

MALE BODY TALK: INVESTIGATING FAT TALK AND MUSCLE TALK IN A  
ROMANTIC CONTEXT

by

Kimberly Daniels  
A Dissertation  
Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty  
of  
George Mason University  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Communication

Committee:

\_\_\_\_\_ Director

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Department Chairperson

\_\_\_\_\_ Program Director

\_\_\_\_\_ Dean, College of Humanities  
and Social Sciences

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Summer Semester 2021  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

Male Body Talk: Investigating Fat Talk and Muscle Talk in a Romantic Context

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at George Mason University

By

Kimberly Daniels  
Master of Arts  
Central Michigan University, 2015

Director: Gary L. Kreps, Professor  
Department of Communication

Summer Semester 2021  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother Dorothy Faye Farquharson, and my grandfather Bill James Farquharson. Grandma and Grandpa were wonderful people who rescued me from an abusive childhood and set me on the path to achieve my educational dreams. Their love and guidance made me the person I am today. They willingly gave up their golden years to raise me and without them this degree would never have been possible. They will forever be in my heart.

I loved you first Grandma and Grandpa.

You are my favorite.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my Lord Jesus Christ for allowing me to attend George Mason University, where I grew as a scholar and teacher. I am most thankful to my advisor Dr. Gary Kreps, who supported me in this research agenda from my first semester at GMU. His guidance and tutelage made me a better scholar and a better person. I would like to thank Dr. Kevin Wright for realizing my passion for methodology and encouraging me to pursue this path. I'd also like to thank Dr. Richard Craig for providing a critical cultural viewpoint and teaching a pretty fun pop culture class that brought me a lot of joy. I am extremely thankful to the entire Communication Department at George Mason University who helped me navigate the completion of this degree while battling a serious medical illness. I would like to thank my sister Kristen Gayle Daniels, who is a precious gift to this world and helped me through some very dark times in graduate school. I would like to thank my husband Dylan Thomas Kristufek, who met me at the beginning of my journey in graduate school and changed my life forever. His love and support helped me get through the rough waters in this journey. I owe a deep gratitude to my Grandma Dorothy and my Grandpa Bill, without whom this degree would not have been possible. Finally, I'd like to thank my dog Molly, who has offered the most emotional support anybody could ask for through this process. She truly is the best puppy dog ever.

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## ABSTRACT

### MALE BODY TALK: INVESTIGATING FAT TALK AND MUSCLE TALK IN A ROMANTIC CONTEXT

Kimberly S. Daniels, Ph.D.

George Mason University, 2021

Dissertation Director: Gary L. Kreps

This study investigates the effect that engaging in fat talk or muscle talk has on perceptions of males in romantic relationships. Sexual satisfaction, body image, and relationship satisfaction are examined in relation to fat talk and muscle talk to better understand how this form of communication operates in a romantic setting. An experimental survey design tested heterosexual female participants who listened to audio recordings of male fat talk, and male muscle talk. Results showed that fat talk limited the perceptions of sexual satisfaction, body image, and relationship satisfaction. Surprisingly muscle talk was viewed as more desirable than neutral talk. Implications for the research are discussed.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Obesity is a major health issue in the United States that results in numerous diseases, specifically increased risk of certain types of cancer, coronary artery disease, type 2 diabetes, stroke, as well as significant increases in early mortality (Kelley. 2006). The causes of obesity are varied with several contributing factors related to social, cultural, and biological influences. While obesity does harm a body physically, there is also a strong mental/psychological component to being overweight (Blades. 2005). People suffering from obesity often experience lower self-esteem and struggle with other psychological issues. Obesity is a chronic health problem in the United States and contributes to several psychological constructs such as negative body image (Kelley. 2006).

Body image is a person's thoughts, feelings and perception about the aesthetics of and sexual attractiveness of their own body (Healey & Healey. 2014). Body image can range on a continuum from negative to positive. A person with negative body image may feel self-conscious or ashamed and feel others are more attractive than they are (Healey & Healey. 2014). People with low body image often suffer from lower self-esteem and an increased risk of disordered eating compared to individuals who have a positive body image (Murnene & Smolak. 2019).

Several factors contribute to a person's body image. These factors include cultural influences, media, and social relationships (Healey & Healey. 2014). Recently research has investigated the interpersonal communication factors that may contribute to negative body image. For example, the term "fat talk" describes interpersonal conversations about weight that influence body image (Nichter. 2000). Research has demonstrated a direct link between exposure to both overhearing and participating in fat talk and a lower body image (Nichter. 2000). Engaging in fat talk has also been linked to other damaging effects such as increased risk for disordered eating, poor mental health, increased thoughts about steroid usage, feelings of shame and guilt, and a negative self-image. Given the established links between fat talk link, body image, and obesity, this is an important topic that communication scholars need to study.

Interpersonal communication plays a direct role in the way people manage their health and well-being (Duggan & Street. 2015). Research has shown that romantic partners have the ability to influence health goals, weight loss, and overall health of their committed partners (Gomez-Lopez et al. 2019). Fat talk is one component of interpersonal communication in romantic relationships that can influence weightless and obesity. Examining how interpersonal conversations about weight influence attitudes and behaviors scholars can increase understanding about the obesity epidemic and guide the design of programs to help fight this deadly health issue.

