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To be fit, or not to be: Advertising representation of influencers and body complexes among youth

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To be fit, or not to be: Advertising representation of influencers and body complexes among youth

This study investigates adolescents' perceptions of health, body image, and advertising as portrayed by social media influencers. Through discourse analysis, the research explores how participants interpret messages conveyed through influencer advertising content. The analysis reveals a discrepancy between adolescents' understanding of ideal body representations and the descriptors used in the advertising, shedding light on societal pressures surrounding body norms within social media. The findings underscore the pervasive influence of social media and advertising on adolescent body image constructs, highlighting the importance of cultivating critical advertising literacy skills among youth. Additionally, the study reveals that influencers affiliated with advertising perpetuate stereotypical ideals of the body, emphasizing the need for educational initiatives to promote healthy and positive self-images.

Healthy body; young; social media advertising; influencer; body positivity.

1. Introduction

In today's world, where body image and health are intertwined with mass culture and digital technology, the influence of social media on youth perceptions has become a critical area of study. Fatness is not merely an objective category; it is a social and cultural construct influenced by historical, political, and economic factors. These factors intersect with other

forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, ableism, and classism (Azeez, 2021), and often manifest in media and brand messages.

Influencers, individuals who rise from anonymity on the Internet and can influence people through marketing activities (Abidin, 2018), are key figures in disseminating messages about fatness, especially on social media platforms. The fitness industry utilizes social media to promote and sell products by perpetuating a social ideal that prioritizes physical appearance, equating a slim and toned body with a healthy life (Aguilar & Arbaiza, 2021).

Influencers enhance brand credibility, defined as the perceived truthfulness of information provided by these profiles. This fosters trust between brands and consumers through non-intrusive advertising strategies (Sokolova & Perez, 2021; Salehuddin-Sharipudin et al., 2023). Studies indicate that influencers are major references for younger audiences (González-Larrea et al., 2022; Tsen & Cheng, 2021).

Influencers address issues such as beauty standards and harmful stereotypes against non-standardized bodies, sharing personal experiences regarding physical appearance and eating. This practice constitutes a specific type of affective work, where creators negotiate their online presence and self-brand through authenticity (Tralli, 2023).

Adolescents receive promotional content from influencers, particularly related to cosmetics, beauty, physical health, gym activities, and aesthetic procedures, fostering a form of body worship (López-Martínez et al., 2024). Additionally, some influencers promote the consumption of unhealthy foods high in fats, sugars, and salt (HFSS), which can lead to overweight, obesity, and non-communicable diseases, potentially causing negative long-term health outcomes (Packer et al., 2022; Smit et al., 2020).

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Some studies suggest that adolescents are aware of the significant impact a single influencer can have on a brand's exposure and sales (Zozaya et al., 2022). They recognize that influencer advertising enhances peer marketing, as followers share content related to beauty, physical appearance, and eating within their social circles. However, other studies indicate that children cannot always resist the persuasive intent of such advertising, particularly if they are fans of the influencer, leading to a form of content addiction (Coates et al., 2020).

Aware of the persuasive tactics used by these digital leaders, adolescents often absorb and accept their discourses and practices, integrating them into their behavior, identity construction, and self-concept when interacting with others (Feijoo et al., 2022).

The representation of idealized lifestyles and images by influencers can create unrealistic expectations about physical appearance, leading to body image and self-esteem issues among adolescents, and causing cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). This underscores the need for political intervention to regulate online weight management information and mitigate the broader influence of social media. Such regulation can prevent the dissemination of misinformation about body image and equip adolescents with advertising literacy skills to counteract these messages (Sabbagh et al., 2020; Livingstone & Helsper, 2006).

Today, these practices contribute to the body positivity movement, an online social initiative originating on Instagram that promotes the acceptance and appreciation of all body types, regardless of shape, size, or appearance (Tiggemann et al., 2020). The aim of these influencers and users is to challenge and change the social standards of beauty and perfection that often lead to negative self-image, low self-esteem, and discrimination against people

with non-conforming bodies (Cohen et al., 2021). These standards are widely disseminated by brands.

In a sociocultural context marked by growing concerns about the health of minors and the impact of fatness, along with the rise of movements such as body positivity, it is crucial to explore adolescents' reflections on these phenomena. The intersection between public health and new digital narratives of body acceptance presents a complex scenario where potentially contradictory discourses on well-being, health, and body image coexist.

