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Research Article

Unhealthy Aesthetic Comparisons: How Fit Influencers Sculpt Spanish Adolescents' Body Image Satisfaction

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This study explores how the importance Spanish adolescents place on aesthetics in their personal image affects their body satisfaction and how this relationship is influenced by comparisons with fit influencers. A total of 1082 adolescents aged 12–17 completed a survey measuring the emphasis on aesthetics, the frequency of comparisons with fit influencers, and their satisfaction with physical appearance. We performed a mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro to assess the relationships among these variables, controlling for gender and age. The results indicate that, while placing a high value on aesthetics is positively associated with body satisfaction, this effect is partially mediated by comparisons with fit influencers, which negatively impacts appearance satisfaction. Thus, the relationship is more complex than initially suggested, showing both positive and negative effects, depending on the role of social comparison. Notably, adolescent girls and older adolescents were more likely to engage in comparisons with fit influencers, shaping their ideal body image and fostering dissatisfaction. Thus, this research highlights the necessity of developing media literacy interventions aimed at reducing the harmful influence of social comparison on social media to promote better body satisfaction, particularly among Spanish adolescents.

Keywords: adolescents; body satisfaction; fit influencers; social comparison; social media

1. Introduction

Adolescents are increasingly using social media for identity construction, social interactions, and aesthetic self-expression. Among the most prominent visual content shaping these evaluations is the "fitspiration" phenomenon [1], which promotes fitness, health, and beauty ideals, often via fitness influencers who present highly curated, idealized images. This content, while often promoting healthy lifestyles, also reinforces narrow and unattainable aesthetic standards [2].

The influence of social media on body image is well-documented, and research examining how personal aesthetic orientation intersects with the impact of influencers on body satisfaction remains underexplored, especially in the context of Spanish adolescents [3]. Approximately 17% of Spanish adolescents actively follow fitness- and health-related profiles, making them frequent consumers of idealized, curated images that set unrealistic body ideals.

"Fit influencers," those who position themselves as authorities in exercise, nutrition, and lifestyle [4, 5], are central to this process. Through curated content, online celebrities construct aspirational lifestyles that showcase bodies aligned with often unattainable aesthetic ideals [6]. Although messaging may promote health and well-being, it frequently reinforces appearance-centric values and amplifies opportunities for social comparison [7]. This is particularly consequential for adolescents, whose evolving self-concept and heightened sensitivity to social media feedback render them especially susceptible to the internalization of idealized body norms [3].

While a substantial body of research has established that social media exposure can undermine adolescents' body image, particularly through mechanisms of appearance-based social comparison [8, 9], little empirical attention has been devoted to how adolescents' personal investment in physical aesthetics may shape or be shaped by these

comparisons. The extent to which valuing one's physical appearance heightens vulnerability to social media influences constitutes an area of growing scholarly concern, particularly in relation to fit influencers who promote idealized body standards [10–12]. Moreover, while prior research has examined the internalization of media ideals and their relationship to body dissatisfaction [13–15], it has seldom accounted for the mediating role that appearance-based comparisons with influencers may play in the link between adolescents' aesthetic orientation and their satisfaction with physical appearance.

This study addresses this gap by exploring how Spanish adolescents' aesthetic orientation relates to their satisfaction with physical appearance and whether this relationship is mediated by appearance-based comparisons with fit influencers. We aim to contribute to a more focused conceptual understanding of how digital media aesthetics intersect with adolescent development and how individual-level dispositions shape vulnerability to visual content in increasingly comparison-driven online environments.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Social Comparison Theory and Body Image Development. Adolescence is a critical stage in self-concept formation, during which physical appearance becomes a central dimension of identity [16]. As young people experience rapid physical changes, they become increasingly attentive to how their bodies compare to sociocultural ideals of thinness, muscularity, and overall attractiveness [17]. This developmental process occurs in parallel with heightened sensitivity to peer feedback and societal evaluations, which makes adolescents particularly vulnerable to body image concerns. In this context, aesthetic investment, in which individuals place a high value on their appearance, can serve as a self-affirming factor that enhances body satisfaction.

Social comparison theory [8] provides a useful framework for understanding these dynamics. According to this theory, individuals assess their own abilities and characteristics—including physical appearance—by comparing themselves with others, especially in the absence of objective standards. These comparisons may be upward—toward those perceived as superior—or downward—toward those perceived as inferior, each with different psychological consequences [18]. During adolescence, upward appearance comparisons are especially frequent and can undermine self-perception and satisfaction with one's body [19]. However, the dual-pathway model of body image disturbance [20] suggests that while aesthetic investment can enhance body satisfaction through self-affirming behaviors, repeated upward comparisons with idealized media representations, such as those promoted by fit influencers, can lead to body dissatisfaction by intensifying the perceived discrepancy between one's body and the ideal. This model highlights how both positive and negative outcomes can result from engagement with the media, depending on the type of social comparison involved. Additionally, objectification theory [21] emphasizes the role of social media in objectifying the body. Exposure to idealized representations of fitness and beauty encourages individuals to internalize these standards, further exacerbating body dissatisfaction when they are unable to meet them.

