An Investigation of the Perceptions of "Fat Talk" among Undergraduate College Students

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Abstract

This study will investigate the perceptions of “fat talk” among undergraduate college students. Twenty-five students of the University of New Hampshire-Durham participated in a study that examined the perceptions of ideal body images, body comparisons and attractiveness. Participants took part in qualitative interviews discussing the topics mentioned above. The results were analyzed using qualitative methods which focused on gender differences of the three topics. The results suggest that there are differences in gender perceptions of attractiveness and body comparisons. The results also show that both genders reported having engaged or overheard peers express body dissatisfaction and body comparison.

Introduction

Nichter and Vuckovic (1994) coined the phrase “fat talk” to describe the self-disparaging body talk that occurs in peer groups and appears to contain an element of social influence; they claimed that “fat talk” uses weight as a reference point for feelings; that is, saying “I’m fat” can be like saying “I feel depressed” or “I feel out of control”. For the purpose of this paper, “fat talk” will be defined as a conversation among family and friends pertaining to positive or negative comments about appearance, dieting techniques, and the need to lose weight as acceptable and normative discussions in today’s society. The present study examines the development of social norms involving body image among college students. Since much of the past research has covered little information from male participants, this study focused on gaining the male perspective; twelve out of the twenty-five students interviewed were male.

McKinley (2002) considers the historical context of United States culture objectifying women’s bodies as valued through their physical appearance, they hypothesized that fat talk is a social extension of body objectification. Through “fat talks” young women participate in not only peer criticism but self-objectification. Self-objectification is argued to have damaging psychological consequences, such as increased shame and anxiety, decreased opportunity to achieve peak motivational states due to interruption of cognitive flow and insensitivity to bodily
Self-objectification is present in fat talk; the present study examines how objectification is related to body comparison to peers and celebrities. In western societies especially, young women are pressured to have an idealized body type that they are exposed to through media and their social world.

Pressures to be thin take a variety of forms, such as glorification of ultra-slim fashion models, direct messages that one should lose weight (e.g., weight-related teasing), and more indirect pressures to conform to the current thin-ideal espoused for women (e.g., a friend’s persistent obsessions about weight and appearance) (Stice, Maxfield and Wells, 2002). Media and peer influences all socialize young women to think that attractiveness and opportunities in life come from thinness. In the present study, both female and male students recalled having looked to celebrity bodies for the ideal body image.

Objectification theory, social learning theory and false consensus effect have all been linked to fat talks. Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) asserts that persistent external evaluation leads women to adopt a view of themselves as objects that are valued for use by others. Fat talks are a way for girls to compare themselves to peers and models they see in the media. According to social learning theory, family members and peers can intensify the socio-cultural emphasis on slenderness for girls that are pervasive in our society (Byely, Archibald, Graber and Brooks-Gunn, 1999). Muller, Williamson and Martin (2002) studied the false consensus effect among college females of normal weight; they found that participants with high levels of body-shape concerns overestimate the prevalence of these thoughts in others. These theories have helped past researchers study fat talks and how they are involved in casual conversations of young people.
Purpose

The goal of this study is to examine students’ perceptions of body comparison and images. I also further examined the gender differences surrounding these topics, if any. I hypothesize that female students will compare thinness, and male students will compare muscle bulk. Through qualitative analysis, I also want to examine if students have engaged in “fat talk” or overheard people discussing body satisfaction or dissatisfaction. I hypothesize that students will be more critical of strangers’ bodies than bodies of their friends. I also hypothesize that students will be more critical of people of the opposite sex than people of the same sex. The last topic that will be examined will be the attractive qualities in a potential mate, and if there are any gender differences of attractiveness.

Literature Review

Peers

Peers are a vital part of the lives of adolescents and play an increasingly prominent role in defining social expectations, establishing identity, and evaluating self (Brown, Mory, & Kinney, 1994). Indirect pressures to be thin include conversations with friends. Topics of dieting and exercise are usually talked about among close friends. Social influences have been hypothesized to influence body image and dieting in adolescent girls via three potential mechanisms: perceptions of family relations (Swarr & Richards, 1996), modeling of mothers’ behaviors and attitudes (Pike & Rodin, 1991), and direct communication (Thelen & Cormier, 1995).