This study investigates how younger generations perceive the representation of health, body image, and advertising endorsed by influencers on social media platforms. It also discusses the need for interventions and public policies that balance the promotion of body diversity with the prevention of health risks. This is especially crucial in digital environments influenced by social media, where content often targets a highly vulnerable audience susceptible to persuasive messages from influencers.

2. Objective and research questions

The objective of this study is to analyze how adolescents perceive the portrayal of health, body image, and advertising endorsed by influencers on social media platforms. To this end, the following research questions are posed:

- RQ1: What relevance do adolescents aged 12 to 17 place on physical appearance?
- RQ2: What importance do these adolescents attribute to content in which influencers display an aesthetically beautiful body?

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- RQ3: What impact do influencer messages promoting products that enhance appearance and physical looks have?

3. Method

The data collected for this research is part of a larger-scale project (XXXXX) studying the influence of influencers on the dietary habits and body care of Spanish teenagers. Following an initial quantitative phase, the study adopted a qualitative approach through focus groups with minors aged 12 to 17 residing in Spain. This method was chosen because it allows participants to voice their perspectives and provide insights into their digital world experiences (Silverstone, 2005).

The focus groups were designed with a semi-structured guide to ensure consistency across all groups while allowing flexibility in responses. Given the participation of minors and the age difference between them and the moderators (two per group), who were perceived as authoritative figures, it was emphasized that the discussion was not evaluative. Thus, there were no right or wrong answers, and all comments were considered valuable for the research.

Focus groups were conducted virtually using Microsoft Teams. Permission to record each session was obtained, with prior consent signed by the parents or legal guardians. Participants were informed that the recordings would be used exclusively for scientific purposes and would be transcribed in detail. This explanation was essential to ensure participants felt comfortable discussing their interactions with influencers.

The discussion covered aspects of influencer marketing: (1) whether they followed influencers on social networks, (2) if they recognized influencers acting as brand ambassadors, and (3) which sectors they believed influencers collaborated with most frequently. This led to the core part of the research, relating influencer marketing to physical appearance, food, and body image.

To facilitate specific responses regarding the impact of influencer-sponsored content on food and body care products (RQ2 and RQ3), a 1-minute 52-second video featuring seven examples of such publications was shown (Table 1).

Example	Social network	Gender influencer	Product	Prominence of the body
1	Instagram	Woman	Women's clothing	Medium shot in which the influencer shows her outfit (top and tights showing her abdomen).
2	TikTok	Woman	Facial cream	Medium shot of the influencer wearing a silk robe in the bathroom applying the product.
3	TikTok	Man	Food (cookie candy)	Medium shot of the influencer dressed in street clothes (jeans and t-shirt).
4	TikTok	Woman	Bikini	American shot of the influencer in a bikini dancing in front of the camera.
5	TikTok	Woman	makeup accessory	Close-up of the influencer dressed in street clothes.
6	TikTok	Woman	Facial mask	Medium short shot of the influencer dressed in street clothes applying the product.
7	TikTok	Man	Food (cocoa cream)	Medium shot of the influencer dressed in street clothes testing the product.

Table 1. Description of the examples shown during the Focus Groups

The focus groups were concluded by thanking the participants for their involvement and offering them the opportunity to ask questions either at that time or via email. Each session lasted approximately 50 minutes, roughly the length of a school class. Table 2 provides a detailed list of the questions asked of the focus group participants, offering a comprehensive overview of the discussion points.

RQ	Focus Question Guide for Groups (FG)
The Relevance of Physical Appearance for Adolescents	• What would be your ideal physical appearance? Think of three words or a famous person who represents that ideal. • Do you think physical appearance is important? How about for your friends? • Do you strive to maintain a good physical appearance? What do you do to achieve this? • Do you believe that having a good physical appearance is related to greater success on social networks? • Do you like to edit photos before sharing them? • What do you usually focus on when editing photos?
Exposure to Content from Influencers with Aesthetically “Perfect” Bodies	[After viewing the video] • What do you think of these types of publications? What impression do the videos leave on you? • How do you feel after watching sponsored content from influencers who flaunt their bodies or show off a beautiful body? • Does your ideal body and healthy diet match what influencers portray?
Incidence of Promotions of Products that Enhance Physical Appearance	[After viewing the video] • When you see these products advertised by influencers, do you think they would help improve your physical appearance? • Generally, do you use these publications as a reference when getting ready, going out, or taking care of your physical appearance?