Although the theory originated in offline social contexts, the emergence of social media has transformed the comparative landscape. Digital platforms now offer constant exposure to idealized visual content, intensifying opportunities for appearance-based evaluation and accelerating the internalization of aesthetic norms [22]. This change has profound implications for adolescent body image, as diverse studies have shown that social media use is associated with heightened dissatisfaction, particularly when users engage in visual comparisons with idealized representations [9, 12, 23].

2.2. Fit Influencers and Aesthetic Pressure in Adolescents. Among the various forms of online content, "fitspiration" imagery—content that blends fitness, lifestyle, and beauty ideals—has gained significant prominence and appeal among adolescents [1]. These individuals promote exercise routines, diet practices, and motivational messaging, while presenting highly curated and aspirational versions of themselves [4, 5]. Their perceived authenticity and accessibility distinguish them from traditional online celebrities [24], making them more salient targets of comparison for young followers [6].

While such influencers may encourage healthy behaviors, they also often embody beauty standards that appear unattainable for adolescents. Consequently, engagement with fit influencer content may affect body satisfaction [7]. Exposure to such content is especially impactful for youths who place a high value on physical appearance, as their aesthetic orientation may increase their likelihood of using influencers as benchmarks for self-evaluation [25].

Emerging research has begun to explore these effects in the adolescent population. Some studies have shown that appearance comparisons with fit influencers are linked to lower body satisfaction [26] and higher body-related anxiety [10, 11]. In this sense, although research specifically focusing on fit influencers in the Spanish context is still emerging, other studies point to comparable dynamics of dissatisfaction linked to idealized digital representations. Ruiz-Ariza et al. [27] identified a significant relationship between adolescents' social media use and body dissatisfaction, highlighting appearance-based comparisons as a key explanatory mechanism. Gil-Quintana et al. [28] further observed that, while some adolescents reported increased motivation for physical activity after engaging with influencer content, others displayed greater sedentary behavior and concern with appearance, particularly when combined with compulsive digital engagement and unhealthy food consumption patterns [29]. Additional findings suggest that influencer-driven advertising on social platforms fosters the internalization of unattainable beauty standards among Spanish adolescents, reinforcing aesthetic dissatisfaction and the pressure to conform [3].

2.3. The Role of Gender and Age in Appearance-Based Online Comparisons. In this context, empirical research has highlighted gender and age as key moderating variables that

examine appearance-based social comparison and body satisfaction. These individual differences have been systematically integrated into analyses seeking to explain the variability in adolescents' responses to media-driven aesthetic ideals [9, 14, 30].

First, gendered socialization exerts differential pressure on boys and girls regarding their appearance [31]. Girls are encouraged to conform to thinness and beauty ideals, which leads to more frequent and emotionally charged comparisons with peers and media figures [32]. As a result, adolescent girls are more likely to internalize the unrealistic aesthetic norms promoted by fit influencers, resulting in heightened dissatisfaction and distorted body image [30, 33]. In contrast, boys experience dissatisfaction with their muscularity and physical strength [34]. While they may also engage with fit influencer content, the intensity and psychological impact of these comparisons tend to be less severe and are filtered through different aesthetic standards, that is, ideals of performance and strength [35].

Age also plays a critical role in shaping vulnerability to appearance-based social comparison. As adolescents grow older, their awareness of societal beauty standards intensifies, as does their critical engagement with media content [3, 36]. Older adolescents tend to scrutinize their appearance, adopt evaluative attitudes toward their bodies, and perceive a greater discrepancy between themselves and the idealized images found on social media platforms [37]. These age-related shifts suggest that the negative impact of influencer-driven comparisons may increase as adolescents progress to later developmental stages.

2.4. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses. Drawing from social comparison theory [8] and contemporary research on adolescent body image, this study introduces a conceptual model that links aesthetic self-orientation, exposure to digital appearance ideals, and body satisfaction. The model posits that adolescents who place strong importance on physical aesthetics (AEST)—that is, those who view appearance as central to self-definition—are more likely to evaluate their bodies in relation to idealized social media content. This process may influence body satisfaction (SATIS) directly or indirectly through appearance-based comparisons with fitness influencers (FIT), a highly salient figure within the digital environment adolescents frequently inhabit [5, 7].

Adolescents who strongly value appearance often engage with curated content that promotes narrow standards of beauty, including "fitspiration" imagery [1]. Influencers operate as powerful aesthetic benchmarks [4, 6], reinforcing internalized ideals that can distort self-perception [10, 25]. While aesthetic investment can sometimes enhance body image by encouraging appearance-related behaviors such as grooming or fitness [14], these benefits may be undermined when comparison targets embody unattainable ideals [2, 26].

The model also considers how gender and age shape this dynamic: girls are more likely to engage in beauty-related content and internalize thinness standards promoted by influencers [30, 32], whereas boys tend to navigate muscularity norms and different aesthetic pressures [34, 35]. Additionally, as adolescents mature, they become more critically aware of ideal body expectations and are more likely to compare themselves to social media figures, increasing their susceptibility to dissatisfaction [36, 37]. Based on this framework, we proposed the following hypotheses:

- H1: The importance adolescents place on physical aesthetics is directly associated with their reported levels of body satisfaction.