Fat talk has primarily been studied in women, but research has demonstrated the phenomenon happens in men groups too (Orth et al. 2018). There is currently very little research on fat talk in romantic relationships, and few studies examine how fat talk

influences romantic components in male speakers. An extensive search on the subject of male fat talkers in romantic relationships yielding one study investigating the topic (Murray, 2020). Given how interpersonal communication can influence obesity levels this is an important area of study that needs further attention.

This study examines interpersonal conversations about weight (fat talk) from male speakers in the context of a romantic relationship. Fat talk is examined in relation to health goals, interpersonal qualities, and romantic attractiveness in an effort to better understand how this area of interpersonal communication can influence the health and wellbeing of men in romantic relationships.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Fat talk is negative speech about one's weight or shape (Nichter, 2000). This type of communication is detrimental to well-being and has been linked to body dissatisfaction (Arroyo & Harwood, 2012), eating disorders (Clarke, Murnene & Smolak, 2010), and negative friendship quality (Bodel, Smith, Holm-Denoma, Gordon, & Joiner, 2011). The term fat talk was introduced after researchers performed ethnographic interviews among adolescent girls and discovered that discussions about weight and body shape are a very frequent form of conversation among that population (Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994). Since the introduction of fat talk this type of communication has been studied in a variety of contexts and between genders. In addition to fat talk, men engage in a form of body talk very similar to fat talk called muscle talk (Engeln, Sladek, & Waldron, 2013). Muscle talk is discussing the desire to become more muscular or discussing the shape of the muscles on a body (Engeln, Sladek, & Waldron, 2013). Fat talk and muscle talk take place in a variety of interpersonal settings including mother-daughter communication (Arroyo, 2012) patient provider communication (Nichter, 2000), talk among friendship groups (Engeln, Sladek, & Waldron, 2013), and in dating relationships (Murray, 2020).

While fat talk has been studied in a variety of situations, the function of this type of talk appears to vary in different settings (Martz, 2018). The six functions of fat talk outlined by researchers are eliciting reassurance from others that one's self-insults are

unwarranted, hinting at other negative feelings, relieving guilt from engaging in fattening behaviors such as eating dessert, expressing in-group appearance values, engaging in impression management and conformity, and reinforcing reciprocated fat talk (Martz, 2018). These different functions have been studied primarily among friendship groups, but little research has examined how fat talk functions in romantic relationships.

Romantic partners are at a very unique position to influence weight loss goals and body image, and fat talk may be one way that this happens. The few studies that have examined fat talk in romantic relationships have exclusively focused on male perceptions of female fat talk (Murray, 2020, but research indicates that men engage in this type of harmful communication as well. This study sought to better understand how fat talk functions inside heterosexual romantic relationships by examining how perceptions of male fat talk, and muscle talk, influence romantic relationships.

### **Fat Talk and Muscle Talk in Men**

Negative body talk for men tends to focus on building muscle, a term known as “muscle talk.” Although research on fat-talk in men is very limited, evidence suggests fat-talk does occur in male friendships, but men experience far less fat-talk compared to women (Arroyo & Harwood, [2012](#); Engeln, Sladek, & Waldron, [2013](#); Martz, Petroff, Curtin, & Bazzini, [2009](#)). Cross-sectional data have linked college men’s tendency to engage in negative body talk to drive for muscularity, eating disordered behavior, and appearance investment (Engeln et al., [2013](#)). Experimental data show that exposure to fat-talk in men increases state body dissatisfaction, as it does for women. Muscle talk has

been shown to increase thoughts of abusing steroids (Arroyo & Hardwood, 2012) and has been linked to an increase in thinking about steroid use (Arroyo & Hardwood, 2012).

Although a few studies have investigated fat talk with men, body image issues have traditionally been studied with women so it is very unclear how fat talk might influence male body image. There is also no research on how male fat talk, or muscle talk influences any other type of relationships other than friendships. Currently there is no published research that shows up when searching the literature that examines how muscle talk or fat talk might influence romantic relationships. One dissertation study investigates how fat talk influences romantic relationships (Murray. 2020) but it only examined perceptions of female fat talk, not male. Fat talk and muscle talk influence both men and women and can play an important role in perceptions of each gender in heterosexual romantic relationship so it is important to investigate this type of interpersonal communication in both sexes.

### **Fat Talk and Romantic Relationships**

Fat talk is related to sexual inhibition and relationship insecurity because it relates to a poor body image (Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994). The connection between body image and sexual behavior has been well documented in research. For example, among committed heterosexual couples, poor body image was associated with decreased sexual satisfaction and decreased overall, relationship satisfaction (Van den Brink et al., 2018). Positive body image appears to relate to physical proclivity to sexual responsiveness (Van Der Brink et al., 2018). In one study conducted in 2009, researchers found that

college women with higher body esteem had higher sexual desire in response to an erotic story regardless of actual body size (Seal, Bradford and Meston, 2009). This indicates that high body esteem, or a positive body image may be related to a person's sexual satisfaction. Fat talk has also been demonstrated to influence perceptions of sexual satisfaction (Arroyo. 2014). In one experimental study that examines fat talk in relationships to romantic relationships participants were asked to evaluate a fictional couple in a vignette (Miles. 2018). In this study the female subjects displayed different levels of fat talk and participants were asked to rate the perceived sexual satisfaction of the relationship. Results showed that both male and female participants perceived lower sexual satisfaction and lower overall relationship satisfaction for the couple when Jessica excessively fat talked, than when her fat talk levels were minimal or non-existent (Miles, 2018). This study indicates there is a relationship between fat talk and sexual satisfaction, at least in female speakers, but there is still no evidence indicating if this is true in male interpersonal conversations. While studies have examined how men perceive a woman when she fat talks, it is important to examine how women perceive a man when he fat talks so researchers can fully understand how fat talk influences variables in a romantic relationship.

