

Influencers and fatphobic aesthetic moralism: the digital pedagogy of adolescent body ideals

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KEYWORDS

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Body image
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ABSTRACT

This study examines how adolescents internalize fatphobic body norms through sustained exposure to influencer-driven aesthetic narratives of health. The term “fatphobic aesthetic moralism” is used as an interpretive framework to describe how influencer-driven content may transform aesthetic and health-related body norms into moral evaluations, whereby thinness, muscularity, and visible self-discipline become associated with responsibility, self-control, and personal worth. Drawing on survey data from 1,032 Spanish adolescents aged 12-17 years and semi-structured interviews with educators, health professionals, and social workers, the results show that adolescents who identify influencers as role models for health and beauty show a higher prevalence of elevated fatphobic attitudes. Quantitative results distinguish the greater overall frequency of peer referents from the higher prevalence of elevated fatphobic attitudes among adolescents selecting influencers, while qualitative results reveal how influencers function as informal pedagogues whose authority derives from algorithmic visibility and affective proximity. Professionals emphasized that these narratives naturalize fatphobia by framing bodily conformity as evidence of effort and virtue, while deviation signals irresponsibility or failure. Within this framework, influencer culture can be understood as a digital pedagogy through which body norms may become moralized via aesthetic codes, producing enduring hierarchies of worth that extend beyond beauty ideals into the evaluation of the self and others.

Influencers y moralismo estético-gordofóbico: la pedagogía digital de los ideales corporales adolescentes

PALABRAS CLAVE

Redes sociales
Imagen corporal
Gordofobia
Moral
Influencer

RESUMEN

Este estudio explora cómo los adolescentes internalizan actitudes gordofóbicas mediante la exposición a las narrativas estéticas y de salud de *influencers* en redes sociales. Se emplea el término “moralismo estético-gordofóbico” como un marco de interpretación para describir cómo sus contenidos pueden transformar las normas corporales en valoraciones morales, de modo que la delgadez, la musculatura y las manifestaciones visibles de autodisciplina se asocian con la responsabilidad, el autocontrol y la valía personal. A partir de un cuestionario a 1,032 adolescentes españoles de entre 12 y 17 años, junto con entrevistas semiestructuradas a profesionales de la educación, salud y trabajo social, se observa que los adolescentes que identifican a los *influencers* como modelos de salud y belleza presentan mayores niveles de gordofobia. Los resultados cuantitativos permiten diferenciar entre una mayor frecuencia global de los pares como referentes y una mayor prevalencia de actitudes gordofóbicas entre los adolescentes que toman como modelo a los *influencers*. Los profesionales subrayan que estas narrativas contribuyen a naturalizar la gordofobia, en tanto que promueven la idea de que la conformidad corporal constituye una prueba de esfuerzo y virtud, mientras que cualquier desviación es interpretada como señal de irresponsabilidad o fracaso. Bajo este marco, la cultura influencer puede comprenderse como una pedagogía digital a través de la cual las normas corporales se moralizan mediante códigos estéticos, generando jerarquías de valor persistentes que trascienden los ideales de belleza e influyen en la evaluación sobre sí mismos y los demás.

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Social media platforms are central to shaping adolescent body ideals, wherein visual content reinforces normative aesthetics (Sharp & Gerrard, 2022). Within this landscape, influencers act as cultural agents, circulating aesthetic cues (Feijoo & Vizcaíno-Verdú, 2025) and narratives that promote body standardization (Colligs, 2024). Influencers mediate vernacular understandings of health, beauty, and body image through curated performances of discipline and self-optimization (Coronel-Tarancón, 2025). These digital pedagogies of embodiment position appearance within economies of recognition and visibility metrics (Lupton, 2016), where corporeality becomes associated with aspirational personhood (Fatt & Fardouly, 2023).

Recent scholarship has foregrounded how online contemporary discourses of health, thinness, and body self-management circulate through cultural imaginaries of discipline, responsibility, and aspirational selfhood (Chen et al., 2024). These sensibilities acquire particular intensity during adolescence, a developmental stage shaped by heightened social comparison and peer recognition (Kenny et al., 2016). Against this backdrop, this study examines how adolescents' body referents relate to fatphobic attitudes and how influencers may contribute to the moralization of body ideals, advancing research on digital body socialization.

Psychological traditions in body image and moral valuation

Adolescence is a period in which body image becomes closely tied to social life and appearance-based self-evaluation (Ata et al., 2011). Social comparison is a key mechanism, as adolescents evaluate themselves against socially salient others while recognition and belonging concerns intensify (Burnell et al., 2024; Festinger, 1954). Repeated exposure to online and aspirational bodies reinforces these standards (Fioravanti et al., 2022). Accordingly, socially transmitted appearance ideals become relevant through exposure, comparison, and internalization within the broader cultural understanding of desirable embodiment (Coffey, 2024).