While aesthetic concern can sometimes fuel dissatisfaction, previous research has also suggested that it may enhance perceived self-worth through appearance-related investments such as grooming or fitness behaviors. Although our study does not directly assess these behavioral mechanisms, we frame aesthetic orientation as a potential contributor to body satisfaction when not filtered through negative comparison dynamics [14, 38, 39].

- H2: Comparisons with fit influencers mediate the relationship between the importance placed on physical aesthetics and satisfaction with physical appearance.

Aesthetic orientation may increase exposure to aspirational content, which can intensify appearance-based comparisons and erode satisfaction [9, 10, 23, 25].

- H3: Girls report higher levels of appearance-based comparisons with fit influencers than boys, consistent with gendered patterns of self-monitoring and exposure to aesthetic ideals in digital media.
- H4: Age is positively associated with appearance-based comparisons with fit influencers and negatively associated with body satisfaction, reflecting developmental increases in media awareness and self-evaluation tendencies.

Cultural beauty norms and gendered media targeting make girls particularly vulnerable to internalizing unrealistic ideals [15, 30, 32, 33]. With age, adolescents become more self-evaluative and media aware, which may amplify the emotional salience of upward comparisons [36, 37]. While both gender and age are known to influence how adolescents engage with appearance-related content, in the present study, they were treated as covariates to account for their statistical relevance without implying moderation effects. This approach allowed us to examine their independent associations with comparison behaviors and body satisfaction while maintaining analytical parsimony.

3. Methodology

A survey was administered to 1082 Spanish adolescents aged 12–17 years ($M = 14.5$ years; 49.6% boys and 50.4% girls). A multistage stratified sampling procedure was used, with proportional allocation based on four aggregated geographical areas, classified according to the NUTS regions defined by the EU. Additionally, a second level of stratification was

applied based on the socioeconomic status of families (low, medium, and high). The final sample of adolescents was selected using cross-quota sampling by gender and age.

Fieldwork was conducted between February and May 2024, and participants were recruited through a panel service. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's Ethics Committee overseeing the research project [40], and informed consent was secured from each participant's guardian (Code PI: 066/2023).

3.1. Measures and Procedure. Participants first provided demographic information, including age and gender. Following this, they completed a series of items corresponding to the key variables examined in this study.

We grounded the development of measurement instruments on previously validated scales in the fields of body image and social comparison, selecting and adapting them to fit the specific aims and context of the study. To construct the AEST scale (importance of aesthetics in appearance), we selected and adapted items from Carlson-Jones and Crawford [38], whose work provides a validated foundation for assessing body image concerns during adolescence. To enhance cultural specificity, we incorporated additional content derived from the qualitative and quantitative findings reported by Duno and Acosta [39] and Fanjul-Peyró et al. [41], both of which identify salient aesthetic norms and beauty standards within the target sociocultural context. This allowed us to capture the internalization of and concern with culturally mediated ideals of appearance.

For the SATIS scale (body satisfaction), we retained the multidimensional structure proposed by Carlson-Jones and Crawford [38], which distinguishes between satisfaction with discrete physical features, including body weight, muscularity, and facial characteristics. This structure aligns with contemporary models of body image, which emphasize the importance of domain-specific assessment to comprehensively understand body satisfaction.

To develop the FIT scale (comparison with fit influencers), we adapted the theoretical framework of social comparison elaborated by Tiggemann and McGill [42], ensuring alignment with the current media landscape by contextualizing referents of comparison within the domain of social media influencers. We subjected all scales to a review process, during which we reformulated the selected items to ensure linguistic clarity, conceptual coherence, and age-appropriate phrasing. This step also allowed us to verify the instruments' cultural relevance and psychometric adequacy prior to their empirical application. A detailed description of these constructs is presented in Table 1.

To assess the psychometric properties of the measurement instruments, we conducted principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation for each scale. The AEST scale showed a two-factor structure with satisfactory factor loadings (> 0.56) and explained 62.34% of the total variance. The SATIS scale also revealed two components, accounting for 60.02% of the variance, with all item loadings exceeding 0.60. The FIT scale showed a clear unidimensional structure with excellent loadings (0.918–0.937) and explained 85.92% of the variance. All KMO values were above 0.75, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant in all cases ($p < 0.001$), indicating suitability for factor analysis. These results support the convergent validity of the three scales (Table 2). In addition, the Pearson correlations between the three constructs ranged from –0.34 to 0.59, all below the 0.70 threshold, supporting discriminant validity.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics. An analysis of the mean scores for the items in the AEST construct revealed that participants generally tended to disagree with undergoing aesthetic procedures to enhance their appearance (Items AEST1 and AEST5, with means ranging from 1.61 to 2.33). However, a slight tendency among adolescents to express concern about physical appearance was observed, particularly before leaving home (Item AEST7) or when shopping for clothes (Item AEST8), indicating moderate anxiety about projecting an ideal image (means between 3.10 and 3.14). The moderate dispersion in responses suggests that while adolescents generally feel discomfort with their physical appearance, more invasive procedures such as surgeries or cosmetic touch-ups are not widely accepted.

