

The Impact of Social Media Aesthetic Capital on Adolescent Body Image: Micro-Influencer and Expert Perspectives on Social Success and Digital Pressures

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Abstract

Social media amplify beauty standards that shape adolescent body image and weight-related behaviors. This study investigates the role of aesthetic capital in perceived body-related social success and weight-loss behaviors among Spanish adolescents, with a focus on the mediating effect of social media pressure. Using a mixed-methods approach, we integrate survey data from 1,082 adolescents (12–17 years old) with qualitative insights from fitness micro-influencers and healthcare professionals. Quantitative findings indicate that adolescents associate toned bodies with greater social advantages, and perceived social media pressure significantly predicts engagement in weight-control actions. Interviews with micro-influencers reveal the tension between content monetization and the reinforcement of idealized body standards, while healthcare professionals highlight the psychological toll of aesthetic comparison, linking it to anxiety, body dissatisfaction, and extreme dietary practices. These findings suggest that aesthetic capital functions as a mechanism of social success and exclusion in digital spaces, reinforcing hierarchies of desirability and status.

Keywords: beauty capital, body image, adolescents, weight loss, mental health

Public Policy Relevance Statement

Social media platforms reward appearance with visibility, turning physical attractiveness into a form of aesthetic capital that shapes adolescents' understanding of success, belonging, and self-worth. This study shows that when young audiences buy into this logic, they experience heightened aesthetic pressure and are more likely to engage in harmful weight-control behavior. These dynamics call for cross-sector interventions that confront the platformed economy of appearance and equip new-generation cohorts with the skills to critically navigate social media aesthetics.

Introduction

Social media have redefined body image formation, particularly among adolescents who engage in representations of a normative or aesthetic body. This image refers to a body that aligns with culturally reinforced ideals, typically characterized by thinness, muscle definition, symmetry, youthfulness, and other traits (Siebers, 2000). Its specific attributes vary depending on social and cultural contexts and are often shaped by dominant beauty standards and peer-driven validation mechanisms (Coffey, 2017). Unlike traditional media, digital platforms enable an interactive environment in which self-image is shaped by dominant narratives and algorithmic curation (Vandenbosch et al., 2022). Within this ecosystem, social validation increasingly depends on adherence to aesthetic norms, fueling concerns about its effects on younger users' physical and mental well-being.

Research has linked social media to intensified social comparison (Reer et al., 2019) and self-objectification (Fox & Vendemia, 2016), both of which are associated with greater body dissatisfaction and the adoption of weight-control behaviors in adolescence (Boursier et al., 2020). However, the pathways through which body ideals translate into social leverage and behavioral patterns remain underexplored. Scholars suggest that perceived aesthetic pressure may mediate this process (Gong, 2023; Rice, 2022), accelerating the internalization of beauty standards and their enactment in daily life. This aligns with the concept of aesthetic capital, where physical appearance functions as a social resource influencing status and opportunities.

While prior research has examined the influence of social media figures on adolescents' eating behaviors and body perceptions (Vanwesenbeeck et al., 2024; Vizcaíno-Verdú et al., 2024), further analysis is needed to understand how body hierarchies are reproduced through routine digital practice. Within this framework, micro-influencers constitute a significant legitimizing force. Boerman (2020) proposed a follower-based threshold—under 10,000 followers—as a functional criterion for such research. However, this metric alone does not account for the socio-cultural dynamics that sustain their

influence. Drawing on the work of digital anthropologists such as Marwick (2013) and Abidin (2016), we conceptualize micro-influencers as culturally embedded actors whose authority emerges from aesthetic labor, affective proximity, and algorithmic fluency. Their ability to render normative body ideals socially actionable and emotionally resonant positions them as key agents in the everyday normalization of beauty standards, especially during adolescence. Likewise, integrating perspectives from healthcare professionals is essential to capture the emotional and behavioral responses triggered by digital aesthetic pressures as well as their broader clinical ramifications.

This study examines how the perception of an aesthetically desirable body, characterized by thinness and muscle toning, shapes adolescents' expectations of social success and influences their weight-control strategies, focusing on the mediating role of social media. In particular, we investigate the effects of upward, appearance-based social comparisons fostered by idealized representations online, which research has linked to internalized aesthetic pressure and harmful behaviors during adolescence (Reer et al., 2019; Boursier et al., 2020).

Drawing on Festinger's (1954) foundational theory of social comparison, which posits that individuals assess themselves by comparing their appearance, abilities, or status to others, especially in contexts lacking objective standards, we consider how curated influencer images on social media amplify these tendencies. While the theory distinguishes between upward and downward comparisons with varying psychological outcomes, our focus is on upward comparisons that intensify perceived inadequacy in relation to digitally beauty standards. Combining a quantitative analysis of these dynamics with qualitative insights from key digital actors, such as health professionals and fitness-oriented micro-influencers, this research deepens the interplay between social success, body image ideals, and adolescent behavior.

The Impact of Aesthetic Capital, Beauty Standards, and Global Adolescents Body Image

Aesthetic capital has emerged as a significant form of symbolic capital in contemporary societies (Yin & Pryor, 2012), in which physical appearance shapes social positioning, economic opportunities, and interpersonal relationships (Anderson et al., 2010). Adolescence, as a critical developmental stage, remains particularly vulnerable to the internalization of dominant beauty standards, which in turn influences identity formation and self-esteem (Johnston & Foster, 2025).

The concept of aesthetic capital rests on the premise that physically attractive attributes generate social and economic advantages, thereby structuring prestigious hierarchies and exclusion mechanisms (Anderson et al., 2010). In this context, the emergence of a beauty regime has intensified the commodification of the body, particularly among young individuals who experience increasing pressure to adopt beautification practices as a prerequisite for social acceptance (Johnston & Foster, 2025). This phenomenon exacerbates gender, ethnic, and social class inequalities, as prevailing aesthetic norms tend to privilege Eurocentric features and thin body types, while marginalizing those who do not conform to these ideals (Kuipers, 2015).