### **Men's' Perceptions of Women's Fat Talk**



There has been little research on how men or women perceive fat talk from each other. In an effort to uncover males' views of fat talk, Britton et al. (2006) presented a vignette describing fat talk among female college peers studying together. The researcher then asked participants to select the most likely response from a fictional character named Jenny. Jenny had three options available which were either self-accepting speech, fat talk about herself, or to remain silent. The participants were asked which response would be most attractive to a female audience. Results showed that both male and female participants expected that Jenny would reciprocate with fat talk statements and that the fictional women in the group would find this most attractive. However, both genders of participants expected that self-accepting statement to be most attractive to men. While this was not studied in the context of romance but just in terms of attractive conversational patterns in general, it demonstrates that there may be a perception that men do not find fat talk attractive. There is no reported research that demonstrates how women feel about a male who is fat talking however.

A study that did investigate a romantic aspect of fat talk was constructed by Britton et al. (2006). In the study college aged male participants were presented with a vignette and asked to imagine that they were interested in dating the woman in the story. The story indicated that the males overheard the fictional female speaking in a derogatory or accepting manner about her body. The men were asked a lot of questions about their perceptions of the female in the story. Results showed that men who read the vignette in which the target woman berated her body perceived her to have poorer mental health than the men who read the vignette in which she expressed self-acceptance. The type of body

dialogue (self-accepting, or fat talk) did not affect participants' desire to get to know the target female or how likely they would be to ask her out. These results may have been observed because there was no description about the woman's attractiveness or interpersonal qualities, but these findings do demonstrate that men hold negative views of a woman who fat talks.

Another study examined how female fat talk influences men's perceptions of a fictional female's weight (Morsch, 2018). Male participants were presented with a story of a woman who either fat talked or spoke more accepting of her body. Results showed that as the fat talk level of the target increased, perceived body size of the speaker also increased, suggesting that fat talk might lead a listener to infer that a woman's body size correlates with whether she engages in self-berating body dialogue. Research has shown that women of all sizes fat talk, even thin women, and especially women with eating disorders (Arroyo, 2012) so this perception may not be entirely accurate. This perception is also completely one sided because no study has examined how male fat talk is perceived in relation to a male's weight.

While both of these studies examined men's perceptions of female fat talking, they did not address how fat talking might influence romantic relationship quality. Fat talk is a form of self-criticism however, which is known to be toxic to romantic satisfaction (Lassri, Cohen, Luyten, & Sahar, 2016). Previous research has demonstrated that fat talk may be harmful to romantic relationships because it hinders sexual satisfaction (Van den Brink, Vollman, Smeets, Hessen, & Woertman, 2018). Fat talk also

damages self-esteem, which research has demonstrated is very important for romantic satisfaction (Markey & Markey, 2006).

Fat talk may serve as a proxy for women's general perception of their self-worth (Martz, 2019). Research has shown that women internalize their overweight status as part of their identity, while overweight men do not (Grover, Keel, & Mitchell, 2003) which demonstrates this form of talk may be very different between genders and result in different outcomes. Being overweight has been shown to be significantly related to lower self-esteem in women, while this was not the case for men (Grover, Keel, & Mitchell, 2003). This evidence suggests that weight might play a larger factor in influencing female's self-esteem than it does in influencing males' self-esteem, which raises the question about whether fat talk from a male is as determinantal to a romantic relationship as fat talk from a female is.

There are currently no investigations found in an exhaustive search of the literature concerning female perceptions of male fat talk. This current study seeks to learn more about how females perceive this type of talk from males in a romantic relationship context. To accomplish this goal, the following research questions and hypothesis will be examined in this study.

H1: Fat talk by male heterosexual romantic partners will yield lower perceived relationship satisfaction scores from their female partners than males who engage in the neutral talk condition.

H2: Fat talk by male heterosexual romantic partners will yield lower perceived sexual satisfaction

scores from their female partners than males who engage in the neutral talk condition.

H3: Fat talk by male heterosexual romantic partners will yield the lower perceived body image scores from their female partners than males who engage in the neutral talk condition.

RQ1: What influences will muscle talk by male heterosexual romantic partners have on perceived relationship satisfaction scores from their female partners?

RQ2: What influences will muscle talk by male heterosexual romantic partners have on perceived sexual satisfaction scores from their female partners?

RQ3: What influences will muscle talk by male heterosexual romantic partners have on perceived body-image scores from their female partners?

RQ 4: Does the type of talk (fat talk, muscle talk, neutral talk) performed by a male influence the perception of how much his body weight is in female listeners?