Regarding body satisfaction, the results showed that participants generally reported a high degree of satisfaction with various aspects of their bodies, particularly with their body weight (Item SATIS1, $M = 3.70$), hair (Item SATIS5, $M = 3.98$), skin tone (Item SATIS6, $M = 3.95$), and facial features (Item SATIS4, $M = 3.94$). This trend reflects a positive self-perception and a considerable level of acceptance of their body image. The low variability in responses, as indicated by relatively low standard deviations, suggests that body satisfaction is widely shared among adolescents, highlighting a high level of body-related self-esteem.

Finally, regarding the FIT construct, participants showed a moderate tendency to compare themselves with fit influencers, both in terms of overall appearance and specific features (means ranging from 2.04 to 2.34). The observed variation in responses suggests individual differences in how these comparisons are perceived and processed (Table 3).

4.2. Mediation Model Results. We conducted a mediation analysis using Hayes' PROCESS macro in SPSS, employing Model 4 [43] with 5000 bootstrap samples on a final sample of 999 adolescents aged 12–17 years (Table 4). In this analysis, "body satisfaction" (SATIS) was designated as the dependent variable (Y), "importance of aesthetics in appearance" (AEST) as the independent variable (X), and "appearance comparison with influencers" (FIT) as the mediating variable (M). Gender and age were included as control variables.

The results revealed a significant positive association between AEST and SATIS (total effect: $c = 0.0632$, SE = 0.0255, $p < 0.01$). However, when FIT was introduced as a mediating variable, the direct effect of AEST on SATIS decreased slightly (direct effect: $c' = 0.0750$, SE = 0.0256, $p < 0.01$), indicating partial mediation. Further analysis showed that AEST was positively associated with a higher tendency to compare oneself with fit influencers ($a = 0.0141$

TABLE 1: Description of the survey constructs.

Construct	Items	Scale[a]	References
Importance of the aesthetic in appearance (AEST) ($\alpha = 0.837$)	[AEST1] I would consider cosmetic surgery if I were unhappy with a part of my body. [AEST2] I dedicate a considerable amount of time and effort to improving or maintaining my physical appearance. [AEST3] My primary motivation for exercising is to improve my physical appearance, rather than for health or enjoyment. [AEST4] I am willing to follow strict diets to achieve my ideal body. [AEST5] I have occasionally considered undergoing minor cosmetic surgeries to enhance my appearance. [AEST6] I frequently worry about certain parts of my body that I find unattractive. [AEST7] I always check my appearance before leaving the house. [AEST8] I make an effort to buy clothing that enhances my appearance.	1 = *strongly disagree* 2 = *disagree* 3 = *agree* 4 = *strongly agree*	Adapted from Carlson-Jones and Crawford [38]; Duno and Acosta [39]; Fanjul et al. [41]
Body satisfaction (SATIS) ($\alpha = 0.877$)	How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your body? [SATIS1] My weight [SATIS2] My endurance [SATIS3] My athletic ability [SATIS4] My facial features [SATIS5] My hair [SATIS6] My skin tone [SATIS7] My body shape [SATIS8] The definition of my muscles [SATIS9] My height [SATIS10] My waist	1 = *not at all satisfied* 2 = *slightly satisfied* 3 = *moderately satisfied* 4 = *quite satisfied* 5 = *very satisfied*	
Comparison of the appearance with influencers (FIT) ($\alpha = 0.918$)	[FIT1] Do you think about your appearance when viewing content from fitness influencers? [FIT2] How often do you compare your overall appearance and/or specific body parts to those of fitness influencers? [FIT3] How much do you compare your facial features with those of fitness influencers?	1 = *never* 2 = *rarely* 3 = *sometimes* 4 = *often* 5 = *very often*	Adapted from Tiggemann and McGill [42]

[a]D/K and N/A responses were assigned values of 90 and 97, respectively, and were treated as missing values in the statistical analysis.

TABLE 2: Convergent validity indicators for the AEST, SATIS, and FIT scales.

Scale	KMO	Bartlett χ^2 (df, p)	No. of components	Variance explained (%)	Highest loading	Lowest loading
AEST	0.824	2271.106 (28), $p < 0.001$	2	62.34	0.841	0.561
SATIS	0.890	4196.504 (45), $p < 0.001$	2	60.02	0.82	0.6
FIT	0.757	2105.753 (3), $p < 0.001$	1	85.92	0.937	0.918

Note: Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant in all cases ($p < 0.001$). All factor loadings refer to the rotated solution.
Abbreviation: KMO = Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy.

, SE = 0.0034, $p < 0.01$), while FIT was negatively associated with SATIS ($b = -0.8372$, SE = 0.2349, $p < 0.01$).

The indirect effect of AEST on SATIS through FIT was significant, as indicated by the 95% confidence interval obtained via bootstrapping, which did not include zero (indirect effect: $a * b = -0.0118$, SE = 0.0044, 95% CI [−0.0220, −0.0044]). These results suggest that appearance-based comparison with fit influencers partially mediates the association between aesthetic orientation and body satisfaction. However, given the modest size of the indirect effect, this mediation should be interpreted as one contributing pathway among others that may link aesthetic prioritization to body image outcomes.

4.3. Impact of Gender and Age. We also included gender and age as covariates in the mediation model of FIT between

TABLE 3: Descriptive statistics.