Constant exposure to unattainable beauty standards, particularly through social media and mass communication, has been identified as a key factor in the development of body image disorders among adolescents (Johnston & Foster, 2025). Some studies have demonstrated that the pressure to conform to these aesthetic ideals fosters anxiety, depression, and eating disorders, further intensifying the vulnerabilities inherent in this life stage (Hanquinet et al., 2014). Moreover, the standardization of beauty has been strategically instrumentalized as a form of predatory capital that maximizes profit at the expense of adolescent well-being by promoting cosmetic products, plastic surgery, and digital filters that perpetuate body dissatisfaction (Torrás-Gómez et al., 2024). The impact of aesthetic capital extends beyond psychological and emotional dimensions, affecting adolescents' physical activity and overall well-being. Scholars have identified a correlation between the internalization of sociocultural

attractiveness standards and engagement in sports, although with significant gender disparities.

Whereas the pressure to achieve thinness discourages physical activity among female adolescents, the idealization of a muscular physique often drives male adolescents toward extreme exercise regimens (Mieziene et al., 2014; Toselli et al., 2023).

From a sociological perspective, aesthetic capital operates as a mechanism of social stratification that reinforces structural inequality. Schneickert et al. (2020) argued that beauty perception not only influences economic and relational opportunities, but also intersects with cultural and social capital, thereby generating a form of discrimination based on physical appearance. Their analysis suggested that aesthetic valuation determines access to social and economic resources, reinforcing the exclusion of individuals who deviate from the dominant beauty canons. Beauty construction during adolescence does not constitute a unidirectional process imposed by the media but rather involves negotiation and reinterpretation by young individuals themselves. Hanquinet et al. (2014) evidenced that beauty perceptions evolve over time, shaping new forms of cultural capital that challenge traditional aesthetic hegemony. Similarly, some adolescents have begun to use digital platforms as spaces of resistance, fostering alternative narratives that redefine conventional beauty standards (Kuipers, 2015).

Concepts of beauty are far from homogeneous globally, exhibiting substantial cultural variation. In non-Western contexts, adolescent body image perceptions are shaped by a dynamic interplay between local traditions and external influences. For instance, in the Ankole society in Uganda, beauty ideals fluctuate between traditional standards and contemporary influences driven by the globalization of Western aesthetics (Kaziga et al., 2021). In Japan, Westernization has significantly reshaped adolescent body image, with media-driven narratives reinforcing thinness and fair skin as markers of status and success (Nielson et al., 2013). Similarly, in India, exposure to K-pop beauty standards has

intensified body dissatisfaction, leading adolescents to internalize extreme thinness and flawless skin as aspirational ideals (Narisha-Buhphang, 2024).

In Spain, where the present study is framed, the impact of aesthetic capital on adolescents is mediated by multiple sociocultural factors. Spanish beauty ideals remain deeply rooted in a cultural tradition that has historically valorized specific physical traits associated with hegemonic femininity and masculinity (Ruiz-Carot et al., 2019). As a result, aesthetic pressures manifest differently across genders, with an emphasis on thinness and facial perfection for young women and muscularity and physical strength for young men (Conesa-Agüera et al., 2019). The advertising and cosmetics industries further reinforce these ideals, perpetuating the notion that social acceptance and success are contingent upon adherence to prevailing aesthetic standards.

Beyond gender differences, physical attractiveness plays a central role in adolescent identity construction, shaping social interactions and perceptions of self-worth. Francisco et al. (2015) found that attractiveness correlates strongly with popularity, social integration, and self-esteem among Spanish youth. For Latin American adolescents residing in Spain, these beauty standards intersect with ethnic and class-based discrimination, heightening their vulnerability within peer groups (Zavala, 2018). Exposure to dominant aesthetic ideals fosters exclusionary processes and pressures many migrant adolescents to modify their appearance to align with Western beauty norms. This dynamic is further intensified by the influence of digital social networking sites, which serve as primary spaces where these beauty standards are reinforced and perpetuated.

Social Media, Body Image, and Life Success

The impact of social media on adolescent self-image and behavior must be understood in light of its pervasive and habitual usage. In Spain, 94.7% of individuals aged 10 to 15 report regular access to the internet, and 70.6% of children and adolescents go online frequently, primarily through mobile devices, a figure that has increased by 1.1 percentage points from the previous year (ONTSI, 2024).

According to *DataReportal* (We Are Social, 2025), there are over 39.7 million active social media users in the country, representing approximately 82.9% of its total population. These figures are corroborated by IABSpain, whose *Social Media Report* (2025) indicates that 86% of individuals aged 12-74 years regularly engage with social media platforms. Among younger users, particularly those between 12 and 17 years old, social media serves diverse functions. The same report highlights that this Alpha cohort primarily uses these platforms for entertainment (88%), following trends (28%), and meeting new people (25%). In particular, they display heightened engagement with influencer content across Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, with an average daily usage of 1 hour and 16 minutes.

Against this backdrop of high-frequency social media use among adolescents in Spain, digital platforms function as central spaces for the circulation of idealized body representations, shaping adolescents' sense of self and perceived social value (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Adolescent users tend to evaluate their physical appearance based on the standards they observe online, which can lead to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors (Spies-Shapiro & Margolin, 2014; Qi & Cui, 2018; Song et al., 2022). Continuous engagement with these images and narratives reinforces the notion that certain body types are more desirable and successful, thereby establishing an unrealistic model that disproportionately affects young individuals (Feijoo & Vizcaíno-Verdú, 2024).

The internalization of idealized aesthetic models—as captured by instruments such as the SATAQ-4R (Schaefer et al., 2017)—fosters the pursuit of a body image that conforms to dominant cultural standards, driving practices such as excessive use of digital filters, body modification, and cosmetic surgery (de Lenne et al., 2018; McFadden, 2009). Social pressure to meet these standards is particularly intense among adolescents and young women (Chin-Evans, 2003), who are frequently exposed to content that portrays extreme thinness and well-defined musculature as ideals of attractiveness (Fanjul-Peyró et al., 2019). These factors have been linked to the development of eating disorders and body dysmorphia—a condition characterized by a distorted perception of one's

appearance (Losorelli et al., 2025)—which can have long-term consequences for psychological and mental well-being (Qi & Cui, 2018).

