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### Big Beautiful Women: The Body Size Preferences of Male Fat Admirers

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## Big Beautiful Women: The Body Size Preferences of Male Fat Admirers

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*This study examined the body size ideals of a group of male fat admirers (FAs) in comparison with an age- and body mass index (BMI)-matched control sample. Forty-seven men, who were involved in the fat acceptance community, and 64 control individuals rated a series of 10 images of women that varied in BMI from emaciated to obese. As expected, the results showed that FAs rated a significantly higher BMI as the most physically attractive compared with the control sample. FAs also rated figures with higher BMIs, particularly those in overweight and obese categories, more positively than did the control group. In addition, FAs perceived a wider range of body sizes to be physically attractive than the control group. Participant demographics did not predict ratings over and above affiliation with either the FA or control groups. These results are discussed in relation to the growing body of work examining fat admiration.*

Over the past several decades, there has emerged a relatively large and varied body of work relating to anthropological, psychological, and sociological aspects of body fat (e.g., Bordo, 1993; Crandall, 1994; Hesse-Biber, 1996; Longhurst, 2005; Probyn, 2000; Stearns, 2002). One particular aspect of this literature relates to the idealization of various body sizes within particular socioeconomic (e.g., Swami, Knight, Tovée, Davies, & Furnham, 2007; Swami & Tovée, 2005a,b, 2007a,b) and historical contexts (Swami, Gray, & Furnham, 2007; for a review, see Swami & Furnham, 2008). Specifically, many authors have documented the stigmatization and denigration of body fat within contemporary (Western) societies (Swami, Chan, Wong, Furnham, & Tovée, 2008; Swami et al., 2008), partly as a means of serving hegemonic interests (Bordo, 1993; Campos, 2004; Lebesco, 2004; Lebesco & Braziel, 2001; Swami, 2007; Wolf, 1990). As Brown and Rothblum (1989) argued, this “fat oppression” represents the following:

[a] hatred and discrimination against fat people, primarily fat women, solely because of their body size. It is the stigmatization of being fat, the terror of fat, the rationale for a thousand diets and an equal number of compulsive exercise programs. It is the equation of fat with being out-of-control, with laziness, with deeply-rooted pathology, with ugliness. (p. 1)

Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a number of authors and groups began to challenge this fat oppression, and more recently there has developed a substantive body of work based loosely on “fat studies” (see Ellin, 2006). Although this literature is highly varied, a number of specific strands can be discerned, including antidiscrimination research (e.g., Crandall, 1994; Crandall & Martinez, 1996; Puhl & Brownell, 2003), public health and social issues surrounding fatness (Saguy & Riley, 2005), and fat acceptance (e.g., Howells, 1993; LeBesco, 2004; Oliver, 2006). In terms of the latter, for example, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance in the United States has reclaimed the word “fat” to promote its use as a positive signifier (Howells, 1993), whereas others have discussed social aspects of “fat pride” (Probyn, 2000).

Related to the discussion of fat acceptance is the phenomenon of “fat admiration” (i.e., a sexual attraction to heavier partners; Blickenstorfer, 1996; Fabrey, 1972; Wachtel, 1976). Fat admiration is difficult to define precisely, but is usually used in relation to individuals (typically, heterosexual men) who find attractive someone considered clinically overweight (a body mass index [BMI] higher than 25 kg/m<sup>2</sup>) or obese (BMI above 30 kg/m<sup>2</sup>). The issue is complicated by the fact that some fat acceptance authors reject terms such as “overweight” and “obese,” which are considered to stigmatize fat (e.g., Schroeder, 1992; Wann, 1999). Moreover, the preferences of fat admirers (FAs) themselves can be wide ranging, and the targets of those preferences can range from being slightly overweight to morbidly obese. Even

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so, a consistent thread among FAs appears to be their rejection of the thin ideal as an unnecessarily prescriptive societal construct (Swami & Furnham, in press).