Moral-development research addresses a distinct dimension of social evaluation. Smetana and Turiel (2006) show how adolescents differentiate moral concerns from other social domains; bodily appearance is not inherently moral, but socially meaningful norms may become implicated in judgments about persons. Banerjee et al. (2020) similarly analyzed moral self-presentation. In digital contexts, where self-presentation is normatively shaped and appearance acquires symbolic value (Beer, 2016; Zillich & Wunderlich, 2024), these perspectives help distinguish bodily from moral evaluation.

Relational foundations of adolescent body image

Embodied self-understanding emerges gradually through familiar interactions in which appearance acquires meaning as part of how young people interpret themselves and become aware of how others perceive them (Ata et al., 2011). In this regard, environments provide early embodied reference

points through communication and modeling of food, weight, and appearance. Parental comments, modeling, monitoring, non-verbal cues, and evaluations of others' bodies can shape adolescents' self-appraisals and normalize standards of eating, weight control, and bodily acceptability (Rodgers, 2012; Tanguy et al., 2025). Recent evidence suggests that the impact of such communication depends on how adolescents perceive its intention and frequency, with ambiguous or humorous remarks acquiring lasting significance when they are repeated over time or are difficult to emotionally process (Puhl et al., 2022). Family influence is not restricted to the parents. Siblings and other family members may also constitute proximal embodied referents, as adolescents encounter recurrent ways of talking about, evaluating, and presenting bodies within the family environment (Wu et al., 2026). In the present study, these familial figures are distinguished analytically from parents to capture potentially different sources of everyday bodily reference within the same relational environment.

As adolescence progresses, peers become increasingly salient sources of body-related norms and evaluations, with friends, classmates, and wider peer circles serving as important reference figures for adolescents' appearance (Kenny et al., 2016). These interactions may gradually normalize appearance-based scrutiny, embedding recognition, ridicule, and admiration into adolescents' developing embodied self-understanding (Beckers et al., 2025; Kale et al., 2026).

Lastly, in media studies, influencers constitute a particularly salient category of body referents in digital adolescence. Unlike proximal agents such as family members or peers, their influence combines repeated platform visibility (Cotter, 2019), aspirational self-presentation and perceived expertise conveyed through curated intimacies (Abidin, 2015). These features give influencers a distinctive capacity to circulate body ideals through everyday routines that function as informal bodily pedagogy (Goodyear, 2022), leading us to expect their role in adolescents' body evaluations to be especially relevant in digital scenarios.

Visual regimes of health and aesthetics in a digital adolescence

In adolescence, the differences between health and aesthetics may become blurred within a visual economy in which biomedical definitions of health—grounded in physiological integrity, hormonal regulation, psychological stability, and the absence of disease (WHO, 2020)—are overshadowed by image-based interpretations. Although clinical institutions emphasize that health cannot be inferred from appearance and caution against equating slimness or muscular tone with wellness (NICE, 2025), and despite medical assessments relying on indicators such as metabolic parameters or nutritional adequacy (Kolb et al., 2021), these non-visual criteria seldom resonate with adolescents' platform-based experiences.

Aesthetic understandings of the body emerge from established beauty regimes privileging slim and symmetrical forms (Elias & Gill, 2018), which circulate as codified signals of desi-

rability on social media (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015). This conflation is evident in content where aesthetic discipline replaces functional understandings of health (Bell et al., 2021). Adolescents witness lean bodies framed as evidence of self-control and redemption, fitting within Entwistle's (2002) notion of an "aesthetic economy" that validates fashionable embodiment. Through routine interactions, they calibrate their bodies according to platform metrics (Beer, 2016) –likes, comments, follows–, interpreting these signals as indicators of belonging or inadequacy (Fatt & Fardouly, 2023), and reflecting broader processes of body quantification (Lupton, 2016) in which appearance becomes a form of symbolic capital within social media environments.

Moral configurations of fatphobia

Fatphobia involves evaluative meanings that associate fatness with bodily inadequacy, deficient self-regulation, and reduced social worth (Bourdelle & Laroche, 2026). In digital environments, bodily management may become increasingly visible, exclusive, and quantifiable (Bacon et al., 2001), linking appearance to assumptions about discipline, adequacy, and social worth (Cousens, 2025; Lupton, 2016). These processes can intensify the overlap between aesthetic and moral evaluations without making them equivalent.

In this sense, bodily norms operate at different but related evaluative levels. At an aesthetic level, particular forms of embodiment become culturally privileged and normalized, with thin and toned bodies acquiring heightened visibility within dominant grammars of health, fitness, and beauty (Chen et al., 2024; Feijoo & Vizcaíno-Verdú, 2025). However, at a moral level, body size may also become associated with judgments about personal characteristics. Existing research has linked fatness to assumptions of laziness (Puhl & Heuer, 2009), irresponsibility (Frazier, 2022), deficient self-regulation (Kuhn, 2025), and moral failure (Atherton, 2021). Aesthetic valuation and moral valuation are therefore related but analytically distinct: the former concerns which bodies are socially privileged, whereas the latter concerns what bodily appearance is taken to signify about the person.