Furthermore, continuous exposure to success narratives on social media—often presented through images of professional achievements, aspirational lifestyles, and idealized personal relationships—can foster feelings of inadequacy and negative self-comparison among users (Do, 2024). In a digital landscape where adolescents construct their identities based on external validation, the gap between their real lives and the idealized versions they encounter online—particularly in relation to influencers (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Aguaded, 2020)—can heighten anxiety, reinforce perceptions of failure, and intensify feelings of social isolation (Spies-Shapiro & Margolin, 2014). This issue is particularly evident on platforms where engagement with edited and curated images perpetuates an unattainable standard of perfection (de Lenne et al., 2018). Moreover, the digital environment fosters a meritocratic culture in which personal value is measured by the accumulation of likes and comments, reinforcing the belief that social recognition defines self-worth (de Lenne et al., 2018). These dynamics strengthen the perception that physical appearance and social media popularity are primary determinants of social success, contributing to a fragile identity highly dependent on external validation (Devos et al., 2025). As a result, adolescents' self-esteem becomes increasingly contingent on digital interactions, making them more vulnerable to rejection or the perception that they are not attractive—and therefore not successful—enough in life.

Research has challenged the association between dominant aesthetic capital and success, highlighting its negative impact on adolescent mental health. For instance, Devos et al. (2025), in a longitudinal study on the projection of idealized lives, found that high social media exposure correlates with increased depressive symptoms, heightened anxiety, and lower self-esteem. The persistent comparison with unrealistic body standards, coupled with the pressure to maintain a socially acceptable

digital image, can create a cycle of personal dissatisfaction (Qi & Cui, 2018) and a pervasive sense of failure.

Objectives and Research Questions

This study explores how the perception of an aesthetically desirable body influences adolescents' social opportunities and engagement in weight-loss behaviors. Specifically, it examines the mediating role of social media pressure in shaping these relationships. To achieve a deeper understanding, this research integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative component assesses the extent to which social media-driven aesthetic norms impact adolescents' body image-related behaviors, while the qualitative analysis explores two critical perspectives: (1) how fitness-oriented micro-influencers perceive and reinforce adolescent body standards through social media content, and (2) how healthcare professionals evaluate the emotional and behavioral effects of these pressures. The research questions guiding this study are:

- RQ1: To what extent does the perception that a toned body provides greater social and personal opportunities influence the adoption of weight-loss behaviors in adolescents? How does social media mediate this relationship?
- RQ2: How do fitness-oriented micro-influencers perceive and contribute to the shaping of adolescent body standards on social media?
- RQ3: What emotional and behavioral effects do healthcare professionals identify as consequences of social media-driven body image pressure on adolescents?

Methodology

To explore the relationship between social media pressure, body image, and weight-loss behaviors in adolescents, we adopted a mixed-method approach. The study was conducted in two phases: (1) A structured online questionnaire was used to collect data on adolescents' perceptions, beliefs, and self-reported behaviors related to body image, social validation, and the influence of social

media. This method offered high suitability for large-scale, anonymous data collection among adolescents and enabled the assessment of internalized attitudes and subjective experiences. The questionnaire format provided participants with a private space to reflect on sensitive topics such as aesthetic pressure and weight-loss behaviors, which reduced potential discomfort and enhanced the honesty of their responses; (2) Qualitative in-depth interviews with healthcare professionals and fitness-oriented micro-influencers to contextualize the statistical findings and provide deeper insights into the formation of adolescent body image.

A total of 1,082 Spanish adolescents aged 12 to 17 years ($M = 14.5$ years; 49.6% boys, 50.4% girls) participated in the study. We employed a multistage stratified sampling approach, ensuring proportional representation across four aggregated geographical regions, following the NUTS (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics) classification established by the European Union (Eurostat, 2021). Additionally, stratification was based on family socioeconomic status (low, medium, and high). The final sample was selected using a cross-quota method, ensuring balanced gender and age distributions. Participants were recruited through a panel service. For the qualitative phase, we conducted 6 in-depth interviews with experts from different fields, selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diversity of perspectives: (a) Healthcare specialists ($n=2$): Experts in nutrition and well-being, assessing the effects of exposure to aesthetic content on adolescents' mental health, eating habits, and physical activity; (b) Fitness micro-influencers ($n=4$): Content creators specializing in fitness and nutrition (1,000-100,000 followers), whose influence in spreading aesthetic trends and consumption habits is significant.

We focused on the contributions of healthcare professionals, whose expertise provided critical insights into the psychological and behavioral effects of aesthetic pressures on adolescents. Additionally, we analyzed the perspectives of fitness micro-influencers because of their influence in shaping body

image ideals on social media. The university's Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for the study, and the legal guardians of all participants provided informed consent (Code PI:066/2023).

Quantitative Measures and Analysis

In the first stage, participants provided demographic details such as age and gender. They then completed a series of validated survey instruments to measure the key constructs under analysis.

To measure the key constructs, we employed a set of structured items inspired by previously validated instruments and adapted to the adolescent population. The perceived social advantages of having a toned body (ADV) were assessed using a single item: "Do you believe that having a toned body provides more advantages in life?" answered on a 4-point ordinal scale (1 = No advantages to 4 = Many advantages), following the conceptual framework proposed by Fanjul-Peyró et al. (2019). We considered this option appropriate for ensuring brevity and avoiding questionnaire fatigue among younger respondents.

Perceived body pressure on social media (SMP) was measured using a six-item scale adapted from Schaefer et al. (2017), which covers both thinness-oriented and muscularity-oriented pressures. Respondents indicated their agreement with statements such as "Social media pressures me to improve my appearance" or "I feel pressured by social media to be more muscular," using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 4 = Strongly agree). This scale showed excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .946$). To assess construct validity, we conducted a Principal Components Analysis (PCA) using varimax rotation. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was excellent (KMO = .923), and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2(15) = 4879.80, p < .001$), indicating suitability for the factor analysis. A single component was extracted, which explained 78.73% of the total variance. All item loadings exceeded .86, confirming the scale's unidimensional structure and strong convergent validity.