Table 2. Summary of the Research Questions and structure of the dynamics

3.1 Sample

We conducted twelve focus groups involving 55 teenagers who participated in the first stage of the project. These groups were organized based on the following variables: (1) Socioeconomic level: high, medium, and low; and (2) Age groups: 6th grade, elementary (11

years), 1st cycle of ESO (12-13 years), 2nd cycle of ESO (14-15 years), and Bacalaureate (16-17 years).

Accordingly, we organized three focus groups for each age group, each corresponding to a distinct socioeconomic level. Data collection was carried out from October to December 2022. Our aim was to have five participants in each group; however, due to scheduling conflicts, some sessions were conducted with only four participants (Table 3).

12 Focus group (N= 55)	
Age	11 years old (6 th grade, Elementary): 15
	12-13 years old (1 st cycle ESO): 15
	14-15 years old (2 nd cycle ESO): 13
	16-17 years old (Bacalaureate): 12
Gender	Men: 27
	Women: 28
SES	High: 19
	Medium: 20
	Low: 16

Table 3. Sociodemographic characteristics of study participants.

The nature of this project entails a series of ethical considerations, particularly concerning the participation of minors in fieldwork. Consequently, express parental authorization was always obtained, and the process was supervised by the Ethics Committee of the university that funded this research. This committee also supervised and approved the research project report.

4. Results

We present the results organized according to the research questions posed.

4.1 RQ1: The relevance of physical appearance for adolescents

We began the conversation by asking participants what they understood by healthy living. The discourse was consistent across all groups, regardless of age or socioeconomic level: participants emphasized the importance of varied food consumption, avoiding excessive intake of certain foods, particularly sugary products. However, when asked to identify a famous or public figure who exemplifies a healthy body with a desirable physical appearance, their responses were generally unbalanced. Most participants pointed to very normative bodies or even elite athletes (Figure 1), indicating a distortion between their descriptions of healthy living and the examples they provided.



Figure 1. Word cloud of names of celebrities with "healthy" bodies.

Concern about physical appearance varied significantly with age: as age increased, so did concern about physical appearance. For example, sixth graders did not pay much attention to

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8 their physical appearance, possibly because they are a very young group, as one participating
9 student mentioned:

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13 “We are normal, we are children, and we kind of have to accept ourselves... That we
14 don't have to think about the nonsense of... Perfect physique, “I have to eat vegetables
15 today,” because if not... we will have time to think about it as adults”
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18 (ELEMENTARY. MEDIUM).

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22 However, discussions in the ESO and Baccalaureate groups revealed statements about trying
23 to eat less when conditions such as weight gain occurred, especially during identity
24 development and puberty.
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28 “When you look bad, well, maybe you do a little more exercise... Or it's summer and
29 you've already eaten a lot of ice cream or sweets and then, after the summer, you think
30 you weigh a kilo more and you're not happy with your weight or something, so maybe
31 you try to eat less or exercise more” (2ND CYCLE ESO. HIGH).

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37 Social networks emphasize appearance significantly, and participants were aware of this
38 reality. Generally, the groups agreed that a socially accepted physique has a greater chance
39 of success on digital platforms. They noted that this reflects societal norms, where having a
40 “normative” appearance is crucial for social success.
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45 “People and society prefer the thinnest person, and where there are more people or
46 more followers, then you go and follow them too” (1ST CYCLE ESO.MEDIUM).
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50 The participants acknowledged this superficial aspect of society, recognizing that when they
51 see a photograph or video on social networks, the first things they notice are the face, body,
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8 makeup, and overall appearance. They also acknowledged that influencers are often expected
9 to adhere to the standard beauty ideal of being thin and toned.

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13 “A girl who is chubbier may be three times as nice as someone who isn't like that, but
14 I think that, just because she is chubby, they won't want to follow her, because they
15 are used to seeing thin and very beautiful people” (ELEMENTARY.MEDIUM).

