Women’s Fat Talk and Positive Body Talk Effects on their Likeability

Fat talk is that easily recognizable self-disparaging body talk in which girls and women engage in relation to food, weight, or the body.\(^1\) Fat talk is not innocuous. It consistently is shown to be highly associated with, and even to cause, body dissatisfaction, a known risk factor for the development of eating pathology.\(^2\) Although the widespread norm to fat talk has been theorized to facilitate bonding and protect against social rejection\(^1\), studies show that women who make positive body statements are actually perceived by other women as more likeable than women who engage in fat talk.\(^3\) Nonetheless, girls and women engage in fat talk regularly, and there is evidence, even, that fat talk is contagious: A first woman’s engagement in fat talk spurs her conversation partner to fat talk.\(^4\) In separate research on obesity and stigma, there is clear evidence of a strong cultural bias against women who are overweight, including that they are seen as generally less likeable.\(^5\) Social psychologists long have known that conformity to a group’s behavior (e.g., fat talk) increases when attraction to the group members is high.\(^6\)

The purpose of this study was to assess how body-statement type (i.e., fat talk vs. positive body statement) interacts with a woman’s body type (thin vs. overweight) to influence her likeability. Understanding whether a fat-talk conversant is deemed more or less likeable depending on her weight status may help researchers identify factors influencing its contagion.

**Hypotheses**

We hypothesized that a woman would be perceived as more likeable when:
1. she made positive body-related statements vs. fat talk
2. she was noticeably thin vs. noticeably overweight.

Most substantively, however, integrating research from the fat talk and obesity-stigma literatures, we hypothesized that:
3. found least likeable would be an overweight woman fat-talking.

**Method**

Participants were 139 undergraduates (mostly first-years; 68%) who participated for extra-credit in this online study. The average BMI was 22.2 (SD = 2.7), that is, in the normal range per conventional BMI labels. We developed and piloted sets of body-related statements and photos of women, and selected for use only statements rated as clear instances of fat talk and body affirmation, and only photos depicting noticeably thin and overweight body types.

We used a 2 (body type: noticeably thin vs. overweight) × 2 (body statement: fat talk vs. positive body talk) within-subjects design. Participants were shown a series of photos, each accompanied by a body-related statement, followed by a set of questions. Each photo depicted a college-age woman (thin or overweight) making a statement (positive or negative) about her body.
Each participant was presented with two of every possible combination of photo and statement type, such that she responded to 8 unique photo-statement pairs.

Included in the set of questions presented after each of the photo-statement pairs was the target likeability item along with distractor items. The target item read, “How likeable is she?” and used a scale ranging from 1 (not at all likeable) to 7 (very likeable).

Results

Table 1 presents the results. The upper half shows the average likeability ratings received by the women in the four conditions. The lower half provides results of tests comparing likeability ratings across every possible pair of conditions.

Hypothesis 1 was supported: Participants liked the fat-talking women significantly less than the women making positive body statements ($F[1, 138] = 96.79, p < .0001$).

Hypothesis 2 was not supported; the opposite was found: Participants liked the women with thin body types significantly less than the women with overweight body types ($F[1,138] = 49.21, p < .0001$).

Hypothesis 3 – that overweight women fat-talking would be perceived as least likeable – was partially supported. They were liked significantly less than both thin and overweight women who made positive body self-statements, but the likeability scores they received were not significantly different from those received by thin women who made fat-talk statements. Least liked, generally speaking, were the thin and overweight women who fat-talked (and their likeability ratings were statistically indistinguishable). Liked more than the overweight women who fat-talked were the thin women who made positive body statements. However, there was no statistical difference in the likeability ratings of the thin women based on the type of body talk they exhibited (i.e., they were not perceived as less or more likeable if they fat-talked vs. made positive body statements). Finally, those rated most likeable were the overweight women who made positive body statements.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Mean(SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thin women fat talking</td>
<td>4.15(1.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overweight women fat talking</td>
<td>4.05(1.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thin women making positive body statements</td>
<td>4.42(1.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overweight women making positive body statements</td>
<td>5.53(1.08)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparison of likeability means across conditions

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thin vs. overweight women fat talking</td>
<td>$F(1, 138) = 1.24, p = .027$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thin vs. overweight women making positive body statements</td>
<td>$F(1, 138) = 112.45, p &lt; .0001$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thin women fat talking vs. overweight women making positive body statements</td>
<td>$F(1, 138) = 124.29, p &lt; .0001$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thin women making positive body statements vs. overweight women fat talking</td>
<td>$F(1, 138) = 12.43, p = .0006$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overweight women fat talking vs. making positive body statements</td>
<td>$F(1, 138) = 215.44, p &lt; .0001$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thin women fat talking vs. making positive body statements</td>
<td>$F(1, 138) = 5.28, p = .023$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. An adjustment to alpha was made via the Bonferroni technique ($\alpha = .05/6$ tests), which re-set alpha to .008 per test.

Discussion

Despite the negative stereotypes associated with individuals who are overweight and the culture-wide desire to emulate the bodies of thin women, these results show that overweight women who made positive body statements were perceived as most likeable. These women’s statements may be less threatening to another woman’s body satisfaction than the same statements made by thin women. One may not experience a decrease in one’s body satisfaction, as has been shown to occur in the presence of thin women fat-talking, and body dissatisfaction may have an influence on a target woman’s
likeability. Related, the notion that an overweight woman accepts and embraces her body may encourage others to accept their own bodies as well. Another possible explanation is that it may have increased positive mood on the part of the listener. The effects of an elevation in mood may, in turn, have increased the perceived likeability of the target. Future work aimed at disentangling the factors associated with its contagion effects should consider body dissatisfaction, mood, and likeability simultaneously.

References