To address weight-loss actions (WLA), participants were asked whether they had engaged in any of the following behaviors in the past year: fasting, eating very little, using meal replacements, skipping meals, or taking dietary supplements. Each item was answered dichotomously (0 = No, 1 = Yes), and for the mediation analysis, responses were combined into a composite index ranging from 0 to 4, reflecting the number of strategies endorsed by the participants. This approach was inspired by previous measures used in adolescent health research (Song et al., 2022; Toselli et al., 2023) and allowed us to quantify the intensity of engagement in weight-control behaviors while maintaining ethical considerations regarding questionnaire content for adolescents. Table 1 provides an overview of the constructs, variables, and measurement instruments. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the distribution of responses for perceived social advantages of a toned body, social media pressure, and weight-related perceptions.

[Table 1]

Qualitative Data Collection and Thematic Coding

To guide the interviews, we developed two semi-structured protocols: (1) interviews with health professionals, which focused on their perceptions of social media and micro-influencer fitness and nutritional content impact on adolescent behavior; and (2) interviews with micro-influencers, in which we explored their role in content creation, their strategies for audience engagement, and their views on how their messages influence followers' habits. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility and enabled a deeper exploration of emerging themes. In Appendix I, we present the specific questions that were asked to each profile. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and manually coded through thematic analysis to ensure a systematic review and categorization of the key insights.

Regarding the interview processing, we applied a structured analysis based on the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2024). The initial coding followed an open approach, identifying meaning units within the narratives. Subsequently, axial

coding facilitated the categorization of these units, grouping information fragments into emerging categories related to the construction of bodily standards, perception of social success based on appearance, and emotional and behavioral effects on adolescents. This process structured both data and interpretations in alignment with research questions 2 and 3. The resulting thematic analysis revealed recurring patterns in participants' narratives. These patterns were organized into core themes that structured the findings. We paid particular attention to the co-occurrence of key concepts in the narratives of micro-influencers and healthcare professionals to better understand the pressure that social media may exert on adolescents' perceived body image.

Results

RQ1: To What Extent Does the Perception that a Toned Body Provides Greater Social and Personal Opportunities Influence the Adoption of Weight-Loss Behaviors in Adolescents? How Does Social Media Mediate this Relationship?

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for perceived social advantages of a toned body (ADV) and social media pressure (SMP). Adolescents reported a moderate perception of social advantages linked to a toned body (ADV1; $M = 2.47$, $SD = .843$). The mean values for social media pressure (SMP) were low to moderate, with the highest pressure associated with improving overall appearance (SMP3; $M = 2.13$, $SD = .976$), followed by appearing thinner (SMP2; $M = 2.06$, $SD = .965$) and looking fitter (SMP1; $M = 2.01$, $SD = .926$). Pressure related to reducing body fat (SMP4; $M = 1.93$, $SD = .928$), increasing muscle mass (SMP5; $M = 1.89$, $SD = .864$), and muscle definition (SMP6; $M = 1.88$, $SD = .858$) was lower. These results suggest that adolescents experience moderate aesthetic pressure on social media, with a greater focus on general appearance and thinness rather than muscle development.

[Table 2]

Regarding weight loss actions (WLA), a significant observation was that 50% of participants opted not to respond, suggesting that weight-related behaviors may be a sensitive topic among

adolescents. Among respondents, the most commonly reported behaviors included eating very little (20.4%) and skipping meals (16.5%), followed by taking dietary supplements (7.3%), fasting (6.1%), and using meal replacements (2.3%).

Mediation Analysis

To determine whether perceived social advantages of a toned body (ADV) influence weight-loss behaviors (WLA) through social media pressure (SMP), we conducted a mediation analysis using Model 4 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2022). This method estimates indirect effects, determining whether the mediating variable (M) explains part of the relationship between the independent variable (X) and dependent variable (Y). The mediation model included ADV as the independent variable (X), SMP as the mediator (M), and WLA as the dependent variable (Y). Weight-control behaviors were operationalized as a composite measure including fasting, skipping meals, eating very little, and using meal replacements or supplements. A bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples was employed to estimate confidence intervals for the indirect effects. Mediation was considered statistically significant if the bias-corrected 95% confidence interval (CI) for the indirect effect did not include zero. Standardized coefficients (β) were used to evaluate the strength of associations.

The results showed that ADV significantly predicted SMP ($\beta = .25, p < .001$). In turn, SMP significantly predicted WLA ($\beta = .18, p < .001$). The indirect effect of ADV on WLA through SMP was statistically significant ($\beta = .0433, 95\% \text{ CI } [.035, .077]$), confirming mediation. The direct effect of ADV on WLA remained significant but was reduced ($\beta = .08, p = .0006$), indicating partial mediation. Age and gender were included as covariates to control for potential confounding factors. Age was significantly associated with SMP ($\beta = .03, p = .0235$) and WLA ($\beta = .04, p = .0006$), suggesting that older adolescents experience greater social media pressure and are more likely to engage in weight-loss behaviors. Gender significantly predicted SMP ($\beta = .15, p = .0024$), with girls reporting higher perceived pressure than boys. However, gender did not significantly predict WLA ($\beta = .04, p = .2897$), indicating that the relationship

between social media pressure and weight-related behaviors is not solely attributable to gender (Figure 1).

[Figure 1]

RQ2: How Do Fitness-Oriented Micro-Influencers Perceive and Contribute to the Shaping of Adolescent Body Standards on Social Media?

To examine how fitness and nutrition micro-influencers perceive their role in shaping adolescent body standards, we analyzed their reflections on the interplay between physical appearance, social validation, and professional legitimacy. The findings reveal that micro-influencers construct and reinforce body ideals through their digital presence, with their own body image remaining central to their professional identity. Moreover, their perception of what defines a desirable body has evolved over time, reflecting broader shifts in aesthetic norms and influencing both their content and younger audiences' expectations. While many attempt to balance commercial pressures with ethical responsibility, they acknowledge the challenges posed by algorithmic incentives and audience demands.

Micro-influencers acknowledged that body ideals have shifted in recent years, moving away from extreme thinness toward muscular and toned physiques. While they recognized this as an expansion of socially accepted body images, they also expressed concerns that the new standard remains highly unattainable for most adolescents:

Nowadays, I think the 'fitness model' look is becoming more dominant, rather than the super-thin 'classic model's' look. Toned, strong, and fit, men and women are taking over... I fit that profile. (I4_fit_influencer).