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20 Minors tend to clarify that the success-body relationship is more pronounced on social
21 networks than in reality. They attribute this to the more superficial nature of judgment on
22 these virtual platforms. Since it is not possible to know a person in depth through these
23 environments, the criteria used to determine whether they like an influencer are more related
24 to physical appearance rather than the content or information provided.

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30 “Because in the end, you don't know the people on social media and people don't
31 know a person... you can know a little from the videos, but you can't know if they're
32 nice or not, because people pay attention more to their physique.”
33 (ELEMENTARY.HIGH).

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39 However, participants indicated that for certain content creators, particularly those on Twitch
40 and YouTube, physical appearance does not provide added value.

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44 “It depends on the content you offer, it doesn't matter if you are fat or skinny, I mean,
45 if you play video games live, you don't have to be fat or skinny, you just have to make
46 yourself liked, I don't know... That's not necessary” (2ND CYCLE ESO. LOW).

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8 The fear of exposure may explain why a minority of participants confirmed sharing unedited
9 photographs on their social networks. The high school group primarily admitted to editing
10 their images before sharing them on these platforms.
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15 “Also, a little to make it look better, if I have come out with a face that looks
16 like... I don't know, a little bit strange, then we repeat the photo, or put a filter,
17 and that way it doesn't show as much” (1ST CYCLE ESO. MEDIUM).
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22 **4.2 RQ2: Exposure to content from influencers with aesthetically “perfect”** 23 **bodies** 24

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26 When addressing how young people feel after continuously seeing posts from influencers
27 with a “perfect” physical appearance, we observe two main reactions: (1) indifference, where
28 they indicate that this type of content bores them and does not negatively impact their self-
29 esteem. They assert that an influencer who shows their body does so because they feel
30 confident and have achieved their desired physical condition; and (2) damage to self-esteem,
31 where they recognize that continuous exposure to such content has made them feel bad about
32 their own bodies or even depressed. Notably, when discussing this topic, participants rarely
33 used the first person and did not describe these feelings as their own experiences. This
34 observation suggests a personal distance from the healthy living practices they describe,
35 possibly indicating a lack of internalization of these habits.
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46 This phenomenon may be influenced by various factors, such as social pressure, media
47 influence, and the lack of accessible and realistic models of healthy bodies. Additionally, it
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may reflect a tendency to idealize certain standards of health and beauty without considering personal limitations and realities.

“Well, let's look at me, for example. I don't think it affects me much, but it is true that a person who has a lot of complexes about their body, who is there all the time—every time they open their cell phone—seeing perfect bodies, or influencers with perfect bodies and perfect skin, it can affect a person who has many insecurities” (BACC.HIGH).

In an attempt to reflect their own body image in contrast to their perceptions of influencers, participants' allusions to their own appearance were collected. The contrast was evident (Figure 2). While they associated terms such as “great body,” “handsome,” or “thin” with content creators, their descriptions of their own physical appearance were much more modest, often using the term “healthy.”



Figure 2. Allusions to the influencers' physique vs. allusions to one's own physique.

Furthermore, the words they used to describe their own feelings or the potential feelings of others generated by these types of publications were almost always negative (Figure 3). Although indifference was notable, some minors reflected that they felt insecure, sad, or ashamed of themselves when viewing influencers' content.



Figure 3. Allusions to negative feelings after viewing the influencer's content.

It is important to highlight that younger girls showed particular interest in one of the examples discussed during the conversation, specifically one in which a woman appeared whose appearance did not fit the "usual standard" they have in mind for influencers. They acknowledged that the influencer in the video seemed "daring" or "brave" because she exposed herself to negative comments due to a physique that supposedly does not meet the standard (with more fat and muscle mass). They admitted that having a physique far from the perfect, toned, and muscular ideal could make these leading figures targets of offensive comments about their bodies.