## METHODS

### **Summary:**

This study is an experiment delivered online with three conditions. In one condition a male performs fat talk in a vignette, and in another vignette, they perform muscle talk, and in the control condition vignette they perform neutral talk, that does not discuss their bodies. The goal of the study is to examine how the type of talk (fat, muscle, or neutral) influences female perceptions of males. Perceived self-esteem, body image, relationship satisfaction, and body weight are explored in relation to male fat talk, male muscle talk, and the control condition.

### **Participants:**

Participants were recruited using the Amazon Mechanical Turk online crowdsourcing marketplace service. The criteria for subject recruitment included the following factors: heterosexual females who have had a romantic relationship in the past year. All ages are examined.

### **Audio Recordings:**

Three recordings of a conversation between a man and woman are used in this study. Each audio clip displays a conversation between a man and a woman who are in a romantic relationship. In one recording the man engages in fat talk, in another he

engages in muscle talk, and in another he engages in neutral talk (that does not discuss the body).

**Participant Demographic Information:**

Participants were asked to identify the following about themselves: race, age, gender, relationship status.

**Male Body Image:**

Participants were asked to rate the perceived male speakers body image using a modified version of Body Image Concern Inventory (Littleton, 2005). (See this scale in Appendix A). This is a well-established and reliable scale often used in social science research.

**Sexual Satisfaction:**

The woman's sexual satisfaction with the relationship was measured with a modified version of the Theiss Sexual Satisfaction Scale (2011). (See this scale in Appendix B). This is a well-established and reliable scale often used in social science research.

**Relationship Satisfaction:**

The short form of Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-7; Sharpley & Rogers, 1984) was used to measure overall relationship satisfaction. (See this scale in Appendix C). This is a well-established and reliable scale often used in social science research.

**Perceived Male Weight:**

A measure created for this study was used to measure the perceived weight of male speakers for each condition. The scale consists of one question, asking a participant to identify if they feel the male is underweight, normal weight, overweight, or obese (See this scale in Appendix H).

### **Procedure:**

Participants were presented with a Qualtrics survey. They were randomly sorted into one of three conditions using Qualtrics randomization features. This feature assigns participants into different conditions randomly as a built-in feature of the software. In each condition an audio recording was used to portray a conversation between a man and his romantic female partner. In one condition the man performed fat talk, in another condition he performed muscle talk, and in the neutral condition the man performed neutral talk. Each condition was compared to see how the type of talk influenced the dependent variables. After listening to the audio recording, participants were asked a set of questions to measure each variable.

### **Analysis:**

T-test and ANOVA tests were conducted to test the level of male-self-esteem, relationship satisfaction, perceived male weight, and sexual satisfaction. Using ANOVA tests, each condition was compared for each of these variables.

## RESULTS

### Demographics

100% of the participants were female. Participant's races ranged from Caucasian (62%) African American (17%) Asian (11%) Hispanic (4%) and Middle Eastern (4%) and other (2%). Participants ages ranged from 18-25 (45%), 26-40 (35%) 41-50 (8%), 51-60 (9%) and 60-65 (3%).

### Tests of Main Hypotheses

Consistent with the hypothesis, an independent sample t- test showed that perceived sexual satisfaction scores in the neutral talk condition ( $M = 125.00$ ,  $SD = 10.00$ ) were significantly higher than perceived sexual satisfaction scores in the fat talk condition ( $M = 102.50$ ,  $SD = 7.58$ ),  $t(10) = 4.39$ ,  $p < .01$ .

H1 was supported.

Table 1. t-test Results Comparing Perceived Sexual Satisfaction Among Fat Talk and Neutral Condition

| Condition | N   | Mean   | SD    | p    |
|-----------|-----|--------|-------|------|
| Fat Talk  | 300 | 102.50 | 7.58  |      |
| Neutral   | 300 | 125.00 | 10.00 | .003 |

Consistent with the hypothesis, an independent sample t- test showed that perceived body image scores in the neutral talk condition ( $M = 114.00$ ,  $SD = 8.00$ ) were



significantly higher than perceived body image scores in the fat talk condition ( $M = 100.50$ ,  $SD = 6.00$ ),  $t(10) = 3.21$ ,  $p < .01$ . H2 was supported.