Micro-influencers described their physical appearance as central to their professional legitimacy, with their body composition functioning as both a form of branding and a qualification for their work. Beyond aesthetic validation, they emphasized that maintaining a specific image reflects discipline, self-control, and perseverance, reinforcing the idea that physical appearance is a marker of personal and professional credibility. This dynamic transforms their physical appearance into a professional credential

on social media platforms, solidifying the link between aesthetic capital and social/economic success. As a result, the impact of their content extends beyond inspiring changes in their audience's habits; it also reinforces the perception that achieving professional recognition and opportunities depends on aligning with dominant beauty standards. Several interviewees explicitly stated that their career prospects were closely tied to their physical appearance, underscoring the extent to which aesthetic capital continues to shape professional legitimacy and access to opportunities:

I have added pressure to my profession, which is a nutritionist. In other words, my professionalism is often judged based on my physical appearance—or at least that is what many people think. They assume that I must have good knowledge if I have a physique that meets society's standards. (I1_fit_influencer).

Although micro-influencers claimed they strive to promote realistic and healthy body images, they acknowledged that social media platforms systematically reinforce prevailing body ideals, often counteracting their efforts. The logic of engagement prioritizes content in which bodily aesthetics generate higher interaction, particularly in fitness and nutrition posts, conditioning the way influencers present health-related topics. As a result, even those who attempt to distance themselves from narratives that promote body dissatisfaction find themselves constrained by algorithmic structures that incentivize content reinforcing normative body ideals, particularly thin and toned physiques. One interviewee stated:

If I trained more often in a crop top or something like that... instead of wearing a looser shirt. I know I would get more engagement because society rewards it, but I do not want to fall into that. Because I am like, 'I do not want my content to be validated because of my physique'. (I1_fit_influencer).

Micro-influencers expressed concerns about their content being misinterpreted by adolescents, particularly regarding weight-control behaviors. While some emphasized their commitment to educating audiences on nutrition and exercise holistically, they acknowledged that certain messages may lead to extreme and harmful behaviors among younger followers:

I always say what a red flag is. I can point it out. I can say: watch out for hypervigilance around food. I mean, be careful about how we talk when we are around a teenager or a child... Language is very important for building healthy relationships with food. (I2_fit_influencer)

Content creators also expressed concerns that many young individuals lack the knowledge required to accurately interpret the training or dietary recommendations presented in their content. This gap in understanding is particularly concerning, as it may lead to unhealthy or risky practices. For instance:

I always promote keeping things natural. When I talk to teenagers or young people... they have a very vague idea of what doping substances really are in their entirety because there are a thousand types for a thousand different things. They might know it is bad for their health, but they do not fully grasp how serious it can be. (I1_fit_influencer)

The discourse on the impact of fitness- and nutrition-related content on social media among adolescents increasingly highlights an awareness that, while affirming, ultimately leads to the assimilation of unrealistic body standards. Micro-influencers have expressed concerns about body dysmorphia resulting from the uncontrolled overconsumption of non-professional content, as well as physical and mental health disorders linked to dissatisfaction with body types shaped by singular, non-generalizable conditions. They also noted the role of confirmation bias, reinforced by the sheer variety of body ideals projected through these platforms. Some interviewees explained this as follows:

I think that what is being promoted the most is body dysmorphia. It seems that it is the most common disorder among teenagers. I find it really sad. When I first started training, the internet was just taking off, and information trickled slowly. There were very few influences, and precisely because there were so few, they were usually of high quality. You would get your information from just a handful of sources and think, 'Oh, okay, so this is how it is'. But I think now there is such an overwhelming amount of content from every random person out there—'Veganism is the best', 'High-intensity training is the way to go', 'CrossFit is the ultimate method'. (I3_fit_influencer)

Micro-influencers play a mediating role in shaping adolescent perceptions of contemporary body standards, balancing professional incentives with ethical concerns. They acknowledged that idealized body images increasingly center on muscularity and toning, yet remain largely unattainable for

adolescents. While they attempt to promote health-conscious messages and holistic well-being, algorithmic logic and professional pressures to maximize engagement compel them to project habits that may be misinterpreted, particularly given the unregulated, uninformed, and biased nature of much online content. As a result, a conflict emerges between evidence-based health information advocating physical and mental safety and content that, through widespread dissemination and information overload, reinforces unrealistic aesthetic ideals. This creates a complex dynamic where influencers both educate and inadvertently contribute to the internalization of body ideals as markers of success and self-worth.

RQ3: What Emotional and Behavioral Effects Do Healthcare Professionals Identify as Consequences of Social Media-Driven Body Image Pressure on Adolescents?

Healthcare professionals highlighted that sustained exposure to unattainable body ideals on social media has significant repercussions on adolescents' mental and physical health. Psychological experts emphasized that constant comparison with idealized images leads to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and in some cases, eating disorders.

A lot of obsession. Much importance is placed on what others think of them. A lot of rigidity too. There is a lot of perfectionism, of course. But I would also say that, taken to the extreme, it could even lead to depression, stemming from that obsession and that pursuit. I think anxiety could also come into play. That is the most common outcome.

(I2_healthcare_professional)

Finally, what they end up doing is destroying their self-esteem because every time they try and fail, it chips away at their confidence. It increases their insecurity, their discomfort, their anxiety, and even depressive symptoms.

(I1_healthcare_professional).

Experts emphasized that social media is not the sole source of body image pressures. Rather, broader societal and interpersonal influences, including family and peer groups, contribute significantly to adolescents' internalization of beauty standards.

It is a mix of different environments. I think, first and foremost, that family stands out, and second, the social aspect. Because at the end of the day, if you are already being told at home that you need to have a certain body, that you have to go on diets, that you have to... (I2_healthcare_professional)

Beyond family influence, peer dynamics and social media content further reinforce body standards. One specialist highlighted that adolescents seek validation not only within their immediate social circles but also through social media, using it as a barometer of acceptance:

Obviously, family plays a big role. But considering how teenagers are acting nowadays, I think what they see on social media—between YouTubers and influencers—is what influences them the most. (I1_healthcare_professional)

Healthcare specialists identified three prevalent risk behaviors among adolescents influenced by body image pressures: (1) unsupervised restrictive dieting, (2) the use of unregulated supplements, and (3) excessive exercise routines. As one of the professionals pointed out:

They look on YouTube and Instagram for accounts that show them workout routines or diets that supposedly work wonders and deliver miraculous results. However, this is not the case. Teenagers put themselves at risk and often end up making their symptoms even worse. (I1_healthcare_professional)

The adoption of these habits can lead to nutritional deficiencies and long-term health complications, including hormonal imbalances, eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, muscle dysmorphia, and body dysmorphic disorder. Another significant emotional consequence is the intensified self-imposed pressure, which can result in adolescent isolation. Young individuals internalize consumption patterns that promote unrealistic goals; when they fail to attain them, they often experience frustration and feelings of failure. A healthcare professional explained:

The consequences end up being more irritability, leading to arguments and conflicts with parents and friends. More retreating into social media, which in turn creates a vicious cycle (I1_healthcare_professional).