Byely et al. (1999) conducted a study to examine the emergence of body image concerns and dieting behaviors in early adolescence as a function of girls’ perceptions of family relationships, maternal modeling of dieting behaviors and body image concerns, and peer pressures to diet. They designed a longitudinal study based on self reported data provided by
fifty-five young girls aged ten to fourteen (1999: 156). They were assessed on body image, dieting attitudes and behaviors, perception of weight and family relations. At time second investigation, a year later, nineteen out of fifty-five girls (34.5%) reported that they had been on a diet in the last year and of those girls who reported dieting in the last year, a majority (75%) said that they dieted in order to “look better” (158). Researchers also found that girls’ body image significantly decreased, whereas problematic dieting behaviors significantly increased over time. Conversations with friends and body comparisons with their bodies is the focus of my study. I examined the influence of peers on students’ body satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction.

Media

The use of slender models in advertising presents direct socio-cultural messages (Stice, Maxfield and Wells, 2003). Over the past fifty years, western society has promoted thinness to be the social norm, thus young women constantly compare their bodies to their friends and favorite celebrities. Arguably the most likely cause of body dissatisfaction among adolescent girls is the current unrealistic standard of female beauty which places an inordinate emphasis on thinness that is unattainable for most girls (Ackard and Peterson, 2001). Mass media, which include magazines and television, are often regarded as the single strongest influencing factor on adolescent body image (Levine and Smolak 1996: 238). In the present study participants were asked if they had ever compared their body to bodies of celebrities, if so they were asked what body features they compared or admired.

Hargreaves’ and Tiggemann’s (2004) study examined the impact of televised images of idealized male attractiveness, in addition to female attractiveness, on adolescent body image. The participants were 595 adolescent students from two South Australian public high schools; students were in years 8–12. The methods used were Appearance Schemas Inventory (ASI)
(Cash and Labarge, 1996) to measure appearance schematicity and Physical Appearance Comparison Scale (PACS) (Thompson, Heinberg and Tantleff, 1991) to measure the degree to which individuals tend to compare their appearance with others. Using a five-point Likert scale, respondents indicated their level of agreement with 14 statements (Hargreaves and Tiggemann, 2004). As hypothesized by the researchers, girls viewing thin-ideal commercials had significantly greater body dissatisfaction than those viewing the nonappearance commercials. They found that exposure to thin-ideal and muscular-ideal commercials did lead to increased appearance comparison, this effect was stronger for girls. These results suggest that, in general, girls seem to process self-related appearance information more deeply and more automatically than boys (2004: 357). One limitation of Hargreaves and Tiggman’s study was the researchers argue that as the media’s portrayal of the muscular ideal becomes increasingly pervasive (Pope, Olivardia, Borowiecki and Cohane, 2001), it is possible that boys and men will become increasingly vulnerable to the impact of idealized images on their body image. My current study examines the impact of celebrity bodies on body dissatisfaction; focusing especially on the impact of the muscular ideal on male students.

**Attractiveness**

Gender differences vary drastically among adolescents when discussing attractiveness in both people of the opposite and same sex. Body image is an important aspect of self-representation and self-evaluation during adolescence (Jones 2001). Weight has been a primary feature in predicting body dissatisfaction among females whereas the attractiveness concerns of males have been associated with height and shoulders/muscular shape (Abell and Richards, 1996). Diane Jones’ (2001) study examined attractiveness social comparison during adolescence...
through the open-ended surveys of boys and girls from seventh and tenth grades. Her study hoped to overcome previous research limitations; limitations were no consideration for the role of social comparison in the body image satisfaction of males. Gender differences and similarities in social comparison have not yet been explored (2004: 647). My current study also examines the gender differences when it comes to attractiveness in the opposite sex. I will only be examining traits that are appearance based. Jones (2001) had students respond to a survey in which they were asked to write a description of their ideal image of attractiveness for both a teenage girl and for a teenage boy; in this way, the same-sex and opposite-sex attractiveness conceptions were obtained from both boys and girls (649). Height, weight, shape/build, face, personality, intelligence, style and popularity were attributes included in the responses. Gender differences emerged when weight was a defining factor for girls and build a defining factor for boys. Diane Jones suggests that longitudinal studies and experimental research are necessary to determine more clearly the causal connections between social comparison and body dissatisfaction (661); thus a limitation in her study.