The present study

Building on these perspectives, this study examines adolescents' fatphobic attitudes, the social referents used to define healthy and aesthetically valued bodies, and the evaluative meanings surrounding these norms in digital contexts. Body-image research informs the analysis of social comparison and referents, whereas moral-development research helps distinguish aesthetic preferences from judgments about conduct or personal worth. In this sense, "fatphobic aesthetic moralism" is used as an interpretive framework.

More specifically, (EO1) examines variation in fatphobic attitudes by gender, age, socioeconomic status, and parental educational level; (EO2) compares healthy- and aesthetic-body referents, with particular attention to influencers or celebrities

as digital referents. These results inform EO3 and EO4, which qualitatively examine professionals' interpretations of influencer culture, adolescent body ideals, and body moralization. Given the exploratory nature of this study, no *a priori* hypotheses were formulated.

Method

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011) was employed to examine how fatphobic attitudes are articulated among adolescents through aesthetic and health-related body judgments, while exploring how professionals in education, healthcare, and social intervention address these dynamics. The quantitative phase compared the embodied referents associated with adolescents' notions of healthy and aesthetically valued bodies, with particular attention to whether influencers emerged as a distinctive referent relative to proximal socializing agents. These results subsequently informed the qualitative phase, which examined how professionals interpreted adolescents' fatphobia within influencer culture.

Participants

The quantitative phase initially included 1,082 Spanish adolescents aged 12-17 years. Fifty participants (4.6%) were excluded due to current psychological or medical treatment, following the ethical criteria established for the study, resulting in a final sample of 1,032 adolescents. The final sample comprised 170 participants aged 12 years (16.5%), 171 aged 13 (16.6%), 177 aged 14 (17.2%), 172 aged 15 (16.7%), 173 aged 16 (16.8%), and 169 aged 17 (16.4%). Gender distribution was balanced, with 514 males (49.8%) and 518 females (50.2%). Regarding socioeconomic status, 331 participants were classified as high SES (32.1%), 470 as medium SES (45.5%), and 231 as low SES (22.4%).

The qualitative phase involved eight professionals working with adolescents aged 12-17 years across educational, healthcare, and community-based social intervention settings. No additional sociodemographic data were collected from the participants. The sample included two secondary-school educators, two healthcare practitioners specializing in adolescent well-being and eating-related issues, and four social workers involved in youth intervention and psychosocial support programs. Participants were purposively selected as key informants (Patton, 2015) because their sustained professional contact with adolescents across educational, healthcare, and community settings provided complementary perspectives on body-image concerns, social-media-related pressures, and body-related evaluations. Their role in the qualitative phase was to contextualize and interpret the patterns identified in the adolescent survey from different professional settings rather than to substitute adolescents' own perspectives. The inclusion criteria required direct professional experience working with adolescents and familiarity with body-image-related concerns emerging in educational, healthcare, or community settings. Social workers were intentionally overrepresented because of their sustained involvement in informal education

nal environments and community-based interventions, where body-image-related issues frequently arise.

Instruments

Quantitative instrument. To address EO1 and EO2, a set of variables was designed to capture adolescents' fatphobic attitudes and their relationship with sociocultural referents shaping body ideals (see Table S1, Supplementary material).

Fatphobia was assessed using an adaptation of the 14-item *Fat Phobia Scale-Short Form* (Bacon et al., 2001). The original bipolar structure, five-point semantic differential response format, and scoring procedure were retained, while the wording of the adjective pairs and instructions was adapted to Spanish for administration to adolescents. The questionnaire was administered in Spanish, and the English wording presented in Table A1 is a translation provided for reporting purposes. Conceptual correspondence with the original instrument was maintained by preserving the semantic opposition represented by the original adjective pairs and the original scoring structure.

Additional checks were conducted to examine the internal structure and construct validity of the adapted scale. A one-factor solution accounted for 52.4% of the item variance, with acceptable convergent validity evidence ($AVE = .524$; $CR = .934$). Discriminant evidence was also supported by low HTMT values between the fatphobia index and the remaining questionnaire constructs, with the highest value observed for fitness-influencer credibility ($HTMT = .217$), which is well below the conventional thresholds.

Considering the asymmetric and concentrated distribution of *Fat Phobia Scale* scores, a quintile-based categorization was adopted to obtain five ordered strata. Quantile-based grouping is commonly used to facilitate categorical analysis while retaining more information as the number of groups increases (Altman & Bland, 1994). Accordingly, the 20th, 40th, 60th, and 80th percentiles were used as sample-derived cut points rather than theoretical or clinical thresholds.