Perhaps surprisingly, there has been little discussion about fat admiration within academic spheres, particularly within the psychological literature on interpersonal attraction. This is noteworthy given that supportive fat acceptance communities now exist in the United States, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand and have developed to combat weight discrimination and stigmatisation. Less frequently, these communities act as avenues for the development of relationships between FAs and overweight individuals. Much of this development has taken place online and there now exist many dating and matchmaking Web sites for “big beautiful women” (BBWs) and “big handsome men” (BHM), and it is also possible to find specialist erotica dedicated to overweight and obese women and men (cf. Blank, 2000; Kulick, 2005).

Nevertheless, a small number of studies have begun the task of examining fat admiration in detail (e.g., for a discussion of BHMs, see Monaghan, 2005). In a recent study, for example, Swami and Furnham (in press) discussed various explanations for the preferences of FAs, including the possibility that FAs are heavier than the general population and so are attracted to others who most resemble themselves in terms of body size, and that fat admiration stems from an idealisation of individuals who challenge social norms about sexual identity and appearance (cf. Mayer, 1993). Similarly, Saguy (2002) discussed “fat heterosexuality” in terms of fetishistic behavior: She suggested that the attraction of male heterosexual FAs to BBWs is a form of fetishism that serves to reinforce gender inequality. In this sense, fat admiration may not be very different from “thin heterosexuality” in that both objectify women and, in doing so, reinforce the ubiquity of a woman’s body weight for her appearance. Indeed, Saguy discussed the relationship between “feeders” and “feedees”—relationships where one individual is provided with abundant food supplies to encourage weight gain—in precisely such terms. Feeders, who tend to be men, are likely to have the upper hand in such relationships, as feedees become dependent on them for sexual gratification, as well as nutritional intake.

To date, however, only one study has explicitly documented the body size preferences of FAs. Using line drawings of the female figure, Swami and Furnham (in press) reported that a sample of British male FAs showed a preference for heavy-weight over normal- and light-weight figures when making judgments of physical attractiveness. The same sample also rated normal-weight figures as the healthiest, suggesting that FAs are making informed judgments about attractiveness ideals, independent of health perceptions. An important limitation of the study, however, was its use of line drawings that lacked ecological validity—that

is, the stimuli used were deficient in depicting a range of body weights, and really only depicted body weights within a relatively narrow (normal-weight) range.

To overcome this limitation, this study examined the body size preferences of a community of FAs using photographic stimuli depicting women ranging in BMI from emaciated to obese, which allowed for a more precise evaluation of the preferences of FAs. Moreover, by comparing the preferences of FAs with an age- and BMI-matched control group, it was possible to examine whether there are differences in the range of figures considered attractive by FAs and non-FAs. Although this is in a sense tautological (i.e., FAs would be expected to idealize heavier individuals than non-FAs because the former are, by definition, more accepting of overweight), there are several reasons why this is important. Primarily, documenting the body size preferences of FAs will serve to highlight the variability of such preferences within contemporary societies, given that the bulk of psychological research has focused on cross-cultural differences (see Swami, 2007; Swami & Furnham, 2008).

Certainly, there is evidence to suggest that some groups within contemporary, Western society have ideals of body size that diverge from mainstream norms. For instance, Swami and Tovée (2006b, 2008) previously showed that lesbians and gay men idealize heavier and thinner bodies, respectively, compared with heterosexual women and men. Similarly, there is a raft of studies showing that ethnic minority groups define a range of body sizes as attractive, in stark contrast to the emphasis on thinness among (typically, Caucasian) majority groups (e.g., Allan, Mayo, & Michel, 1993; Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998; Kumanyika, Wilson, & Guilford-Davenport, 1993; Rubin, Fitts, & Becker, 2003). FAs, however, appear to idealize a significantly heavier body weight than any previously-studied group, although the range of body sizes that they consider attractive has not been examined before.

In short, then, we report the first systematic examination of the body size preferences of male FAs based on their ratings of ecologically valid photographic stimuli. Based on the previous review of the literature, we predicted that, in comparison with the control sample, FAs in this study would show a preference for a significantly higher ideal BMI, and that they would consider a wider range of body sizes to be physically attractive.