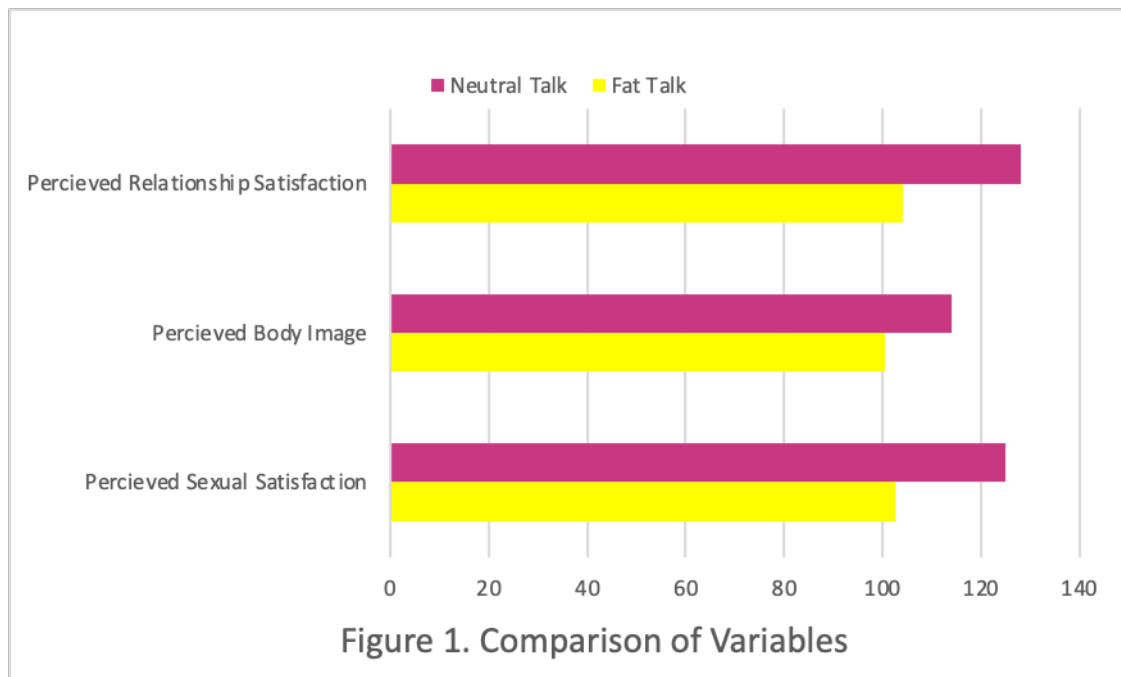
Table 2. t-test Results Comparing Perceived Body Image Among Fat Talk and Neutral Condition

| Condition | N   | Mean   | SD   | p   |
|-----------|-----|--------|------|-----|
| Fat Talk  | 300 | 100.50 | 8.00 |     |
| Neutral   | 300 | 114.00 | 6.00 | .01 |

Consistent with the hypothesis, an independent sample t- test showed that perceived relationship satisfaction scores in the neutral talk condition ( $M = 128.00$ ,  $SD = 9.40$ ) were significantly higher than perceived relationship satisfaction in the fat talk condition ( $M = 104.23$ ,  $SD = 8.00$ ),  $t(10) = 4.81$ ,  $p < .01$ . H3 was supported

Table 3. t-test Results Comparing Perceived Relationship Satisfaction Among Fat Talk and Neutral Condition

| Condition | N   | Mean   | SD   | p    |
|-----------|-----|--------|------|------|
| Fat Talk  | 300 | 104.23 | 8.00 |      |
| Neutral   | 300 | 128.00 | 9.40 | .002 |



### Test of Research Questions

A one-way ANOVA test, with Fisher's Least Significant Difference comparisons, revealed that male talk conditions (muscle, fat, neutral) differ in their level of perceived relationship satisfaction based on the type of talk they display. Specifically, this analysis showed that males in the muscle talk condition ( $M = 4.36$ ,  $SD = .74$   $F=.08$ ,  $p > .05$ ) had significantly higher perceived relationship satisfaction than males in the fat talk condition ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = .53$   $F=.05$ ,  $p > .05$ ) or neutral talk condition ( $M = 1.50$ ,  $SD = .52$   $F = .07$ ,  $p > .05$ ) Muscle talk yielded higher perceived relationship satisfaction than both the fat talk and neutral talk conditions.

Table 4. ANOVA Results for Talk Conditions on Perceived Relationship Satisfaction

| Talk Type   | Mean Difference | SD  | n   |
|-------------|-----------------|-----|-----|
| Muscle Talk | 4.36            | .74 | 300 |
| Fat Talk    | 3.00            | .53 | 300 |
| Neutral     | 1.50            | .52 | 300 |

A one-way ANOVA test, with Fisher's Least Significant Difference comparisons, revealed that male talk conditions (muscle, fat, neutral) differ in their level of perceived sexual satisfaction based on the type of talk they display. Specifically, this analysis showed that males in the muscle talk condition ( $M = 5.34$ ,  $SD = .62$   $F = .11$ ,  $p > .05$ ) had significantly higher perceived sexual satisfaction than males in the fat talk condition ( $M = 2.10$ ,  $SD = .53$   $F = .6$ ,  $p > .05$ ) or neutral talk condition ( $M = 1.20$ ,  $SD = .32$   $F = .04$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Muscle talk yielded higher perceived sexual satisfaction than both the fat talk and neutral talk conditions.

Table 5. ANOVA Results for Talk Conditions on Perceived Sexual Satisfaction

| Talk Type   | Mean Difference | SD  | n   |
|-------------|-----------------|-----|-----|
| Muscle Talk | 5.34            | .62 | 300 |
| Fat Talk    | 2.10            | .53 | 300 |
| Neutral     | 1.20            | .32 | 300 |

A one-way ANOVA test, with Fisher's Least Significant Difference comparisons, revealed that male talk conditions (muscle, fat, neutral) differ in their level of perceived body image scores based on the type of talk they display. Specifically, this analysis showed that males in the muscle talk condition ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = .52$ ) had significantly

higher perceived body image than males in the fat talk condition ( $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = .73$ ) or neutral talk condition ( $M = 2.20$ ,  $SD = .52$ ). Muscle talk yielded higher perceived body image than both the fat talk and neutral talk conditions.