Item	*N*	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
AEST1	886	1	4	1.61	0.857
AEST2	975	1	4	2.28	0.905
AEST3	982	1	4	2.04	0.930
AEST4	954	1	4	1.71	0.802
AEST5	961	1	4	1.57	0.829
AEST6	981	1	4	2.33	0.962
AEST7	1005	1	4	3.10	0.867
AEST8	990	1	4	3.14	0.870
SATIS1	1001	1	5	3.70	1.018
SATIS2	998	1	5	3.56	0.980
SATIS3	1005	1	5	3.74	1.043
SATIS4	1007	1	5	3.94	0.821
SATIS5	1013	1	5	3.98	0.968
SATIS6	995	1	5	3.95	0.871
SATIS7	1000	1	5	3.72	0.922
SATIS8	966	1	5	3.44	0.945
SATIS9	1012	1	5	3.68	1.040
SATIS10	994	1	5	3.73	0.967
FIT1	980	1	5	2.34	1.157
FIT2	993	1	5	2.21	1.167
FIT3	989	1	5	2.04	1.100

AEST and SATIS. Gender had a significant effect on the tendency to compare oneself with fit influencers (FIT) ($b = 0.1910$, SE = 0.0660, $p < 0.01$), revealing notable gender differences in this behavior. Specifically, girls were more likely than boys to engage in comparisons with fit influencers. However, no significant direct effect of gender on body satisfaction (SATIS) was observed ($b = -0.5647$, SE = 0.4910, $p > 0.05$), indicating that while girls compare themselves more frequently with influencers, this does not directly influence their body satisfaction.

In contrast, age had a significant effect on both FIT ($b = 0.0555$, SE = 0.0195, $p < 0.01$) and SATIS ($b = -0.3742$, SE = 0.1447, $p < 0.01$). These findings suggest that as adolescents grow older, they are more likely to engage in comparisons with fit influencers, which is associated with lower body satisfaction. This trend reflects a process where increased exposure to, and comparison with, idealized beauty standards on social media intensifies with age, negatively impacting adolescents' perceptions of their body image (Figure 1).

5. Discussion

This study examined how adolescents' orientation toward physical aesthetics relates to body satisfaction and how this association is shaped by appearance-based comparisons with fit influencers. Framed within social comparison theory and situated in a developmental perspective on identity formation, the findings provide a structured response to the four hypotheses and contribute conceptually to existing research on media influence and adolescent self-perception.

The analysis confirmed a positive association between valuing aesthetic appearance and body satisfaction, an outcome that aligns with studies suggesting that adolescents who engage in appearance-regulating behaviors, such as exercising for aesthetic reasons or curating their physical presentation, may experience a sense of agency and mastery over their bodies [38, 39]. Rather than assuming that aesthetic orientation invariably leads to dissatisfaction, our findings suggest that under certain conditions, particularly when social comparison is not prominent, this concern may coexist with stable or even positive body image perceptions.

In addition, the mediation analysis revealed a statistically significant but modest indirect effect of comparison with influencers. This pathway, while limited in magnitude, aligns with previous research on how curated digital personas promote narrow appearance ideals [3, 6]. Adolescents who placed greater emphasis on aesthetics reported higher frequencies of comparison with fit influencers, which in turn was associated with lower body satisfaction. This relationship resonates with the findings of Tiggemann and Zaccardo [9], who demonstrated that fitspiration content tends to amplify the upward comparison and internalization of unrealistic ideals. Furthermore, the data echo the argument advanced by de-Brabandere et al. [10], who observed that adolescents increasingly use influencer content as a normative standard for appearance-related self-assessment, particularly in the fitness and health domains.