This analysis of gender differences and their view of attractiveness can be compared to the presence of fat talk in conversation. Identifying these differences will help researchers examine conversations involving fat talk. Understanding body dissatisfaction of both males and females will lead to future investigation of social norms. As mentioned earlier, males have not been studied thoroughly in their participation in fat talks, thus a focus in my study. Like Diana Jones’ study, my results found that females nearly twice as often as males mentioned facial features when describing attractiveness. Jones also argues that although ideal attractiveness as defined by girls was conceived as multidimensional, the reality is that body image satisfaction
was related most strongly to the frequency of social comparisons for a very limited set of physical attributes.

**Methods**

The research method I chose to use was qualitative interview. I had a semi-structured interview that focused on four categories of questions. I asked participants if they had ever heard people talking to them or around them about their bodies, and if so, the setting in which the conversation took place. Questions about body comparison; comparing friends’ bodies or to bodies of celebrities and people in the media were also asked. The interview included questions about feelings about their own body and the lifestyle adjustment to college. Lastly, I asked about attractive qualities when looking for a potential mate.

My sampling method was through snowball/referral sampling. All of the interviewees were full time students at the University of New Hampshire; Durham campus. My sample consisted of thirteen female and twelve male students. I interviewed students who I considered to be acquaintances. I then found other interviewees through referrals to their friends and roommates to participate in my study. All of my participants were volunteers and signed an informed consent before taking part in the interview. All of the participants chose a pseudonym at the beginning of the session which was later used to code in my data analysis. By signing the consent they also agreed to having the interview be taped using a voice recorder. This proved to be a handy tool for the data analysis process.

Interviews ranged from twenty to twenty-five minutes with each participant. The more information provided, the longer the interview. I used an interview guide to keep the interviews structured. I also probed quite a bit to get participants to explain their answers fully and to get a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences and thoughts. There were virtually no
data collection problems. One difficulty I encountered was trying to find quiet places to meet for the interview. My initial idea of using a computer to record the interview proved to be unsuccessful. I then used a tape recorder, which proved to be more successful and became the tool for the rest of the interviews. While using the recorder, I was able to focus more on my questions and the interviewee, rather than writing down everything that was said, and losing information in the process.

**Results**

After all the interviews were completed, data analysis began. I used qualitative methods to analyze my data. The transcripts of the interviews were examined for common themes. The results were grouped into active or listening roles in “fat talk”, gender differences in body comparisons of both bodies of peers and celebrities and gender differences involving attractiveness. All the information was coded using the pseudonyms provided by interviewees.

I found that all the students had either engaged in “fat talk” or overheard people talking about their bodies. In most cases, students had experienced both. Many students recalled that they had engaged in fat talk among their friends and had overheard strangers. When it came to talking with friends, most students took an active role, contrary to when they overheard strangers and engaged in a more passive role by just listening and not intervening. Both male and female students said that they had overheard fat talk mostly at the gym or at the dining hall. Paul recalls a situation in which he overheard female students talking about working out after eating, he states “Well I hear a lot of girls mostly talk about how they want to be skinny and after they eat something that has like the smallest amount of fat content ever in it they need to immediately run like 15 miles to work out what they ate.” Eight out of the twelve male students said that they had
talked about their bodies with their roommates at either the gym or in their rooms. Robert remarks, “Just looking at other people and sizing people up. I think it is human nature.”

I also found that both male and female students, at one time or another, had compared their bodies to bodies of their friends or people they saw around campus. When comparing bodies Viv replies, “Usually I look at someone who is the same height as me. With people that are taller than me there is no way in hell I could look like that because I don’t have that body shape with being that tall. But when you look at someone who is a little bit skinnier than you and who is around the same height. You say ok that is what I can look like”. Many of the female students reported having compared thinness to another female student. When it came to male students they compared muscle bulk and strength. For example Paul answers, “Normally when I compare my body to someone else’s it’s a person that I don’t like, and I am like oh screw that kid like I am bigger and stronger than he is.”