Table 6. ANOVA Results for Talk Conditions on Perceived Body Image

| Talk Type   | Mean Difference | SD  | n   |
|-------------|-----------------|-----|-----|
| Muscle Talk | 4.34            | .52 | 300 |
| Fat Talk    | 3.10            | .73 | 300 |
| Neutral     | 2.20            | .52 | 300 |

To test RQ4 a chi-square test was performed. A chi-square test was employed to examine the association between male talk conditions (fat, muscle, or neutral) and the perceived weight of male speakers. Results of the chi-square test were not significant, indicating that the type of talk a male engages in is not related to his perceived weight.,  $\chi^2(1, N = 300) = 2.67$ , ns.

## DISCUSSION

The current study assessed whether a male's engagement in fat talk or muscle talk influences perceptions of his sexual satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, and body image. To test this a recorded audio conversation between a male and female in a romantic relationship was used. The participants in this study were 300 heterosexual females aged 18 – 62. The racial information of the participants was 39.8% Caucasian, 11.2% African American, 22.4% Asian, 12.5% Latino or Hispanic, and 12.1% identifying as two or more races.

### **Major Findings**

Consistent with predictions, female participants who listened to a male engaging in fat talk did rate him as having a lower body self-image, lower sexual satisfaction, and lower relational satisfaction as compared to a neutral condition. These findings support previous studies demonstrating that fat talk negatively influences sexual satisfaction and other romantic variables (Erbil, 2013; Seal et al., 2009) and demonstrates that this holds true for male speakers as well as for female speakers. Previous studies have found poorer impressions of relational satisfaction and sexual satisfaction for a couple when a female partner excessively fat talked compared to talking neutrally about her body (Miles. 2018). This study demonstrates that fat talk in men is not a desirable quality in a romantic relationship, and that male fat talk influences female romantic relational partners in

similarly ways than female fat talk influences male romantic relational partners. This study adds to the building evidence that fat talk leads to poor interpersonal relational impressions on romantic relational partners and that fat talk is perceived negatively in various social situations.

This study also examined muscle talk; a type of body talk that is most likely to be expressed by men. The results of the ANOVA tests were surprising because the muscle talk condition led to higher perceived body image, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction than the neutral condition. This indicates that males engaging in muscle talk may be a desired component of a romantic relationship. This finding could be similar to qualitative studies that examined male perceptions of female fat talk and found that men thought a woman fat talking showed she cared about her appearance, a quality they deemed desirable (Mills. 2018). It could be that engaging in muscle talk is interpreted as a man desiring a muscular physique, which is an appealing sexual quality. Women who overhear a man talking about hitting the gym and bulking up may think that the man cares about his appearance and find that a desirable quality.

In examining the responses to open ended questions asked of participants, an interesting theme emerged for rating the muscle talk condition in positive ways. This theme concerned a male's sexual ability. The women tested in this study described that a male would be more sexually satisfied if he gained muscle than a male who did not because he would have higher sexual skills. Females indicated a muscular man would be better able to perform during sex, which would overall increase his sexual satisfaction. The muscle talk condition made women feel that a man who cared about how much

muscle he had would be likely to have a muscular body. This could be a flaw in the design of the experiment, since females seemed to think muscle talk meant a man was invested in gaining muscle and might already have a muscular body, rather than that he lacked a high level of muscular development. The manipulation for this condition may not have been clear or strong enough to produce reliable results. The different talk conditions did not appear to have any influence on the perceived weight of the male speaker. This could demonstrate that the manipulation was not strong enough to produce a visual representation of different body types in female participants minds.

Male muscle talk does appear to be more desirable than fat talk for female romantic partners, which makes sense given the gendered differences between expectations of thinness in males and females. While females are encouraged to be thin, skinny men do not appear to be a desirable quality in society.

## **Limitations**

Despite the abundance of literature on fat talk this is the first study to compare muscle talk and fat talk in male speakers in a romantic setting. This study utilized audio recordings in an attempt not to bias results by letting female participants see the male's body. This may have been a mistake as audio is not as engaging as a video manipulation. Videos of different male body types in each speaking condition may have been a stronger, more vivid, condition that might yield a better explanation of results. It is unclear whether the manipulation for this study was strong enough because no

manipulation check was performed. Future research of this kind should conduct such manipulation checks.

Another limitation of this study is its structured nature. Fat talk and muscle talk are both naturalistic forms of communication that are better studied in natural settings instead of in a very controlled lab. The recorded audio conversation may not have seemed authentic compared to real world displays of this type of talk. This study was conducted in a very artificial environment, and although the results are a good start in understanding this phenomenon future studies should look into studying fat talk and muscle talk in a more natural setting. This is a potential threat to the ecological validity of this study and future investigations should strive to examine these complex relational communication issues in more realistic ways (Kreps, 2001).

Another potential limitation in this study is the audio conversation itself. While a trip to the beach may be very common for some demographics, others such as inner-city talkers, may not plan beach vacations. Blue collar workers may also not have a standard vacation time to discuss with a loved one. This audio conversation focused on planning a vacation to the beach, but future studies should utilize other forms of fat talk or muscle talk conversations that might be more appealing to more demographics.