## Method

### Participants

The initial sample of FAs were approached and invited to take part in a study on their attitudes toward body size during two fat acceptance events held in London. Over a period of 18 months, Viren Swami developed links with individuals in the fat acceptance community, which has helped to break down the skepticism that some FAs

direct toward scientists. The events in question were generally forums of the discussion of fat acceptance activism, although they also served as support networks for esteem enhancement and the development of relationships among FAs. In this study, only data from male FAs were examined, due to the difficulty sampling female FAs (for a discussion of the relative scarcity of female FAs compared with male FAs, see Swami and Furnham, in press). Following Swami and Furnham (in press), this sample was further restricted to individuals who were not exclusively gay, who were of consenting age and who identified as being part of the fat acceptance community. The latter was defined flexibly, but generally involved the holding or promotion of positive attitudes toward overweight and obese individuals.

In total, 58 men were invited to take part in the study, of whom 47 agreed and completed the study anonymously during the two events. The main reasons for declining participation were concerns that fat admiration would be negatively portrayed within the scientific community or mainstream media and concerns about privacy. All participant demographics are presented in Table 1. Once data collection among FAs was complete, an age- and BMI-matched control sample was opportunistically recruited through personal contacts. Data collection in this group continued until

it was deemed to be of a sufficiently large size and when there were few differences between the control and FA groups in terms of age and BMI. It is, of course, possible that not all FAs belong to an FA community and that, therefore, our control group may have contained FAs. To minimize this possibility, we excluded control participants who reported a preference for clinically overweight or obese women ( $n = 2$ ). The final sample consisted of 62 men, none of whom declined to take part (see Table 1 for their demographic details).

**Materials**

*Photographic Figure Rating Scale (PFRS; Swami, Salem, Furnham, & Tovée, 2008).* This scale consists of 10 photographic figures of real women in front-view, selected to ensure the widest possible range of BMIs available to the researchers (2 images from each of the 5 established BMI categories; see the Appendix). The images were presented in greyscale, and all women were captured in a set pose at a standard distance, wearing tight grey leotards and leggings, and with their faces obscured. Following Fisak, Tantleff-Dunn, and Peterson (2007), participants were asked to identify the largest and smallest female figures that they considered “physically attractive,” as well as the figure that they considered “most physically attractive” (values ranged from 1 to 10). In addition, participants also rated each image for physical attractiveness on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*), 3 (*a little*), 5 (*somewhat*), 7 (*very*), to 9 (*extremely*). Previous work has shown that the scale has good construct validity and test-retest reliability (Swami et al., 2008).

*Demographics.* Participants were asked to provide their demographic details, which consisted of their age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, marital status, highest educational qualification, annual income, height, and weight (the latter 2 items were coded as BMI).

**Procedure**

All participants completed paper-and-pencil versions of the two-page questionnaire. Participants provided informed consent prior to taking part in the experiment and completed the questionnaire anonymously. Finally, participants were debriefed following their return of completed questionnaires.

**Results**

**Between-Group Differences**

There were no significant differences between the FA and control sample in terms of age,  $F(1, 108) = 0.84, p > .05$ ; and BMI,  $F(1, 110) = 0.10, p > .05$ . Mann-Whitney  $U$  tests showed no significant between-group

**Table 1.** Participant Demographics for the Fat Admirer and Control Samples

Variable		Fat Admirer ( $n = 47$ )	Control ( $n = 62$ )
Age (in years)	<i>M</i>	37.09	37.63
	<i>SD</i>	9.89	9.51
	Range	20–61	18–67
Body mass index ( $\text{kg}/\text{m}^2$ )	<i>M</i>	24.89	24.68
	<i>SD</i>	3.36	3.70
	Range	17.67–32.28	15.59–33.69
Sexual orientation (%)	Heterosexual	91.5	90.3
	Bisexual	8.5	9.7
Ethnicity (%)	Caucasian	95.7	93.5
	Other	4.3	6.5
Religion (%)	None	76.6	67.7
	Christian	17.0	29.0
	Other	6.4	3.3
Marital status (%)	Married	40.4	46.8
	Single	29.8	19.4
	Dating	23.4	27.4
	Other	6.4	4.8
Education (%)	GCSEs*	25.5	21.0
	A-levels	34.0	40.3
	Undergraduate	34.0	33.9
	Postgraduate	6.4	4.8
Income (%)	<\$15,000	12.8	16.1
	\$15,000–\$22,000	2.1	24.2
	\$22,000–\$30,000	46.8	35.5
	\$30,000–\$40,000	27.7	17.7
	\$40,000–\$50,000	8.5	3.2
	>\$50,000	0.0	1.6
	Not sure	2.1	1.6

