

# Conformity and How it Relates to Eating Patterns

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## Introduction:

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between conformity and eating patterns. Research that has been conducted in this area has shown that eating behavior is affected by social influence (Herman, Roth, and Polivy, 2003). It has been found that when people are eating with others, they eat less than they would if they were in isolation (McFerran, Dahl, Fitzsimons, & Morales, 2009) While it has been demonstrated that participants conform in order to gain group acceptance (Kim, 2011), the purpose of the current study was to examine participants' likelihood to conform to only one other participant; a confederate who engaged in fat talk. Fat talk is a phrase coined by Nichter and Vuckovic which refers to the phenomenon of people (women more often than men) constantly talking about their own or others' bodies and focusing solely on appearances and weight (1994). It was hypothesized that college students exposed to the confederate who engaged in fat talk would conform by choosing to eat healthy foods.

## Methods:

### Participants:

Twenty-nine female undergraduate students, aged 18-22, enrolled in introductory undergraduate psychology courses at Pepperdine University

### Ethnicity of participants:

6.9% Asian or Asian Americans (N=2)  
20.7% Black or African Americans (N= 6)  
6.9% Hispanic or Latino Americans (N= 2)  
62.1% Non-Hispanic Whites (N= 18)  
3.4% declined to answer (N= 1)

### Year in school of participants:

72.4% in their first year (N= 21)  
17.2% in their sophomore year (N= 5)  
10.3% in their junior year (N= 3)

Mean age = 18.81, SD= 0.786

### Design

Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental or the control group:

Experimental Group- exposed to fat talk from the confederate  
Control Group- no confederate was present

Participants could choose from either "healthy" or "unhealthy" food options:

Healthy- apples, bananas, carrots, celery, oranges, grapes  
Unhealthy- Lay's chips, Doritos, cookies, chocolate candies

### Materials

1. EDI-2 body dissatisfaction subscale (Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983)
  - 9 questions measuring the level of satisfaction that participants had with their own bodies
2. Demographic survey
  - age, year in school, and ethnicity of participants
3. SAT practice questions
  - 8 SAT practice questions

## Procedure:

Participants were not explicitly informed of the purpose of the study. They were told that the purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between body dissatisfaction and IQ in female college students. This study required participants to complete two parts:

**Part 1:** an online portion where participants filled out the demographics survey, body dissatisfaction scale and ranked unhealthy foods and healthy foods on a scale of one to five for how much they liked the different foods.

\*this information was used for part 2 of the study

**Part 2:** Participants were assigned to either the experimental (confederate) group or the control group. They were told that the experimenter needed to obtain the informed consent and the survey, but they were welcome to help themselves to the snacks on the table. Then the experimenter went into the back room for one minute and gathered materials and observed whether the participants took food during this time. If participants were in the experimental group, the confederate took this time to prime the participants with fat talk. The confederate said that she would "really like a Kit-Kat, but that she had been gaining a lot of weight". Then she said that she was a sophomore, but she gained the freshmen 15 and should eat the celery instead of chocolate. The confederate would then choose to eat some celery. After one minute passed, the experimenter returned to the main room and told participants they would have eight minutes to complete the SAT practice questions. They were also encouraged again to take more food if they wanted any. Then the experimenter went into the back room again and watched to see if participants took more food. After eight minutes, the experimenter returned to the main room, collected the surveys from participants, and debriefed them on the true purpose of the study.

## Results:

When examining only participants who chose to eat the snacks offered, participants in the experimental group ate significantly more healthy food options than those in the control group ( $F(1,13) = 6.250, p = .027$ ). In the experimental group 46.7% of participants ate only healthy food (N= 7), 6.7% ate only unhealthy food (N= 1), 13.3% ate unhealthy food and then switched to healthy food after the confederate engaged in fat talk (N= 2), and 33.3% ate no food at all (N=5). In the control group, 14.3% ate only healthy food (N=2), 21.4% ate only junk food (N= 3), and 64.3% ate no food at all (N=9).

## Discussion:

When examining the participants in the study who consumed food, results indicated that participants were more likely to consume healthy food options when a confederate was in the room and engaged in fat talk. It is interesting to note that of the 14 participants in the control group, only 5 chose to eat anything as opposed to the 10 out of 15 in the experimental group. This suggests that not only were participants more likely to eat healthier foods because the confederate ate healthy foods, but the participants were also likely to conform to the action of eating if the confederate also took food. These results are consistent with research conducted by McFerran, Dahl, Fitzsimons, & Morales (2010), which found that participants' eating patterns match that of the confederate in the room.

A limitation of this study is that participants often came in to complete part two of the study right after they had finished a meal or right before they had plans to meet someone for a meal. This contributed to the fact that, generally, a lot of food was not consumed by participants. In the future it would be more beneficial to plan time slots around a time when meals would not interfere. Also it is difficult to determine whether the participants in the experimental group ate the healthier options because they felt the pressure to conform to the confederate or they felt the pressure to be healthy because the confederate engaged in fat talk. This study provides an excellent pilot study for a more extensive group of participants.

## References:

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