Amazon Mechanical Turk was used to recruit participants for this study. The survey presented to the participants included qualitative open-ended questions that were not answered satisfactorily. In several instances participants would write in one-word answers so they could skip ahead, leaving questions about how seriously they took this study. It is possible that the participants simply did not know what to do with open ended



questions. A deeper review of the participant pool showed that 82% of this sample came from South America and may not have been native English speakers. The questions could have confused the participants because they are used to taking simple surveys through the mechanical system, instead of open-ended ones. The quantitative data appeared to be filled out accurately, with no detectable patterns or blank portions but future researchers should consider a different approach to asking open-ended questions about fat talk. The nature of the Mechanical Turk sample may have been as representative as possible and future studies might provide greater control on respondent recruitment and selection to improve the generalizability of findings.

The sample in this study was limited to heterosexual females, yielding a very one-sided view of male fat talk and male muscle talk. Future studies should examine how muscle talk and fat talk operate in other types of romantic relationships with partners of differing sexual orientations.

### **Directions for Future Research**

This study demonstrates that muscle talk operates differently than fat talk in a romantic relationship. Future scholars should attempt to understand the differences between muscle talk and fat talk by examining this type of communication in other interpersonal relationships. It is possible that muscle talk operates differently in male friendships than in male romantic relationships. It would be interesting to see if the type of interpersonal relationship changed how fat talk and muscle talk were utilized.

Future research should also consider the implications for this type of talk in romantic relationships. Losing weight is a difficult endeavor and social support remains an important factor to success. It is possible that romantic relationships can offer this support to men seeking to lose weight. Muscle talk may be a key variable in this process, but more investigation is needed to understand if muscle talk is a desirable quality in male romantic partners. Future studies should consider employing a qualitative based approach to better understand why muscle talk is desirable.

In addition, as mentioned in the previous section on study limitations, care should be taken in future studies to conduct manipulation checks on dependent measures. It will be important in future related studies to promote the ecological validity of experimental conditions. It also would be important to ensure selection of a representative sample of respondents to increase research strength. Use of these refinements in future studies can not only strengthen research findings but can also help to test the findings of this study through replication.

### **Directions for Application**

This research shows that fat talk and muscle talk do influence how female romantic partners feel about men in romantic relationships. This knowledge is useful for helping to guide romantic relational partners to communicate in ways that will enhance their relationships. These findings can also be used to guide the provision of social support to those who are battling obesity related disorders. Health care providers and mental health workers who are helping patients overcome food addiction can use the

findings from this research on fat talk and muscle talk to engage in therapeutic communication to help change how people communicate about their bodies. Since fat talk was deemed undesirable in this study it would be prudent for mental health workers to help men frame their desire to lose weight in better ways, which would not alienate their female partners. Losing weight is a difficult task, especially without support so it is important to examine the social constructs that influence this process, such as the way we communicate about our bodies.

## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### Body Image Concern Inventory

Answer as if you were Lois. Please respond to each item by choosing how often you think Clark experiences the described feelings or performs the described behaviors.

|     |   | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Always |
|-----|---|-------|--------|-----------|-------|--------|
| 1.  | He is dissatisfied with some aspect of his appearance   | 1     | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5      |
| 2.  | He spends a significant amount of time checking his appearance in the mirror                      | 1     | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5      |
| 3.  | He feels others are speaking negatively of his appearance   | 1     | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5      |
| 4.  | He is reluctant to engage in social activities when his appearance does not meet his satisfaction | 1     | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5      |
| 5.  | He feels there are certain aspects of his appearance that are extremely unattractive              | 1     | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5      |
| 6.  | He buys cosmetic products to try to improve his appearance  | 1     | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5      |
| 7.  | He seeks reassurance from others about his appearance   | 1     | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5      |
| 8.  | He feels there are certain aspects of his appearance he would like to change                      | 1     | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5      |
| 9.  | He is ashamed of some part of his body  | 1     | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5      |
| 10. | He compares his appearance to that of fashion models or others                                    | 1     | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5      |
| 11. | He tries to camouflage certain flaws in his appearance  | 1     | 2      | 3         | 4     | 5      |

|     |  |   |   |   |   |   |
|-----|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 12. | He examines flaws in his appearance  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. | He has bought clothing to hide a certain aspect of his appearance                                    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. | He feels others are more physically attractive than he is  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. | He has considered consulting/consulted some sort of medical expert regarding flaws in his appearance | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 17. | He has been embarrassed to leave the house because of his appearance                                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 18. | He has missed social activities because of his appearance  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 19. | He fears that others will discover flaws in his appearance   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 20. | He has avoided looking at his appearance in a mirror   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

## Appendix B

### Modified Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (as if Lois)

Answer as if you were Lois. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement about Clark.

|   | Strongly Agree | Somewhat Agree | Neither Agree or Disagree | Somewhat Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|----------------|----------------|---------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.           |                |                |                           |                   |                   |
| At times I think I am no good at all                |                |                |                           |                   |                   |
| I feel that I have a number of good qualities       |                |                |                           |                   |                   |
| I am able to do things as well as most other people |                |                |                           |                   |                   |
| I feel I do not have much to be proud of            |                |                |                           |                   |                   |
| I certainly feel useless at times                   |                |                |                           |                   |                   |
| I feel that I'm a person of worth at least, on an   |                |                |                           |                   |                   |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| equal plane<br>with others                                     |  |  |  |  |  |
| I wish I<br>could have<br>more<br>respect for<br>myself        |  |  |  |  |  |
| All in all, I<br>am inclined<br>to feel that I<br>am a failure |  |  |  |  |  |
| I take a<br>positive<br>attitude<br>toward<br>myself           |  |  |  |  |  |



## Appendix C

Answer as if you were Lois. Please complete the questions by choosing how strongly you agree or disagree with the statements about your sexual relationship with Clark.