This perception can negatively impact academic performance, social interactions, and overall emotional well-being, sometimes leading adolescents to avoid situations where they feel judged. Healthcare professionals highlighted the dual role of influencers—while some promote positive body

messages, others reinforce highly curated and unrealistic beauty ideals, often driven by sponsorship obligations.

Influencers try to say that what they post is not their real life, that there are more factors at play... But in the end, they only post what they are paid for and what sponsors want. If teenagers cannot tell the difference between what is real and what is not, the influencer ends up having a lot of influence. (I1_healthcare_professional)

To counteract these negative effects, healthcare professionals emphasized the importance of early intervention through digital literacy and mental health education. They recommended increased family and school involvement in guiding adolescents toward conscious media consumption and expert-led school programs promoting healthy habits.

I think it is important for schools to implement activities that promote critical thinking among teenagers. In theory, the minimum age at which Instagram is used is 16. But children as young as 8, 9, or 10 are being allowed to join because parents are bored and just hand them a phone: 'Here you go, sweetheart, keep yourself entertained'. The kind of content they are exposed to can be really harmful, turning them into hyper-demanding teenagers who are overly critical of themselves and end up frustrated because they cannot reach the standards that society—through social media in this case—imposes on them. (I1_healthcare_professional)

One effective strategy reported by healthcare professionals is the implementation of critical analysis exercises in clinical practice, where adolescents are encouraged to evaluate online content rather than passively consume it.

We work with teenagers to encourage them to question what they see. We ask them to analyze whether the content is realistic, how it makes them feel—good or bad—and whether the influencer is promoting a product or simply sharing their daily life. It is about giving them the tools to avoid taking everything they see as absolute truth. (I1_healthcare_professional)

Despite growing awareness, institutional efforts to mitigate the negative effects of social media on adolescent body image remain insufficient. Healthcare professionals emphasized that while digital literacy training is being introduced in clinical practice to help adolescents navigate social media critically, such measures are not yet widespread or adequately integrated into prevention strategies.

Experts expressed concern that most available support remains palliative rather than preventive, with interventions often occurring only at later stages, once issues such as body dissatisfaction or mental health struggles have already developed. Although existing policies and regulations address media consumption, digital exposure, and adolescent well-being, they have yet to produce effective large-scale solutions. Healthcare professionals warn that without a proactive approach emphasizing early education and systemic reform, adolescents will continue to face the reinforcement of unattainable body ideals and social pressures in digital spaces.

Schools are not providing the education they should be. They are just now starting to incorporate emotional education, but for many years, the focus has been purely academic. As a result, teenagers—and their parents, who were also educated in this way—struggle to develop and pass on the skills needed for critical digital thinking.

(I2_healthcare_professional)

Experts emphasized the need for a comprehensive, multi-sector approach that includes educational strategies promoting critical digital literacy, regulation of content on digital platforms to prevent misleading and harmful body image messaging and, emotional well-being reinforcement within families and schools to build resilience against social media pressures. As social media continues to evolve and shape adolescent perceptions, healthcare professionals stress that the implementation of preventive strategies, alongside necessary corrective measures, remains critical to safeguarding adolescent well-being.

Discussion

Framed within contemporary discussions on aesthetic capital, our findings introduce three core dimensions: (1) the ways in which aesthetic capital shapes adolescents' motivations to lose weight, (2) the amplification of this capital through social media, and (3) the resulting physical and psychological implications. We underscore aesthetic capital as a critical mechanism of social inclusion and exclusion (Yin & Pryor, 2012), in which physical appearance functions as a symbolic asset that dictates social status and peer acceptance (Anderson et al., 2010). In alignment with Kuipers' (2015) conceptualization of

beauty as a marker of cultural distinction, our results suggest that beauty plays a pivotal role in shaping youth identity, particularly as digital platforms intensify the internalization and reinforcement of aesthetic capital.

Our quantitative analysis confirms that the perceived social advantages of a thin and toned body strongly predict adolescents' adoption of weight-control behaviors, with aesthetic pressure on social media acting as a significant mediator. This aligns with existing literature on the intensification of social comparison and self-objectification in digital environments (Reer et al., 2019; Fox & Vendemia, 2016). Notably, our data illustrate that many adolescents resort to extreme dietary restrictions or fasting to attain an idealized body image, a trend corroborated by healthcare professionals in qualitative interviews. This pressure to conform to aesthetic standards extends beyond adolescents to content creators themselves; fitness micro-influencers acknowledged experiencing the same validation-seeking cycles that they spread within their online communities. This dynamic reinforces the omnipresence of aesthetic capital within digital culture and its reciprocal influence on audiences and content creators.

While gender differences in body image pressures are well-documented, with previous research emphasizing the heightened expectations placed on women to maintain thinness (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016), our mediation analysis did not reveal significant disparities in weight-control behaviors between boys and girls. This suggests that current masculinity ideals—characterized by muscularity and athleticism—generate pressures comparable to those experienced by adolescent girls. These findings are consistent with prior studies indicating that boys navigate aesthetic expectations tied to achieving a lean and muscular physique (Mieziene et al., 2014).

In this context, social media has emerged as a pivotal platform through which these pressures are reinforced and normalized. Although absolute scores for aesthetic pressure may not appear overwhelmingly high, its mediating role in linking body ideals with risky behaviors remains undeniable. Our interviewees explained that algorithms on social media platforms prioritize visually appealing

content, consistently amplifying narratives that equate thinness, tone, and fitness with higher social recognition (Vandenbosch et al., 2022). This aesthetic pressure does not operate in isolation but intersects with broader social and familial influences, intensifying existing processes of body validation (Boursier et al., 2020). Statements from healthcare professionals further supported this claim, emphasizing that mechanical and digital reinforcement accelerates the internalization of unattainable beauty ideals.