Both female and male students were found to be more critical of friends’ bodies than bodies of strangers. Ashley says that she is more critical of her friends’ bodies; “I feel like more critical of friends and the guys are looking at the group of friends that are going out”. This supports the competition among friends when it comes to going out and trying to get attention from guys. Five out of the twenty-five students interviewed said that they were more vocal when it came to criticizing bodies of strangers. Susan explains, “Probably more of strangers because I tend to defend my friends because I feel like they look fine.” My findings also suggest that students were more critical of bodies that were the same sex than opposite sex. Jane states, “When I am comparing to my friends who are very small I compare the size of our bodies. I compare myself to my roommate a lot.” In most cases, comparisons and criticisms were made with people of the same sex.
My findings suggest that female students compare their bodies to celebrities more than male students. Only one male student said that he compared body fat percentage to actors. The rest of the male students said they didn’t compare their bodies to those of celebrities, but they did say they compared bodies with athletes, body builders and UFC fighters. Twelve of the female students said they compared their bodies to celebrities. America’s Next Top Model, Playboy, Cosmopolitan and People magazine were all sources of the comparison. As found in peer comparison, female students compared stomachs, hips and legs to those of celebrities. Jane says that she does compare her body to celebrity bodies but states, “Most people are air brushed and have trainers, and it’s not a realistic goal of looking like that.” Four other females had similar opinions; they said they compared bodies but said that it is unrealistic look because they don’t have the resources to hire a cook and trainer.

Gender differences were found also in qualities of attractiveness, centered on appearance. When talking to male students there was a wide variety of responses. Two male participants didn’t say anything particular other than that they loved everything about the opposite sex and that girl was their type. “Nice” stomachs, butts and legs were referred to as “being a plus” or a “turn on” for eight out of the twelve male students interviewed.

My findings support Diana Jones’ study in that females were more likely to mention facial characteristics as being attractive. Ten of the thirteen female students mentioned facial features (smile and eyes), while only two out of the twelve male students mentioned attributes about the face. “Tall” and “broad” were seen as attractive to female students. Nine out of thirteen of the girls referred to “tall” and “strong” as being a protective quality that they looked for. My findings support past research in that attractiveness for females was based on thinness and fitness, while attractive males was characterized by height and muscles.
Discussion

My results show that there are great differences in the way female and male college students feel about body comparison, appearance and attractiveness. The purpose of my study was to examine these gender differences through qualitative interviews. My results favored some of my hypotheses, but refuted others. My results showed support that female students compared thinness with peers and celebrities while male students compared muscle bulk. The refuted hypotheses were that students were actually more critical of their friends’ bodies than bodies of strangers and students were more critical of bodies that were the same sex than that of the opposite sex.

There are some limitations to my study. The major limitation was time, I only had about a week and a half to meet with people and conduct data collection. Also within the interviews themselves, I wish I had more time to bring up other topics involved with body comparison and ideal body images. Having a partner in a future study would help with my sample size; I was only able to conduct twenty-five interviews at a school that is composed of around twelve thousand undergraduate students.

I suggest that future research be conducted on this topic. The phenomenon of “fat talks” has been a progressing issue in the lives of young people. In today’s society the public is constantly bombarded with media that exploits and obsesses about bodies and their appearance. The pressure to be thin has great historical context in our country; young people are constantly exposed to ideal body images and the pressure to be thin by movies, television and magazines. The development of negative eating pathology and body dissatisfaction can be a consequence of engaging in fat talks. Curriculum and school organizations should be created to combat these negative feelings about eating habits and appearance; it should not be dealt with through “fat
talk”. These conversations encourage negative body images and need to be combated. Individual attention that focuses on why young people feel body dissatisfaction and feel the need to constantly compare themselves to the idealized body type should be examined. Programs to promote healthy eating habits and a positive self image should be created as a resource for young people in middle school to college.

References