### Sexual Satisfaction Scale

#### Items

- (1) My partner and I have a fulfilling sexual relationship.
- (2) I find the sexual contact that I have with my partner to be satisfying.
- (3) My partner always makes sure that I achieve orgasm.
- (4) I am content with the sexual aspect of our relationship.
- (5) There are parts of our sexual relationship that need improvement (reverse coded).
- (6) I am generally dissatisfied with our sexual relationship (reverse coded).

**Note** . Measure utilizes a 6---point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree).

## Appendix D

### Shortened Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-7)

Given the story you just read, answer the following questions as if you were Lois.. Most persons have disagreements in their relationships. Answer the following questions about the approximate extent of agreement or disagreement that you experience in your relationship with Clark.

1. Philosophy of life \_\_\_\_\_
2. Aims, goals, and things believed important \_\_\_\_\_
3. Amount of time spent together \_\_\_\_\_

|        |        |              |            |          |          |
|--------|--------|--------------|------------|----------|----------|
| 5      | 4      | 3            | 2          | 1        | 0        |
| Always | Almost | Occasionally | Frequently | Almost   | Always   |
| Agree  | Always | Disagree     | Disagree   | Always   | Disagree |
|        | Agree  |              |            | Disagree |          |

How often would you say the following events occur between you and your mate?

4. Have a stimulating exchange of ideas \_\_\_\_\_
5. Calmly discuss something together \_\_\_\_\_
6. Work together on a project \_\_\_\_\_

|       |           |         |         |        |       |
|-------|-----------|---------|---------|--------|-------|
| 0     | 1         | 2       | 3       | 4      | 5     |
| Never | Less      | Once or | Once or | Once a | More  |
|       | than once | twice a | twice a | day    | often |
|       | a month   | month   | week    |        |       |

7. The dots on the following line represent different degrees of happiness in your relationship. The middle point, "happy," represents the degree of happiness of most relationships. Please circle the dot which best describes the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.

|           |         |          |       |       |           |         |
|-----------|---------|----------|-------|-------|-----------|---------|
| 0         | 1       | 2        | 3     | 4     | 5         | 6       |
| Extremely | Fairly  | A Little | Happy | Very  | Extremely | Perfect |
| Unhappy   | Unhappy | Unhappy  |       | Happy | Happy     |         |

## Appendix E

### **Audio Transcript – Muscle Condition**

Female: Hey honey, how was your day?

Male: It was good. I got my time off approved so we should start thinking about where we want to go on vacation!

Female: Oh that's great! Why don't we go somewhere warm, like the beach?

Male: \*sigh\* I'm too skinny for swim trunks. Maybe if I hit the gym and tone up we can do that next year.

Female: Okay how about a ski trip?

Male: That sounds a lot better

## Appendix F

### Audio Transcript – Fat Talk Condition

Female: Hey honey, how was your day?

Male: It was good. I got my time off approved so we should start thinking about where we want to go on vacation!

Female: Oh, that's great! Why don't we go somewhere warm, like the beach?

Male: \*sigh\* I look too chunky for swim trunks. Maybe if I drop a few pounds, we can do it next year.

Female: Okay how about a ski trip?

Male: That sounds a lot better

## Appendix G

### Audio Transcript – Neutral Talk Condition

Female: Hey honey, how was your day?

Male: It was good. I got my time off approved so we should start thinking about where we want to go on vacation!

Female: Oh, that's great! Why don't we go somewhere warm, like the beach?

Male: \*sigh\* It's supposed to rain that week. Why don't we do that next year.

Female: Okay how about a ski trip?

Male: That sounds a lot better

## Appendix H

Directions: Using the below scale please indicate what you feel most accurately represents the male speakers weight.

| 1                     | 2           | 3             | 4                   | 5          | 6     | 7               |
|-----------------------|-------------|---------------|---------------------|------------|-------|-----------------|
| Extremely Underweight | Underweight | Normal Weight | Slightly Overweight | Overweight | Obese | Extremely Obese |

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## BIOGRAPHY

Kimberly Daniels was born in Ypsilanti Michigan to Robert Daniels and Susan Christ. She was raised in Bellaire Michigan by her grandparents Bill and Dorothy Farquharson. She graduated from Central Michigan University in the winter of 2013 with an emphasis on interpersonal communication and media production. She completed her master's degree at Central Michigan University in the fall of 2015 with an emphasis in virtual health communication. She began working on her Ph.D in the fall of 2016 at Wayne State University and later transferred to George Mason University to complete her Ph.D. program. Kimberly loves animals and is a member of several animal charities across the world.