For EO2, participants completed two multiple-response items assessing the social figures they used as referents when defining ideal healthy and aesthetic bodies. Participants could select more than one category, and no ranking or prioritization among the selected referents was requested. The predefined categories were identified from the literature on adolescent body socialization, social comparison, and mediated body cultures (Ata et al., 2011; Cotter, 2019; Feijoo & Vizcaíno-Verdú, 2025; Goodyear, 2022) and distinguished between parents (father or mother), siblings (brother or sister), other family members, friends, other known adults, and influencers or celebrities. This classification was intended to capture different relational positions, including proximal familial and peer referents, familiar adults, and mediated aspirational figures. Among participants with valid responses, the mean number of referents selected was 1.46 ($SD = 0.9$, range = 1-6) for healthy bodies and 1.44 ($SD = 0.85$, range = 1-6) for aesthetic bodies.

Qualitative instrument. Concerning the qualitative phase related to EO3 and EO4, semi-structured individual inter-

views were conducted to explore how professionals interpret adolescents' fatphobic attitudes and body-related norms.

The interview protocol was informed by the theoretical framework and preliminary results from the quantitative phase. Although friends were selected more frequently overall, adolescents selecting influencers showed the highest prevalence of elevated fatphobic attitudes in both healthy and aesthetic-body referent analyses. Accordingly, the qualitative phase was designed as a targeted follow-up of this influencer-related pattern rather than an open-ended comparison of all socialization agents. The results were not used to establish influencers as the exclusive source of adolescent body socialization.

Additionally, the interview design drew on literature concerning social comparison processes during adolescence (Festinger, 1954), the convergence of health and aesthetics (Elias & Gill, 2018; Layton, 2011), influencer pedagogies and digital body cultures (Cotter, 2019; Goodyear, 2022), and moralization of body image (Atherton, 2021) (Table S2, Supplementary material). The draft interview guide was reviewed and refined by the research team, incorporating practical feedback from the panel service before fieldwork. No formal expert review or pilot study was conducted. All interviews retained the same core thematic domains and central questions, while profession-specific prompts were used only to contextualize follow-up questions within the educational, healthcare, or social-intervention settings. This common structure preserved cross-interview comparability while allowing contextual sensitivity (Kallio et al., 2016).

Procedure

Data collection was conducted between September and December 2023 using a panel. A multistage stratified sampling procedure was employed, with proportional allocation across four aggregated geographical areas classified according to the NUTS regions defined by the European Union. A second level of stratification was subsequently applied based on family socioeconomic status (low, medium, and high), followed by cross-quota allocation according to age and gender. Participation required informed consent from the legal guardians and assent from the adolescents.

The qualitative phase was developed following preliminary quantitative analyses that identified influencers as referent figures in adolescents' body evaluations. Participants were recruited purposively through the BE23-008 project at Universidad Internacional de la Rioja and collaborating local partners to ensure institutional diversity across educational, healthcare, and social intervention settings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted between February and May 2024 in Spanish, following approved informed-consent procedures. The interviews lasted between 50 and 75 minutes, were audio-recorded with participant authorization, and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Both phases were approved by the Ethics Committee of Universidad Internacional de La Rioja under reference number PI: 066/2023.

Data analysis

Quantitative analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics v25. To address EO1 and EO2, descriptive statistics were first calculated to examine the distribution of fatphobic attitudes and identify reference figures associated with healthy and aesthetically valued bodies. Chi-square tests were used to examine the associations between fatphobia strata and categorical sociodemographic variables. Effect sizes were reported using Cramer's V (Cohen, 1988), and adjusted standardized residuals were inspected for these single-response analyses. For the multiple-response items assessing embodied reference figures, associations with fatphobia strata were examined using the multiple-response chi-square procedure in SPSS, which accounts for participants selecting more than one referent category. For these analyses, N refers to participants with valid responses. The significance threshold was set at $p < .05$.

The sociodemographic variables included age, categorized into six one-year groups (12-17 years); gender (male/female); socioeconomic status (low/medium/high); and parental educational level, grouped into four categories according to the highest educational level attained in the household (lower

secondary or below, upper secondary, first-cycle tertiary education, and university degree or higher).

Qualitative data were analyzed in ATLAS.ti 25 using a hybrid thematic approach combining inductive and deductive coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) and informed by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial codes grounded in participants' accounts were grouped into broader thematic categories and subsequently interpreted through theoretically informed subcodes. This iterative process identified higher-order patterns concerning normative bodies, peer judgment, influencer authority, and moralization of body evaluations (Figure 1).

Results

EO1. Sociodemographic variation in adolescent fatphobic attitudes

The distribution of adolescents across the five fatphobia strata defined by the *Fat Phobia Scale* scores was first examined (Figure 2). These strata were then used to analyze sociodemographic differences in fatphobic attitudes.