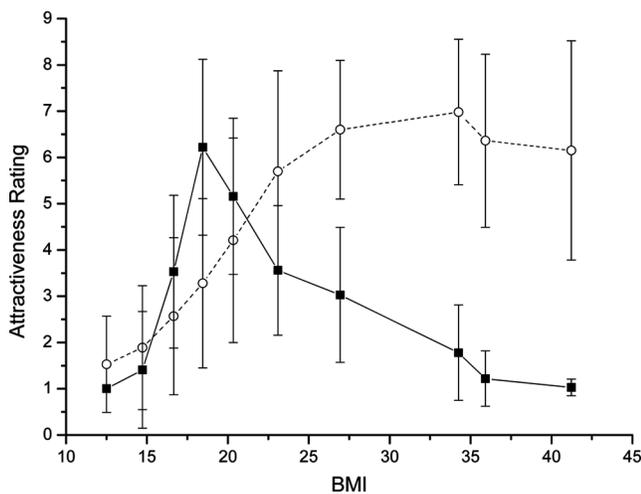
\*GCSE = General Certificate of Secondary Education.

differences on sexual orientation,  $z = 0.21$ ,  $p > .05$ ; ethnicity,  $z = 0.43$ ,  $p > .05$ ; religion,  $z = 1.69$ ,  $p > .05$ ; marital status,  $z = 0.86$ ,  $p > .05$ ; and education,  $z = 0.09$ ,  $p > .05$ . There were, however, significant differences in annual income,  $z = 2.31$ ,  $p < .05$  (non-FAs tended to have higher annual incomes), and so this variable was included as a covariate in all subsequent analyses.

### Figure Ratings

We initially calculated an attractiveness range (AR) score from each participant's ratings by taking the difference between the largest and smallest figure selected as attractive. This provided us with two variables of interest—namely, the figure considered most attractive and the AR. An analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) showed that there was a significant difference between the FA and control samples in terms of the figure considered most attractive (FA range = 4–10,  $M \pm SD = 7.70 \pm 1.50$ ; control range = 3–5,  $M \pm SD = 4.34 \pm 0.74$ ),  $F(1, 108) = 270.93$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .72$ . In this analysis, there was no significant effect of annual income,  $F(1, 108) = 0.04$ ,  $p > .05$ . A second ANCOVA showed a significant between-group difference in the AR (FA range = 1–9,  $M \pm SD = 4.57 \pm 1.72$ ; control range = 2–7,  $M \pm SD = 3.81 \pm 1.02$ ),  $F(1, 108) = 8.18$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .07$ . There was no significant effect of covariate income,  $F(1, 108) = 0.22$ ,  $p > .05$ .

We also conducted a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) with ratings of each image as the variables of interest (see Figure 1), group affiliation as the classification factor, and annual income as a covariate. The overall MANCOVA returned a significant result,  $F(10, 97) = 64.82$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .87$ ; and results of the individual ANCOVAs are reported in Table 2.



**Figure 1.** Attractiveness ratings for the image set. *Note.* The filled squares with continuous lines represent the control group ratings, and the open circles and dashed lines represent the fat admirers group. BMI = body mass index.