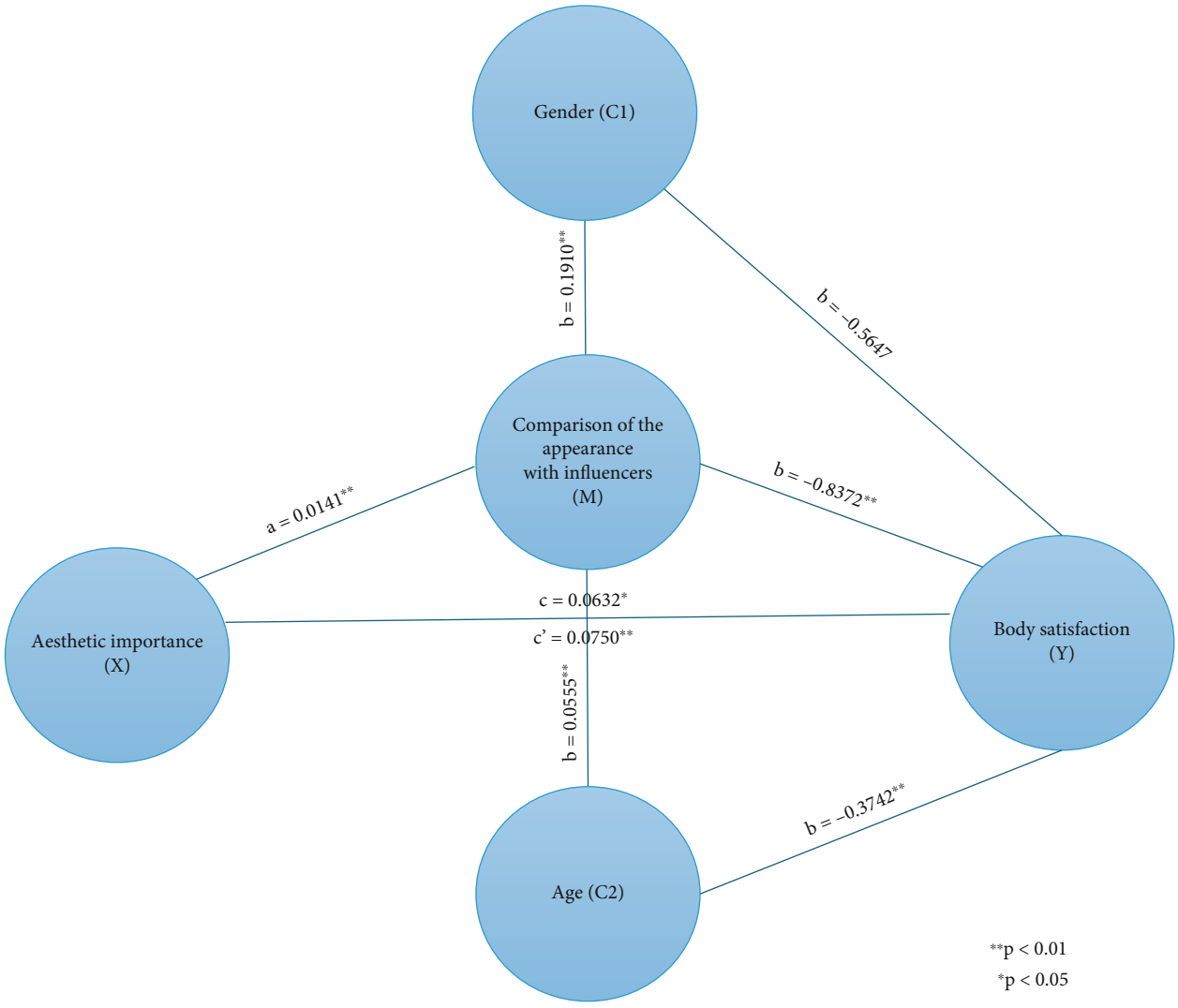
Although this mediating pathway was statistically significant, the effect size was relatively modest, suggesting that appearance-based comparison is only one of the multiple factors that influence the relationship between aesthetic orientation and body satisfaction. This finding tempers more deterministic accounts of influencer content and supports a more differentiated reading of media influence, a perspective echoing recent scholarship on the multiplicity of digital media effects. It also invites the consideration of alternative or complementary factors—such as self-esteem, parental modeling, or peer group norms—that likely interact with social comparison in complex ways. The absence of these variables in our model constitutes a critical avenue for future research aimed at developing more ecologically valid explanations of adolescent body image.

Gender differences emerged in the frequency of appearance-based comparisons with influencers, with girls reporting higher engagement than boys did. This aligns with prior research suggesting that girls are more frequently socialized into appearance-focused self-monitoring and are more consistently targeted by idealized visual content in digital environments [30, 32]. In the present study, however, gender was included as a covariate, and we did not test whether the psychological consequences of comparison differ by gender. Drawing conclusions about such differential effects would require formal moderation analyses, which fall outside the scope of this design.

Similarly, age emerged as a significant correlate of both comparison behavior and body satisfaction. Older adolescents were more likely to engage in comparisons with fit

TABLE 4: Path analysis results for the mediation model.

Path	Estimate (β)	SE	t	p	95% CI
Path a: EST→FITINF	0.0141	0.0034	4.118	< 0.001	[0.0074, 0.0208]
Path b: FITINF→SATIS	−0.8372	0.2349	−3.565	< 0.001	[−1.2981, −0.3763]
Path c': EST→SATIS (direct)	0.0750	0.0256	2.935	0.0034	[0.0249, 0.1251]
Path c: EST→SATIS (total effect)	0.0632	0.0255	2.480	0.0133	[0.0132, 0.1132]
Indirect effect ($a * b$) via FITINF	−0.0118	0.0044 (boot)	—	—	[−0.0220, −0.0044] (boot)



Indirect effect (a*b): B = −0.0118, SE = 0.0044, 95% CI, [−0.0220, −0.0044]

FIGURE 1: Graphical summary of the mediation analysis.

influencers and to report lower levels of satisfaction with their appearance. This trend is consistent with developmental literature that highlights an increase in body-related self-consciousness and evaluative sensitivity during mid-to-late adolescence [36]. Nonetheless, our analysis did not assess whether age moderates the impact of comparison on satisfaction, and we therefore refrain from interpreting these associations as evidence of interaction effects. To refine these findings, future studies would benefit from formally testing gender and age as potential moderators within broader explanatory frameworks. Exploring interaction effects may reveal distinct trajectories in how adolescents engage with and respond to idealized content. In particular, moderated mediation models offer a promising avenue for examining how the influence of aesthetic orientation and social comparison on body satisfaction may differ depending on

developmental stage and gendered experience. Incorporating such designs would refine the theoretical precision of body image research and enhance its capacity to account for individual variability in susceptibility to sociocultural pressure.