Figure 1

Analytical coding process for EO3 and EO4

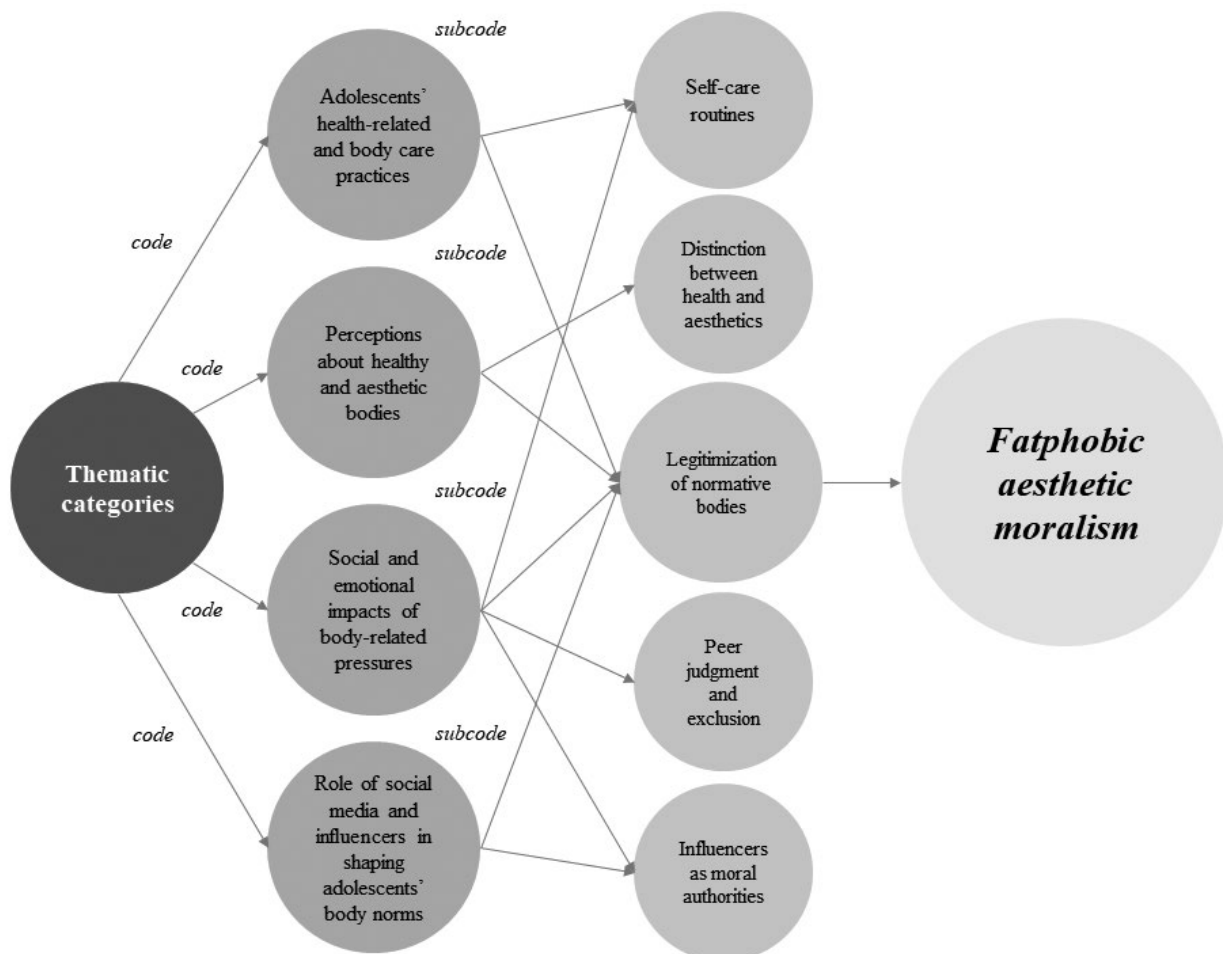
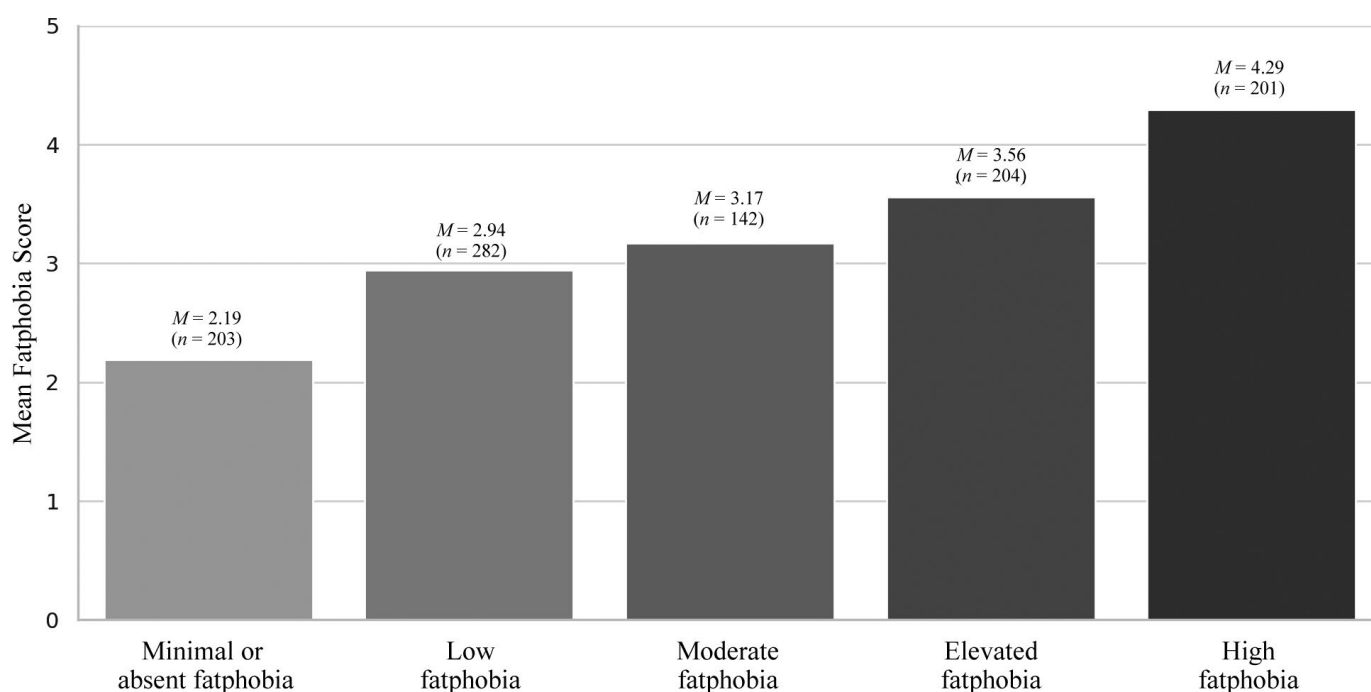