**Table 2.** Results of the Analyses of Covariance for Ratings of Each Image in the Photographic Figure Rating Scale

Figure	Fat Admirer				Control			
	Figure Body Mass Index	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i> <i>df</i> = 1,110	$\eta_p^2$	
1	12.51	1.53	1.04	1.00	0.00	16.19**	.13	
2	14.72	1.89	1.34	1.39	1.27	4.08*	.03	
3	16.65	2.57	1.70	3.58	1.66	9.35*	.08	
4	18.45	3.28	1.83	6.16	1.90	62.85**	.37	
5	20.33	4.21	2.21	5.19	1.71	6.82*	.06	
6	23.09	5.70	2.17	3.61	1.40	36.82**	.26	
7	26.94	6.60	1.50	3.06	1.50	149.87**	.59	
8	34.26	6.98	1.57	1.80	1.04	423.30**	.80	
9	35.92	6.36	1.87	1.23	0.61	410.04**	.80	
10	41.23	6.15	2.37	1.03	0.18	287.13**	.73	

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .001$ .

There was no significant effect of covariate income,  $F(10, 97) = 0.76$ ,  $p > .05$ . As can be seen, there were significant differences between FAs and control participants on all but one figure (Figure A1 in the Appendix). Specifically, FAs provided higher ratings than did control participants on Figures A1 through A2 and A6 through A10, whereas control participants provided higher ratings on Figures A3 through A5.

### Regression Analysis

A hierarchical regression was conducted with the total sample to examine which, if any, participant demographics were associated with ratings for the figure considered most attractive over and above group affiliation (FA or control). In the first step of the regression, group affiliation was added as a predictor variable, with ratings as the dependent variable. In the second step, continuous demographics (age and BMI) were entered in the regression equation to determine if these variables predict AR scores beyond the variance accounted for by group affiliation. Finally, in the third step, non-continuous demographics (sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, marital status, highest educational qualification, and annual income) were likewise entered into the model. The final regression model was significant,  $F(9, 108) = 30.14$ ,  $p < .001$ , adjusted  $R^2 = 0.71$ ; but only group affiliation ( $\beta = -0.86$ ,  $t = -16.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ) was a significant predictor of ratings.

### Discussion

The results of this study using photographic stimuli showed that, as predicted, the body size preferences of FAs were significantly different from those of an age- and BMI-matched control sample. Specifically, FAs

showed a preference for a significantly higher female BMI than did their control counterparts. More important, however, these results also showed that FAs perceived a wider range of figures to be physically attractive than did the control group. Finally, our findings also showed that participant demographics were not significant predictors of participants' ratings.

First, based on ratings of the images in the PFRS, it would appear that this FA sample idealizes female figures that are clinically overweight (BMIs between 25–30 kg/m<sup>2</sup>). Specifically, FAs in this study rated Figure A8 (BMI = 29.24 kg/m<sup>2</sup>) as the most physically attractive, and they also tended to positively rate figures that were in overweight and obese BMI categories more generally. These results can be distinguished from those of the control group, who rated Figure A4 (BMI = 18.45 kg/m<sup>2</sup>) as the most attractive. Moreover, the control sample also rated images that could be categorized as overweight and obese more negatively than their FA counterparts. Indeed, it was notable that there were significant between-group differences in the ratings of every figure, with partial eta-squared values being very high at higher BMI categories.

Second, these findings also showed that FAs considered a wider range of figures to be physically attractive than did the control sample. Moreover, FAs rated the two emaciated figures (BMIs lower than 15 kg/m<sup>2</sup>) more positively than did the control participants. Taken together, these findings suggest that an explanation for fat admiration may be that FAs are rejecting sociocultural norms of attractiveness. Similar arguments have previously been directed at other sub-communities that idealize heavier body sizes. For example, some authors have discussed how body size and physical attractiveness is decoupled among some ethnic minority groups, leading to wider definitions of "attractive" body sizes (e.g., Allan et al., 1993; Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998; Kumanyika et al., 1993; Rubin et al., 2003). A similar perspective may be applicable in relation to fat admiration. It may be the case that FAs challenge sociocultural norms of attractiveness, and this translates into an idealisation of overweight and obese others. Related suggestions, based on research in body image (see Calogero, Boroughs, & Thompson, 2007), include the possibility that FAs have low internalization of media ideals of thinness or feel lower pressure to incorporate media portrayals of thin bodies into their body size preferences. Instead, FAs may adopt more flexible norms of beauty or may even define beauty in ways that emphasize a transgression of "mainstream" norms. Relatedly, FAs may have higher self-esteem, which translates into a confidence to transgress social norms—a suggestion again derived from the body image literature (e.g., see Molloy & Herzberger, 1998).