In this sense, the analysis supported H1, confirming a statistically significant direct association between adolescents' valuation of physical aesthetics and their reported satisfaction with their appearance. This result supports previous claims that aesthetic orientation, when linked to self-regulatory behaviors, can serve as a psychological stabilizing factor [14, 38]. While prior critical accounts have framed aesthetic investment primarily as a risk factor [13], our findings show that under certain conditions, it may operate as a form of self-affirmation, suggesting the need to differentiate between appearance consciousness and appearance anxiety. However, the present design did not incorporate mediating behaviors, such as grooming, fitness, or self-regulatory strategies.

Our results also supported H2 by identifying a statistically significant, albeit modest, indirect effect of appearance-based comparisons with fit influencers in the association between aesthetic orientation and body satisfaction. Although the indirect effect was modest, it substantiates the conceptual claim that influencers act as aesthetic reference points within adolescents' evaluative frameworks [9, 10]. These comparisons appeared to intensify the perceived discrepancies between one's appearance and prevailing digital ideals, thereby modulating the overall impact of aesthetic orientation on satisfaction. This mediating role lends empirical support to the broader theoretical proposition that digital content operates as an active filter shaping self-assessment.

Regarding H3, consistent with prior literature, girls reported more frequent appearance-based comparisons than boys [30, 32]. However, our model did not test whether gender moderated the psychological effects of these comparisons. As such, we refrain from drawing conclusions about differential effects across gender groups.

Finally, our findings support H4 by showing that older adolescents reported more frequent appearance-based comparisons and lower body satisfaction. Older adolescents were more likely to engage in such comparisons and reported greater dissatisfaction, a result aligned with developmental models that emphasize the intensification of social self-evaluation during mid-to-late adolescence [36, 37]. This highlights the need for age-sensitive models of social media influence and reinforces the importance of tailoring intervention strategies to adolescents' cognitive and emotional maturity.

Thus, we situate our model within a broader ecological understanding that acknowledges adolescents' body image as shaped through cumulative, multidirectional exchanges among media content, peer dynamics, developmental self-reflection, and digital practices. To enhance the granularity of such models, future investigations should triangulate self-reported data with digital behavior tracking, in-depth qualitative accounts, and cross-cultural validation. Integrating diverse methodological approaches, including longitudinal, ethnographic, and participatory designs, will further strengthen this concern.

5.1. Policy Implications. The policy implications of this study stem from its focused examination of how adolescents navigate digital appearance norms, particularly through comparisons with fit influencers. Our findings do not provide grounds for direct regulatory intervention nor do they support sweeping generalizations. Rather, they offer empirical grounding for more precise and developmentally sensitive conversations on how educators, families, and digital platforms might approach body image pressures among adolescents in contextually meaningful ways.

The partial mediation observed between aesthetic orientation and body satisfaction through appearance-based comparison suggests that interventions should not frame adolescents as passive recipients of media content but as active interpreters whose self-perception is continually shaped by complex engagements with idealized bodies online. Accordingly, media literacy efforts might be more effective when situated within existing educational disciplines that already address issues of identity, well-being, and representation, such as ethics, personal development, or digital culture. Within these pedagogical spaces, adolescents can be invited to explore how aspirational bodies, health narratives, and fitness aesthetics intersect with platform-specific affordances and attention economies.

Critically, our analysis indicates that these pressures intensify with age and are unevenly distributed across gender lines. Therefore, it would be prudent to design interventions that move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches instead attending of developmental trajectories and culturally salient aesthetic ideals. Programs addressing boys' increasing exposure to muscularity norms should be as nuanced as those addressing thinness pressures among girls, especially given the overlapping emotional and behavioral consequences of both logics.

Although we do not propose content regulation per se, our findings reinforce existing calls for increased transparency in the labeling of commercially enhanced content, particularly where influencers blend health and aesthetic messaging. Collaboration between educators, researchers, and content creators might help establish context-sensitive standards that promote authenticity without compromising expressive diversity. However, such measures should be piloted through critical reflection and empirical scrutiny.

Practical interventions could include the integration of media literacy modules into school curricula, emphasizing critical thinking about digital appearance norms and social comparison dynamics. Additionally, interactive digital toolkits—such as mobile applications or online workshops—tailored to different developmental stages could empower adolescents to navigate aesthetic pressures with greater confidence. Collaborations with social media influencers who advocate for body diversity and authenticity could also serve as effective channels to counteract narrow beauty standards, leveraging peer-driven engagement. Designing these interventions with sensitivity to age and gender differences would enhance their relevance and effectiveness.

This invites us to reconsider how media literacy programs and adolescent development intersect in contemporary digital environments. The value of such interventions

may lie less in shielding adolescents from aesthetic pressure and more in equipping them to decode, interrogate, and navigate those pressures with greater confidence and agency.