The analysis underscores the significant health implications of these compounded influences. Our analysis suggests an increasing normalization of extreme practices—unmonitored restrictive diets, uncontrolled supplementation, and high-risk exercise regimens—that extend beyond body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem to potentially foster disordered eating and negative body image perceptions (Hanquinet et al., 2014; Johnston & Foster, 2025). This issue may cause adolescents to struggle to discern credible health information, leading them to adopt potentially harmful behaviors in pursuit of a popular and idealized physique. The normalization of these behaviors within peer networks, reinforced by messages that equate social approval with a specific body type, activates and perpetuates these “aesthetic echo chambers”. Specifically, educational and familial guidance in nutrition and fitness remains largely absent from discourse, leaving adolescents vulnerable to misinformation and self-directed interventions.

Therefore, we introduce the urgent need for a multidimensional approach to address how adolescents construct aesthetic capital. Digital literacy initiatives, along with accessible expert guidance in mental health and nutrition, should be prioritized to foster critical engagement with body-related content (Spies-Shapiro & Margolin, 2014). Moreover, responsibility must be shared among content creators, digital platforms, and families to mitigate the overrepresentation of appearance-focused messaging. If social success continues to be conflated with aesthetic conformity, evidence-based strategies that promote holistic well-being and body acceptance become imperative. Without these

interventions, the uncritical internalization of restrictive beauty norms will persist, perpetuating the exclusive intervention of health professionals in a critical phase once harm has already occurred.

Practical Implications

A comprehensive strategy is necessary to address the pervasive influence of aesthetic capital on adolescents while promoting health-conscious behaviors guided by professionals. Open discussions with younger generations about the social construction of beauty standards are crucial to fostering awareness of how these ideals shape decision-making and self-perception. Prior research has demonstrated that exposure to unattainable body representations fosters dissatisfaction and self-objectification (Boursier et al., 2020; Coffey, 2017). Thus, promoting self-acceptance and body diversity is essential to counteract dominant digital and aesthetic narratives.

Preventing the normalization of self-directed diet and exercise practices is another critical priority. While social media has democratized access to fitness and nutritional advice, unsupervised guidance increases the risk of disordered eating patterns and physical harm (Johnston & Foster, 2025). Encouraging adolescents to seek professional input from nutritionists, physicians, and certified trainers is imperative to ensure safe and individualized approaches to health and fitness. Developing adolescents' critical media literacy skills is equally essential. Studies emphasize that digital literacy and source assessment skills significantly mitigate the detrimental effects of aesthetic narratives (Vandenbosch et al., 2022; Spies-Shapiro & Margolin, 2014). Without these competencies, adolescents risk internalizing messages that equate social validation with rigid beauty ideals, reinforcing harmful behaviors. Educators, families, and psychologists play a vital role in equipping young people with the tools to critically evaluate online content and prioritize expert consultation in decisions regarding body image and well-being.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that warrant consideration. First, the cross-sectional nature of the quantitative analysis limits the ability to establish causal relationships between perceived social success, social media pressure, and weight-loss behaviors. Future research should adopt longitudinal methodologies to capture temporal changes and clarify the directionality of these associations, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how digital aesthetic capital shapes adolescents' perceptions of body image. Second, the use of self-reported data may introduce social desirability bias, particularly in relation to weight-control behaviors. The reluctance of a considerable proportion of participants (approximately 50%) to disclose specific behaviors indicates the sensitivity of the topic and suggests potential underreporting. In constructing the questionnaire, the design intentionally excluded explicit references to severe disordered behaviors (e.g. vomiting, compulsive exercise) to protect participants who might be undergoing treatment or experiencing emotional vulnerability. Although this ethical safeguard aimed to reduce potential harm, it may have also constrained the range of behaviors reported, omitting clinically significant practices that some adolescents engaged in. While this decision aligned with ethical priorities, it reduced the breadth of the data collected and limited the generalizability of the findings. This trade-off reflects the tension at the heart of adolescent research: balancing the ethical responsibility to safeguard young people with the need to capture the full range of their lived experiences. Developing ethically sensitive instruments that can capture a broader spectrum of behaviors through validated clinical scales, anonymous procedures, or mixed-method approaches remains a key challenge in adolescent research. Third, while the qualitative phase provides valuable insights, it primarily reflects the perspectives of healthcare professionals and fitness/nutrition micro-influencers. This study did not include parents or social educators; whose roles are critical in adolescent development. Prospective approaches should explore how familial and educational contexts interact with digital pressures, shaping adolescents' body-related attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, further

investigations should examine the influence of algorithms in shaping adolescents' exposure to body-related content, considering that engagement-based algorithms prioritize visually appealing, high-interaction posts that may reinforce unrealistic beauty standards.

Conclusions

This research highlights the central role of digital aesthetic capital in shaping adolescents' body image perceptions and engagement in weight-control behaviors. Our mixed-methods approach demonstrates how social media intensifies beauty pressures, prompting adolescents to adopt extreme dietary restrictions and unsupervised fitness regimens in pursuit of an idealized body standard. Healthcare professionals underscore the increasing normalization of these harmful practices, driven by the association between physical appearance and social success. Moreover, our qualitative analysis reveals that fitness micro-influencers, who play a central role in shaping adolescent body ideals, are themselves subject to the pressures they promote, illustrating the self-perpetuating nature of aesthetic capital.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach involving digital platforms, content creators, families, educators, and healthcare professionals. Preventative strategies must focus on digital literacy, fostering self-acceptance, and providing accessible professional guidance before adolescents engage in body-modification practices. Equally critical is the implementation of regulatory measures within social media platforms to moderate content that disproportionately reinforces restrictive beauty norms. Without such interventions, the uncritical internalization of aesthetic standards will persist, leading to long-term physical and psychological consequences for adolescents.