Alternatively, FAs may be attracted to other individuals who are seen to transgress social norms (i.e., overweight and obese individuals). For example, in her

discussion of lesbianism, Brown (1987) highlighted the similarities between overweight women and lesbians, proposing that both groups are denigrated because they violate societal or patriarchal rules. To the extent that lesbians see the stigmatization of overweight individuals as political oppression, therefore, she argued that it would translate into pressure not to succumb to socio-cultural norms. Similarly, FA men may perceive the mere act of being overweight (or, more specifically, the relinquishing of norms associated with feminine beauty and appetite) as a transgression of mainstream norms, which they view as psychologically liberating or sexually arousing.

This is not to deny the importance of gendered aspects of corporeal relationality within fat admiration. As Saguy (2002) pointed out, male FAs may be sexually attracted to the vulnerability of overweight and obese women, which serves to promote and maintain masculinized conceptions of romantic relationships. Indeed, Saguy noted that in feeder–feedee relationships, it is often male FAs who have the upper hand, as overweight or obese women become dependent on them for nutritional intake and related aspects of the relationship. The phenomenon of "hogging"—the practice of groups of men targeting overweight or obese women for sexual encounters—also speaks to this effect (Gailey & Prochaska, 2006). Unlike fat admiration, however, men who participate in hogging are not necessarily attracted to overweight or obese women, but rather take advantage of such women's vulnerability in what is seen as part of a cultural misogyny. As noted by Swami and Furnham (in press), however, the gendered nature of fat admiration may be more complex, allowing for both dominance and submission on the part of men (e.g., "squashing" may give men a sense of being dominated by the women who squash them). Moreover, overweight women may use their size to challenge inequalities in gender, thus making men active partners in their defiance.

There may also be other explanations of fat admiration, which require further research. In recent work, for example, it was suggested that obesity triggers evolved pathogen-avoidance mechanisms that play a role in the stigmatization of obese individuals (Park, Schaller, & Crandall, 2007). On this basis, it might be suggested that FAs have ameliorated concerns about infectious disease, which translates into more positive perceptions of overweight and obese individuals. Another potential explanation is that fat admiration stems from differences in physiology or beliefs as a function of socioeconomic status (cf. Swami & Tovée, 2006a, who reported that hungry men idealized a heavier body weight than do satiated men; see also Tovée, Swami, Furnham, & Mangalparsad, 2006). This explanation, however, seems unlikely given this finding that FAs did not significantly differ from the control sample in terms of educational status (a useful proxy for socioeconomic status) and that annual income did not have an

effect on ratings (see Swami, Tovée, & Furnham, in press). More generally, these results suggest that participant demographics over and above simply being involved in the fat acceptance community do not predict preferences for a heavier body size.

Future work could extend this study in a number of ways. First, it is noteworthy that this range of stimulus BMIs may have still constrained the upper limit of body sizes considered attractive by FAs. One way to investigate this possibility would be to include a wider range of stimuli with larger BMIs than those presented here, a task that may prove challenging given the difficulties sampling women at extreme BMI categories (indeed, this study used the widest range of BMIs available in our library of images). Alternatively, future research could use stimulus sets that vary in body fat percentage, along with or in place of BMI, as this may provide a more accurate measure of fat admiration (e.g., as opposed to muscle mass preferences).

In addition, future work could begin the task of examining our previous speculative comments by examining individual difference predictors of fat admiration. For example, if it could be established that FAs score highly on the Big Five personality trait of openness to experience, then this might be taken as evidence that fat admiration stems from a rejection of social norms of attractiveness and an acceptance of unconventional beliefs or ideals. Just as important, future research should attempt to examine the body size preferences of female FAs for BHMs. This was not possible in this study due to the difficulty sampling large numbers of female FAs. Of course, it is possible that fat admiration is a predominantly male paraphilia, which would explain why there are so few female FAs. To establish the truth of this matter, however, will require more careful and systematic work, particularly research that attempts to document the prevalence of fat admiration within the general population.