Figure 2*Mean levels of adolescents' fatphobia*

Gender differences were statistically significant, $\chi^2(4, N = 1,032) = 10.09, p = .039, V = .01$. A smaller proportion of girls than boys reported elevated or high fatphobia (34.7% vs. 43.8%). Adjusted standardized residuals indicated that boys were overrepresented in the elevated-fatphobia group (ASR = 2.72), whereas girls were underrepresented in this group (ASR = -2.72). Age was not significantly associated with fatphobic attitudes, $\chi^2(20, N = 1,032) = 31.32, p = .051, V = .09$.

Family-related factors were significantly associated with fatphobia. Socioeconomic status showed a significant association, $\chi^2(8, N = 1,032) = 19.22, p = .014, V = .01$. Adolescents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were overrepresented in the elevated (ASR = 2.1) and high-fatphobia groups (ASR = 2.11), whereas those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were overrepresented in the low-fatphobia group (ASR = 2.83). In addition, parental educational level was significant, $\chi^2(12, N = 1,032) = 26.24, p = .01, V = .09$. Adolescents from households with university or postgraduate education were underrepresented in the minimal/absent (ASR = -2.23) and low-fatphobia groups (ASR = -2.22), and overrepresented in the elevated-fatphobia group (ASR = 3.27).

EO2. Fatphobia and adolescent body referents

Multiple-response analyses showed significant associations between fatphobia strata and referent selection for both healthy bodies, $\chi^2(24, N = 1,032) = 68.65, p < .001, V = .13$, and aesthetic bodies, $\chi^2(24, N = 976) = 68.39, p < .001, V = .13$ (Table S3, Supplementary material). For healthy bodies, friends were selected by 357 adolescents (34.6%), other known adults by 349

(33.8%), parents by 346 (33.5%), influencers or celebrities by 249 (24.1%), siblings by 110 (10.7%), and other family members by 98 (9.5%). For aesthetic bodies, friends were selected by 352 adolescents (36.1%), influencers or celebrities by 337 (34.5%), other known adults by 290 (29.7%), parents by 253 (25.9%), siblings by 100 (10.2%), and other family members by 76 (7.8%). Nevertheless, the frequency of selection should be distinguished from the distribution of fatphobia within each referent category.

For healthy-body referents, adolescents selecting influencers or celebrities showed the highest proportion of high fatphobia (29.7%) and the highest combined prevalence of elevated and high fatphobia (52.2%). A similar pattern emerged for aesthetic-body referents, where adolescents selecting influencers or celebrities showed the highest combined prevalence of elevated and high fatphobia (50.4%), including 27.3% in the high-fatphobia stratum. Overall, girls selected slightly more referents than boys in both domains (healthy bodies: $M = 1.54$ vs. 1.38; aesthetic bodies: $M = 1.53$ vs. 1.36).

EO3. Professionals' perspectives on adolescents' body ideals and influencer culture

Participants' accounts revealed a progressive interpretive pattern connecting adolescents' body-related practices, aesthetic understandings of health, influencer authority, and experiences with social pressure. Across professional sectors, these dimensions converged in broader narratives concerning the normalization of normative bodies and moralization of appearance (Table S4, Supplementary material). Therefore, sector-specific

perspectives were retained as contextual information in the attribution of quotations and not as comparative groups.