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8 “The girl seemed brave to me because she could take a lot of criticism for her physical
9 form. In my opinion, she has a great magazine body because she has her curves... but
10 she is very brave because she faces the comments” (ELEMENTARY.MEDIUM).
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15 Among the older participants (high school groups), in addition to being aware of the possible
16 negative effects of frequently being exposed to publications of influencers with ideal toned
17 bodies, they argued that what influencers sometimes show is not always a faithful reflection
18 of reality and, therefore, should not be conceived as such. They reasoned that influencers
19 tend to show their best profile and hide their complexes and flaws, creating a false illusion
20 of perfection and self-esteem.
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27 “An influencer comes out with perfect skin, smooth skin, without any pimples,
28 without any imperfection in his videos; however, they recorded her for Los 40
29 Principales and she had a lot of pimples on her forehead... She is not really saying
30 that she doesn't have them [pimples], what she is doing is covering up a reality,
31 just like I don't like going out in a photo with dark circles under his eyes”
32 (BACC.HIGH).
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40 However, when asked if their idea of an ideal body coincides with what influencers show,
41 the majority response is affirmative. Although they are aware of the certain unreality in the
42 representations of influencers, this does not diminish their desire to achieve that image.
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46 “Well, if he is my favorite influencer, I think that in the end I can believe it, right? I
47 don't think he's lying to my face, I think I can believe it” (BACC.MEDIUM).
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4.3. RQ3: *Incidence of promotions of products that enhance physical appearance*

As we explored whether the products promoted by influencers could contribute to improving their physical appearance or if they would take these publications as a reference for body care, the answers varied depending on age. In line with previous cases, concern about this aspect increased as the young people grew older.

The younger age group considered that influencers' content promoting physical appearance-enhancing products was a form of misleading advertising, feeling insufficiently mature to consume such products. However, among high school adolescents, they admitted that the products promoted by influencers could indeed help them improve their body image significantly. They understood that the use of these promoted products is not limited to an objective improvement in physical appearance but is also perceived to raise their social status. This indicates a desire to resemble these digital references.

“At my high school, people wear Jordan and similar brands to see themselves as more superior, but I don't care about wearing whatever brand” (1ST CYCLE ESO.MEDIUM).

It is crucial to note that participants of all ages showed a clear awareness that the content promoted by influencers is designed with a persuasive intent. However, this perception does not grant them immunity from the influence of these messages to acquire or consume the promoted products. Students of all socioeconomic levels admitted to having made purchases

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8 or having been tempted to consume certain products they saw promoted in these publications,
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10 aiming to improve their physical appearance.

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13 “Obviously I have makeup sponges and I probably don't need any, but I might
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15 see an ad for one and it might encourage me to buy it. Perhaps there are people
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17 who, simply because of how the influencer transmits the message, say: 'I'm
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19 going to buy it, even if I don't need it’” (BACC.HIGH).
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22 Finally, it was found that minors are less susceptible to the influence of models they do not
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24 aspire to resemble, as these do not represent the physical ideal they conceive. A notable
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26 example is an influencer who promotes swimwear but has a body that deviates from the
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28 standard, which is not perceived by them as a role model.

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30 “Well, the bikini one, for example, doesn't seem to favor her, but... In the end, she's
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32 advertising about it and that's it” (2ND CYCLE ESO.MEDIUM).
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37 **5. Discussion and conclusions**

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39 This research delves into adolescents' perceptions of the portrayal of health, body image, and
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41 advertising disseminated by influencers across social media platforms. The findings are
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43 juxtaposed with the theoretical framework, providing a comprehensive elucidation of the
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45 impact of such content on youth demographics.