In conclusion, this study extends earlier work documenting the body size ideals of FAs, which clearly do not conform to “mainstream” ideals of attractiveness. Future work should seek to build on the available literature to more fully account for, and explain, how and why fat admiration arises. Doing so will likely be of benefit to researchers seeking to uncover factors that promote positive body image among women and men (i.e., understanding the factors that influence fat admiration will likely help researchers challenge the contemporary societal fixation with extreme thinness, which has been linked with eating and body image disorders). In addition, this developing body of research may also be important for the promotion of sexual satisfaction, particularly as previous research has shown a positive correlation between fatness and sexual dysfunction (e.g., see Brody, 2003, 2004).

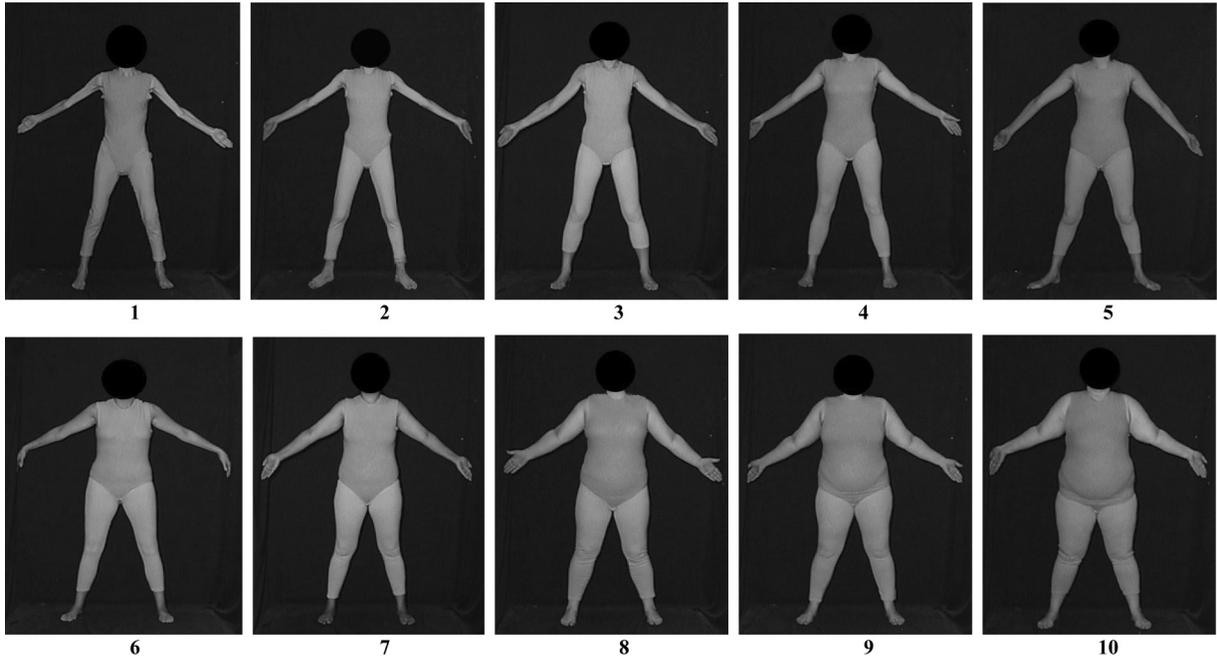
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Appendix

The Photographic Figure Rating Scale (PFRS)



Please answer the following questions:

1. Which figure do you find the *most* physically attractive?—
2. Which is the largest figure that you consider physically attractive?—
3. Which is the thinnest figure that you consider physically attractive?—

Please use the following scale to answer the question below:

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—8—9

Not at all A little Somewhat Very Extremely

How physically attractive do you consider each woman above?

Fig1 — Fig2 — Fig3 — Fig4 — Fig5 — Fig6 — Fig7 — Fig8 — Fig9 — Fig 10 —