Self-care routines and perceptions about healthy and aesthetic bodies. Professionals described how adolescents turned to influencer-generated content when constructing their understanding of what a healthy or aesthetic body is. These figures, often perceived as aspirational, present stylized versions of wellness and fitness that prioritize visual appearance over clinical aspects. According to the interviewees, adolescents engage with these representations without always recognizing the aesthetic agenda they encode.

What I see as a general trend is that what is being conveyed on social media today is not really tied to the value of dedication. [...] But dedication definitely is not a value that stands out among influencers. (E1, education sector).

They emphasized that the “aestheticization” of health is particularly problematic for adolescents. Influencers are seen to promote lifestyle routines that align with marketable beauty rather than with physiological well-being, and these representations rarely convey what it means to be healthy.

I believe that social media content often contributes to this – not necessarily to having a healthy body. Maybe it promotes what is considered aesthetic, but not what is actually healthy or well-being-oriented. (E1, education sector).

Adolescents’ health-related and body care practices

This logic, when applied to the body, is reinforced through a motivational discourse, often aspirational to the point of being unattainable, that dominates the profiles of influencers focused on fitness, lifestyle, or wellness. Their narratives revolve around personal growth, routine discipline, and transformation without accounting for the specific circumstances or contexts of their audiences. As one professional from the social sector noted, adolescents may suffer the consequences of this meritocratic form of digital exposure.

There is a message I hear all the time –the whole “be your best version” thing. [...] “Dare to dream, it is much easier if you just do this...”. [...] It all becomes a kind of consumer mindset. (E6, social sector).

Role of social media and influencers in shaping adolescents’ body norms. Beyond body ideals, professionals described how influencers shape adolescents’ perceptions of bodies. Visibility on social media, especially for lean, toned, and disciplined bodies, confers symbolic authority and moral worth.

Influencers play a huge role. Their words really reach people, especially adolescents. So, if they are telling you that you need to have a certain body, that doing X diet is amazing, or if they are spreading beliefs about food that are

actually really unhealthy, of course adolescents are going to believe it. (E4, health sector).

The internalization of these body norms is intensified in environments where digital recognition becomes a salient measure of social value. Social validation –likes, comments, followers– becomes a measure of worth.

I think influencers hold a lot of social recognition. [...] The more followers they have, the more comments, the more positive feedback on their posts, the more value they have in the eyes of adolescents. (E1, education sector).

In this sense, influencers function as authoritative figures, setting the standard for how a body should look and what a “healthy” lifestyle entails. This moralization leads to self-surveillance and heightened expectation.

Adolescents do not yet have the maturity or ability to differentiate between what is healthy, what might work for them, and what could actually be harmful. (E4, health sector).

EO4. Moralization of fatphobic body norms

Social and emotional impacts of body-related pressures.