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Appendix I

Interview guideline for healthcare professionals

Topic I: adolescent behavior regarding body care

Topic	Questions
Habit changes	Have you observed recent changes in adolescents' self-care habits related to exercise, nutrition, or body image?
Causes of changes	What factors do you believe have contributed to these changes?
Risk behaviors	Have you identified any risk behaviors related to the pursuit of an aesthetic ideal, such as extreme dieting or unsupervised supplement use?

Topic II: Impact on Mental Health and Social Influence

Topic	Questions
Psychological consequences	What psychological effects have you observed in adolescents who are striving to achieve a physical ideal?
Influential agents	Which social factors (family, friends, celebrities, social media, etc.) do you believe exert the greatest pressure on adolescents' self-image?
Cases of Intervention	Could you share any cases where you had to intervene to address physical or emotional issues related to body pressure?

Interview guidelines for micro-influencers

Topic I: Influence of beauty ideals and physical appearance

Topic	Questions
Explore how beauty standards influence their content and perception of the body	How would you describe the predominant beauty standards on social media? Do you consider yourself part of them? - How often do you use filters or modify your images before posting? Do you feel influenced by the expectation that your followers anticipate a certain image from you? - Do you think the beauty ideals you promote in your posts influence your followers' decisions in their daily lives?

Topic II: Influence of social media on adolescents' body image

Topic	Questions
Reflect on how media, social networks, and influencers affect adolescents' perception of their appearance	How do you perceive the representation of bodies in the media and on social networks? - How do you think the content you publish affects your followers, especially regarding their perception of body and beauty? - Have you received messages from followers stating they changed their eating or exercise habits because of your content? How do you feel about that? - How aware are you of your influence on beauty or body care standards among your adolescent followers?

Topic III: Social impact

Topic	Questions
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Reflect on the importance of aesthetics and body image in society	Do you think having a toned or muscular body provides advantages in personal or professional settings? - What responsibilities do you think influencers have in promoting realistic body images? - How do you think your content might affect the mental and physical health of your followers, especially younger ones?
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Table 1*Survey constructs, measurement scales and references*

Construct	Items	Scale*	References
Perceived social advantages of having a toned body [ADV]	[ADV1] Do you believe that having a toned body provides more advantages in life?	1 = No advantages 2 = Some advantages 3 = Several advantages 4 = Many advantages	Inspired by Fanjul-Peyró et al. (2019)
Perceived body pressure on social media [SMP] ($\alpha = .946$)	Indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: [SMP1] I feel pressure by social media to appear more fit. [SMP2] Social media pressures me to look thinner. [SMP3] Social media pressures me to improve my appearance. [SMP4] I feel pressured by social media to reduce my body fat percentage. [SMP5] I feel pressured by social media to be more muscular. [SMP6] I feel pressured by social media to increase the size or definition of my muscles.	1 = Strongly disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Agree 4 = Strongly agree	Schaefer et al. (2017)
Weight loss actions [WLA]	Have you engaged in any of the following to lose weight in the past year? (Multiple answers possible) - Fasting - Eating very little - Using meal replacements (shakes, powders, etc.) - Skipping meals - Using dietary supplements (proteins, vitamins, superfoods, etc.)	0=No 1=Yes**	Inspired by Song et al. (2022); Toselli et al. (2023)

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

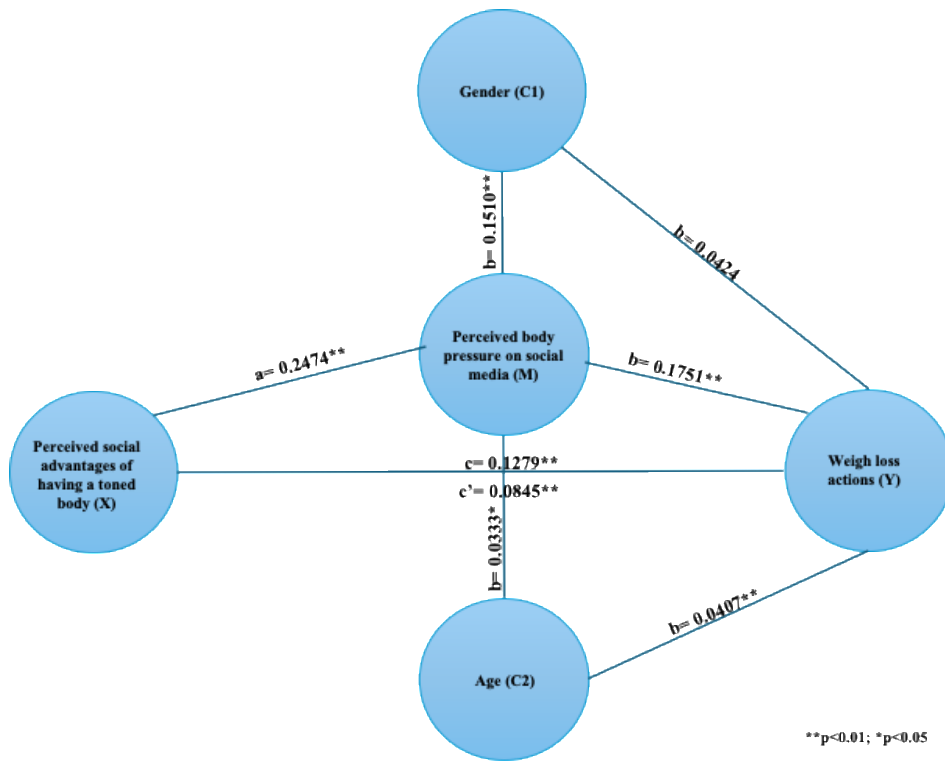
** For the mediation analysis, this variable was converted into a continuous measure (0, 1, 2, 3, 4).

Table 2*Descriptive statistics of survey items*

Item	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
ADV1	1032	1	4	2.47	.843
SMP1	967	1	4	2.01	.926
SMP2	970	1	4	2.06	.965
SMP3	964	1	4	2.13	.976
SMP4	970	1	4	1.93	.928
SMP5	973	1	4	1.89	.864
SMP6	962	1	4	1.88	.858

Figure 1

Mediation Model of Perceived Body Pressure on Social Media and Weight Loss Actions



Indirect effect (ab): $B = 0.0433$, $SE = 0.0089$, 95% CI, [0.0353, 0.0775]