5.2. Limitations. These findings should be interpreted in light of methodological and conceptual limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw conclusions about causality or temporal ordering among variables. The reliance on self-reported data also constrains the interpretation of these relationships as it does not account for potential biases in participants' perceptions and recollections. This design prevents us from determining the temporal sequence of these relationships and the direction of causality. Although the proposed model rests on theoretically grounded assumptions and aligns with prior evidence, longitudinal data are needed to determine whether aesthetic orientation and comparison behaviors precede changes in body satisfaction, or whether dissatisfaction itself increases susceptibility to social comparison.

Second, although the AEST scale is aimed at capturing adolescents' emphasis on physical appearance, some items, especially those reflecting concerns about specific body parts or contemplating cosmetic surgery, may overlap conceptually with body dissatisfaction. This partial overlap could blur the interpretive boundaries between valuing physical aesthetics and experiencing negative self-appraisal, potentially inflating associations with the dependent variable. Although internal consistency was strong and the factor structure coherent, future iterations of the scale should seek to better isolate aesthetic orientation as an attitudinal dimension, distinct from dissatisfaction or emotional distress.

Third, while the FIT scale was designed to assess the frequency of appearance-based comparisons with fitness influencers, it did not capture the emotional valence or direction (upward or downward) associated with these comparisons. This was a deliberate choice, as the primary objective was to measure the behavioral dimension rather than affective consequences. Nevertheless, emotional responses such as inspiration, envy, or discouragement are central to the psychological processes underlying social comparison. Despite the scale's robust psychometric properties (KMO = 0.757; explained variance = 85.92%; item loadings > 0.91), future iterations could incorporate an affective subdimension to better reflect the complexity of comparison dynamics and their impact on body image.

Fourth, the exclusive focus on fitness influencers represents only one segment of a broader influencer ecosystem. Adolescents interact with various types of influencers, such as those focused on beauty, fashion, lifestyle, or entertainment, who may promote different ideals of appearance and invite distinct forms of comparison. Comparative research across influencer categories can clarify whether different content types elicit unique patterns of cognitive, emotional, or behavioral responses.

Fifth, the model did not account for the range of psychosocial variables that likely influenced the observed associations. Factors such as self-esteem, peer dynamics, family communication, and dispositional traits were not included, yet they may have moderated or mediated the effects of media exposure on body satisfaction. Future research could significantly enhance the explanatory model by incorporating psychosocial variables, such as self-esteem, family dynamics, and peer influence. These factors could offer insights into how adolescents' personal and social contexts interact with social media platforms and influence their body satisfaction.

Finally, although the sample included participants from various regions of Spain, broader cultural differences in beauty norms, media consumption patterns, and gender role expectations may constrain the generalizability of the findings. Cross-national studies comparing adolescents from diverse media and cultural environments would contribute to identifying both universal and culture-specific pathways that link social comparison to body image outcomes.

6. Conclusions

This analysis offers a theoretically grounded and informed contribution to the current debate on adolescents' body image. Specifically, we address how adolescents' emphasis on physical aesthetics interacts with appearance-based comparisons involving fit influencers to shape their satisfaction with their bodies. Drawing from social comparison theory and building upon emerging empirical evidence, we articulated and tested a conceptual framework that captured the mediated, developmental, and gendered dimensions of this process.

Our findings illuminate a mechanism by which aesthetic orientation is not inherently problematic but can become a source of dissatisfaction when filtered through idealized portrayals circulated by digital influencers. This means that this research did not aim at reducing adolescent body image to a single explanatory variable. Rather, it identifies a specific pattern—namely, the mediating role of appearance-based comparison—that helps clarify how internal and external factors converge in self-evaluative processes during adolescence.

Importantly, this study advances the literature by extending knowledge to the Spanish adolescent context, where research on media influence and body image remains comparatively limited despite the increasing visibility of influencer culture and related aesthetic pressures. In doing so, we underscore the necessity of contextually grounded inquiries that consider national media ecologies, social norms, and cultural expectations. Through this lens, our work refines the field's understanding of how digital comparisons shape how adolescents interpret and evaluate their bodies.

Thus, our study invites a departure from overly broad conceptions of social media risk toward a sharper, more empirically anchored framework for understanding aesthetic influence. We urge scholars and practitioners to consider how aesthetic content circulates through culturally situated infrastructure, interacts with adolescent meaning-making, and becomes legible within their evolving sense of self. This recalibration enables a shift toward inquiry that is methodologically more granular and ethically attuned to the lived

realities and cognitive capacities of youth navigating highly aestheticized social media ecosystems.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study can be made available upon request from the corresponding author.

Ethics Statement

The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Ethics Committee of the university conducting this research (Universidad Internacional de la Rioja). All participants provided informed consent before taking part in the study (Code PI: 066/2023).

Disclosure

This study presents the findings of the research project "Between Healthiness and the Cult of Physique: The Impact of Fitfluencers' Content on Adolescents' Body Care," known as TEEN_ONFIT.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Author Contributions

Beatriz Feijoo has carried out the funding acquisition, the methodology, the validation, the formal analysis, the investigation, the resources, and the data curation. Arantxa Vizcaíno-Verdú has developed the theoretical framework and the writing—original draft preparation. Beatriz Feijoo and Arantxa Vizcaíno-Verdú carried out the discussion and conclusions and have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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