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47 The findings suggest a progressive escalation in concern with physical appearance as
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49 adolescents mature, mirroring earlier research that posits adolescence as a pivotal phase for
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51 the evolution of identity and self-perception (Feijoo et al., 2022; Zozaya et al., 2022). In
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8 particular, younger adolescents often exhibit a relatively carefree disposition towards their
9 appearance, in contrast to the heightened awareness and discernment demonstrated by their
10 older counterparts. This observed trajectory corroborates the theoretical premise that
11 exposure to prevailing beauty norms in the media and online social spheres profoundly
12 shapes youthful self-conceptions (Cohen et al., 2021).
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19 Scholarly discourse underscores adolescence as a formative period marked by heightened
20 susceptibility to external stimuli, particularly regarding physical appearance (Azeez, 2021).
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22 In alignment with this premise, our study substantiates that older adolescents exhibit a greater
23 propensity to internalize prevailing beauty standards propagated by media and online
24 platforms, consequently amplifying concerns regarding their physical presentation. This
25 evidence aligns with social comparison theory, which elucidates how individuals gauge their
26 appearance relative to others, potentially engendering sentiments of discontentment and
27 diminished self-regard (Tiggemann et al., 2020).
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35 Persistent exposure to influencers' content, depicting "normative and flawless" physiques,
36 elicits varied responses among adolescents. While some exhibit apathy, others report
37 diminished self-esteem and heightened feelings of insecurity. This observation resonates
38 with Tiggemann et al. (2020), who highlight how exposure to idealized representations can
39 foster adverse social comparisons and precipitate body image concerns. Furthermore,
40 adolescents demonstrate awareness that influencers often project an embellished version of
41 themselves, potentially fostering unrealistic ideals regarding physical appearance (Sokolova
42 & Perez, 2021).
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8 The cognitive dissonance theory offers valuable insights into the phenomenon wherein
9 certain adolescents encounter diminished self-esteem upon exposure to influencers' content.
10 According to this theory, individuals experience dissonance when they discern a disjuncture
11 between their appearance and the idealized standards propagated by media and digital
12 platforms, culminating in dissatisfaction with their self-perception (Festinger, 1957). This
13 psychological mechanism is particularly relevant in social media, where influencers often
14 project an aura of flawlessness that appears unattainable.
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22 Additionally, adolescents demonstrate cognizance of the persuasive undertone inherent in
23 product endorsements by influencers. However, this awareness does not invariably insulate
24 them from such messages. Adolescents concede to feeling enticed to procure promoted
25 products in pursuit of enhancing their physical appearance, indicating the substantial impact
26 of influencer advertising on their consumption behaviors (Salehuddin-Sharipudin et al.,
27 2023). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced among older adolescents, who exhibit
28 heightened susceptibility to these messages owing to their aspiration to elevate their social
29 standing and emulate their digital role models (González-Larrea et al., 2022; Tsen & Cheng,
30 2021).
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40 Theoretical frameworks surrounding persuasion and social influence provide further insight
41 into adolescents' susceptibility to product endorsements by digital personalities. These
42 theories posit that individuals are predisposed to being influenced by those perceived as
43 authentic and appealing (Tralli, 2023). Within the landscape of social media, influencers have
44 emerged as notably attractive figures, heightening the probability of adolescents embracing
45 their guidance on matters pertaining to physical well-being and self-care.
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This exploratory research suggests that influencers on social media have a considerable impact on adolescents' perceptions of health, body image, and consumption decisions. Concerns about physical appearance increase with age, and exposure to idealized bodies can negatively affect young individuals' self-esteem, leading to complexes as they develop their identity. Although adolescents are aware of the persuasive nature of product endorsements, they remain susceptible to the influence of these messages.

It is important to recognize the inherent limitations of our study. Primarily, our research adopts a predominantly qualitative methodology. Although this approach is invaluable for capturing nuanced insights and perspectives, it may not fully encapsulate the breadth and depth of adolescents' experiences and behaviors concerning influencer content on social media. The inclusion of quantitative data could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the prevalence and impact of these phenomena among adolescents, particularly in expansive and representative samples. Moreover, our study was geographically confined to adolescents in Spain, potentially constraining the generalizability of our findings to other cultural contexts. To bolster the robustness and applicability of future investigations of this intricate phenomenon, it is imperative to conduct further research encompassing diverse populations and employing mixed-method approaches.

These reflections highlight the necessity of fostering critical advertising literacy skills among adolescents to facilitate their adept navigation of digital environments. Such literacy empowers individuals to discern and counteract persuasive tactics deployed by influencers (Livingstone & Helsper, 2006), thereby mitigating the development of complexes stemming from incessant exposure to idealized body imagery.

Moreover, there is a pressing need to implement public policies aimed at regulating information concerning weight management and body image online. Such measures are vital for curbing the dissemination of misinformation and advocating a more authentic and inclusive portrayal of diverse body types. By regulating advertising practices on social media, policymakers can ensure the accuracy and transparency of messages propagated by influencers, thereby alleviating social pressure on adolescents to conform to unattainable beauty standards (Sabbagh et al., 2020).

In essence, the outcomes of this study emphasize the necessity of adopting a holistic approach to address the impact of influencers on adolescents' perceptions of health and body image. Through concerted efforts on multiple fronts, we can empower adolescents to cultivate healthier relationships with their bodies and resist digital and societal pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty ideals.

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