$. Both of these

results suggest participants thought Jenny would self-degrade in this fat talk situation (Table 1).

Table 1
Frequency and chi-square analyses of rater's observations of participant's responses

Variable name	Direction	Frequency	χ^2 Value	<i>p</i> -Value
Agreed	Yes	34	3.4	.065
	No	51		
Disagreed	Yes	4	69.8	.000
	No	81		
Neither Agreed or Disagreed	Yes	47	.953	.329
	No	38		
Self-degraded	Yes	71	38.22	.000 ^a
	No	14		
Not Self-degraded	Yes	14	38.22	.000 ^a
	No	71		

^a Variables considered substantially reliable ($r = .80+$) to be interpreted in these.

Discussion

These two vignette studies used slightly different methodologies to explore whether college students are aware of fat talk norms for women. Study 1 presented a female fat talk situation and asked participants to choose a response for a target female in a vignette. Study 2 allowed participants to spontaneously respond for the female target in the same fat talk situation. Both studies found evidence that college students indeed recognize self-

degradation as normative for female college students in a situation where other females degrade their bodies.

Study 1 examined male and female participants' perception of a woman's social attractiveness in a fat talk situation across three self-presentational options including self-acceptance, providing no information, or self-degradation of her body. Consistent with the hypothesis, both males and females thought the typical woman in a position such as the target's would respond by self-degrading, and that a self-degrading response, as opposed to self-accepting or remaining silent, would be the most likely response associated with other women liking her. It also appears that both genders think men are most likely to believe a woman is socially attractive when she presents herself as having positive body esteem rather than negative body esteem. Interestingly, although participants acknowledged a norm for women to engage in body self-degradation (fat talk), they themselves stated they would not personally choose to respond in a manner consistent with the acknowledged norm. This phenomenon has been called the "third-person effect" and translates to mean that people will often think that a media message will not have much effect on them personally, but will have an effect on others (Davidson, 1983). College campuses often provide educational programs alerting women to the dangers of obsessive weight concerns and dieting. Thus, it seems probable that the women in this sample might have viewed the norm of body degradation as a negative behavior. Cohen and Davis (1991) and Gunther and Thorson (1992) have found the third-person effect is situational if the message is perceived as negative or persuasion would mean one is not intelligent. Hence, these college-aged participants knew of the fat talk norm, but may have considered self-degradation of one's body image to be unflattering, and thus hard to admit.

Furthermore, our sample was primarily comprised of students taking general psychology, a class that might have primed students to consider

the liabilities of strict adherence to societal norms. Pronin, Lin, and Ross (2002) demonstrated the tendency for individuals to recognize common judgment biases (e.g., the better than average effect) in others, but simultaneously deny their own susceptibility to the bias. Pronin et al. attributed this biased distortion of self, in part, as due to self-enhancement motives to be perceived favorably (although they also identified cognitive biases to explain this phenomenon). The women in our study may therefore, have been able to identify the norm of fat talk as one that impacts other women's behavior, but to which they themselves were relatively invulnerable.

On the other hand, a potentially positive caveat that emerged from this research was the fact that many of the college women in our sample did not believe that they themselves would self-degrade when faced with a fat talk social circumstance, despite knowledge of the fat talk norm. Indeed, across response options, there was no particular response preferred by these women. This suggests that the norms governing fat talk may be moderated by an array of social contexts and individual difference variables, such as body mass or individual body esteem.

It is possible that the force-choice procedure utilized in Study 1 primed participants to think about norms related to body image by providing specific responses including self-degradation or self-acceptance. Study 2 allowed participants to provide responses for the target, and again, that even without restricting participant responses to self-degradation, self-acceptance, or no information, they expected the target to self-degrade her body. This finding suggests the fat talk norm may encourage women to state negative verbalizations about their bodies when other women are doing so. Furthermore, participants did not spontaneously suggest that Jenny would avoid the topic by not responding. Thus college student participants did not identify avoidance of joining into the conformity of fat talk as an appropriate option for women. This finding is consistent with

Nichter's (2004) ethnographic research whereby young females stated in focus groups that they did not feel that avoidance was an option in fat talk conversations. Avoidance was feared to be perceived as “stuck-up” or conceited by the other females, and therefore, they reported feeling compelled to join in the fat talk conversations.

The use of a fat talk vignette reduces the likelihood of extraneous characteristics of the females confounding their perceived social attractiveness; however, this methodology also deprived participants of the naturalistic social environment where impression management usually occurs. Social evaluation depends on a combination of factors including physical appearance, eye contact, body language and verbalizations. Judgments made in fat talk situations, in particular, probably entail physical appearance and self-presentation in combination with what one verbalizes about her body. Use of a script eliminates a number of factors that may influence impression management and social judgment.

Although these studies provide descriptive evidence of recognition of the fat talk norm, fat talk should be investigated experimentally. Perhaps future research could examine opinions of social attractiveness across a manipulated variable whereby randomly assigned groups view a visual depiction of a female involved in a fat talk discussion. An even more realistic setting would be a staged interaction between participants and a confederate who manipulates her self-presentational style while measuring participants' verbal and nonverbal responses to her (e.g., Gapinski et al., 2003). Future investigations may wish to expound on this research and not only examine self-presentational style, but also the effect of the target's body size on perceived likeability within self-presentational style. It is possible that a woman who appears overweight and verbally self-accepts her body would likely be perceived differently than a woman who self-accepts and is of normal weight or is underweight. Moreover, fat talk is probably a conversational style considered normative in all-female

company. Future research may wish to investigate the social appropriateness of fat talk in mixed gender circles as well as if it exists in all-male conversations. A popular cereal company was running television ads where men were complaining about their bodies as a parody on women's fat talk. Men probably do not fat talk among other men, yet the appropriateness of fat talk by women in front of men has not been investigated. Participants in this research seemed to believe fat talk belonged only in feminine social circles.

Self-presentation of body image and the fat talk norm are new areas of research that deserve future investigation as they merge the literature on personal body image with those of psychosocial constructs including conformity pressure and impression management. In understanding the principles that govern self-presentation of body image, a greater understanding of the mechanisms that work to create and maintain body dissatisfaction may be gained. This research may eventually provide empirical evidence that body image is not just a personal phenomenon, but is integrated into and reinforced by social networks. Perhaps the norm of fat talk keeps women believing all other women feel poorly about their bodies, hence normalizing their own body dissatisfaction. Conversely, there may be women who feel positively about their bodies who refrain from verbalizing this to others for fear of norm violation and social ridicule. Hence, a cycle of personal and normative body-image dissatisfaction may perpetuate itself within our culture. The present study combined with future research on fat talk may have utility in the development of cognitive-behavioral or interpersonal prevention or treatment interventions for body-image dissatisfaction.

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