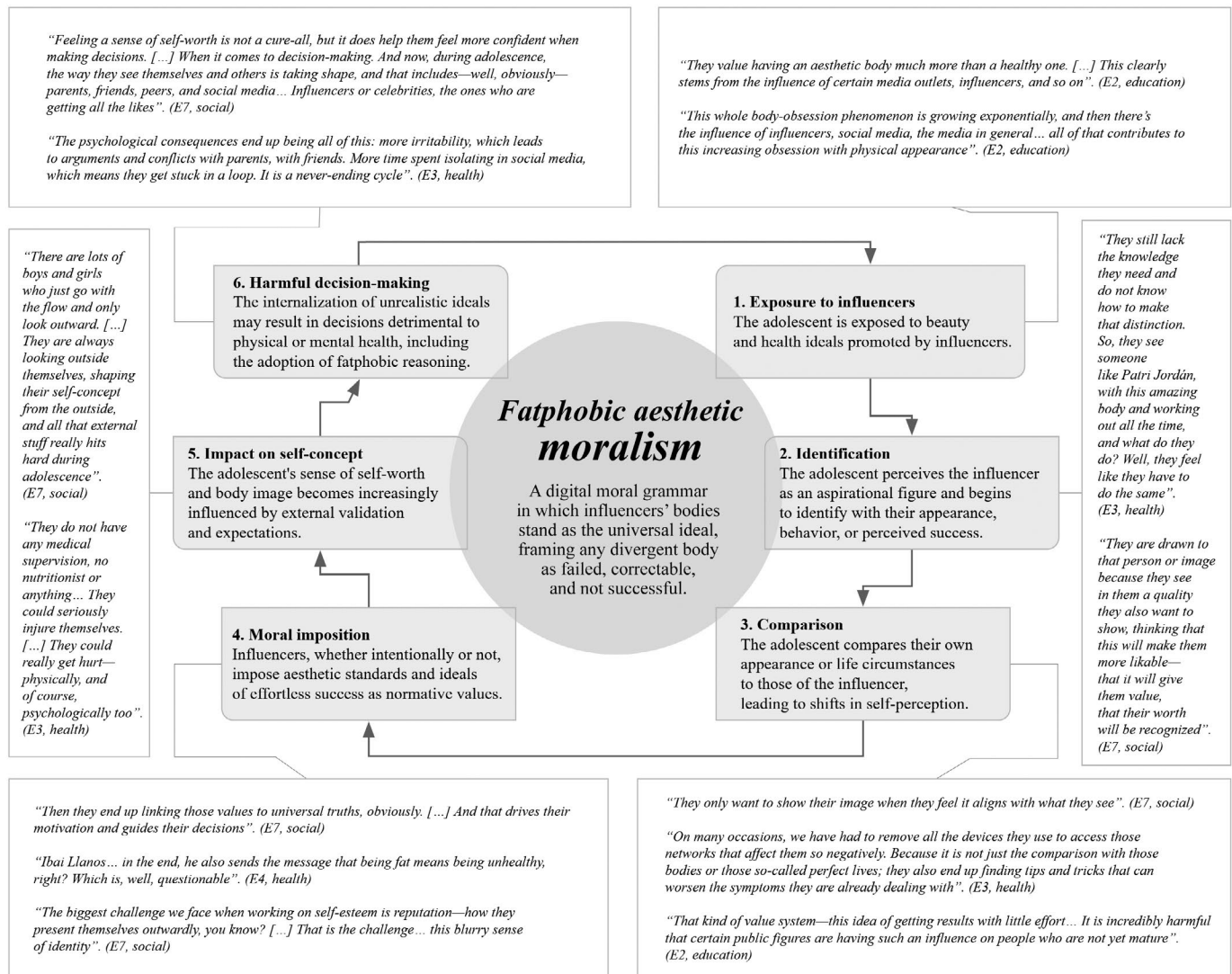
These online referents, identified as a potential source of pressure on the adolescent body, led professionals to frame their discourse around fatphobic norms. Interviewees noted that adolescents internalize the aesthetic body consumed on social media as something natural, failing to recognize these representations as biased or exclusionary. Instead, they perceive them as socially validated truths reinforced by their sense of belonging to an influencer’s community.

In adolescence, the need to belong is so strong that they do not really care what they are joining, as long as they feel loved and part of a group. (E3, health sector).

When you walk into class, there is this kind of daily scan –people look you up and down to see how you are showing up, and I notice it. [...] Going to class feels like being prejudged. (E5, social sector).

Legitimization of normative bodies and fatphobic aesthetic moralism. In this framework, fatphobia seems to be normalized. The fat body is no longer mocked. It is judged, pathologized, and expected to change. Professionals agreed that this does not stem only from immaturity but from the naturalization of a moral value system in which the influencer’s body serves as a benchmark (Figure 3).

Thus, the prominence of influencer-based referents among adolescents reporting higher fatphobic attitudes suggests the consolidation of implicit evaluative frameworks through which influencer aesthetics become socially intelligible models of the “correct” body.

Figure 3*The digital pedagogy of fatphobic aesthetic moralism***Discussion**

The analysis was guided by three dynamics: (1) the convergence of health and aesthetics in digital body norms (Elias & Gill, 2018; Layton, 2011), (2) influencers as vernacular pedagogues of body ideals (Cotter, 2019; Goodyear, 2022), and (3) moral configurations of fatphobia (Atherton, 2021; Cousens, 2025; Lupton, 2016). EO1 showed that fatphobia was sociodemographically patterned, with higher levels more frequent among boys and adolescents from higher socioeconomic or parental educational backgrounds. These differences can be situated within a broader understanding of adolescent embodiment as socially and culturally embedded rather than uniformly experienced (Ata et al., 2011; Coffey, 2024). Conversely, the absence of significant age differences cautions against assuming a simple age-related progression of fatphobia throughout adolescence.

Regarding EO2, friends were the most frequently selected body referents in the overall sample, confirming the central role

of peers in adolescents' everyday body socialization. However, among adolescents selecting each referent category, those who selected influencers or celebrities showed the highest prevalence of elevated and high fatphobia. Thus, peers were the most common referents overall, whereas influencer-based referents were more specifically associated with higher fatphobic attitudes. This pattern motivated the targeted qualitative follow-up, without implying that influencers were the predominant source of body socialization or that the quantitative association established moralization. The modest effect sizes further indicate that these associations should be interpreted cautiously.

Concerning EO3 and EO4, professionals described how influencer culture configures adolescents' understanding of body image and moral values. This logic materializes within the social media realm, which naturalizes normative bodies as universal templates—thin, toned, and self-disciplined. In the words of professionals interviewed, adolescents seem to understand these bodies beyond curated ideals as common-sense standards

of life success. This perception echoes Cotter's (2019) findings on algorithmic visibility and Kim et al.'s (2023) work on social authority, while the present analysis further suggests that adolescents may read visibility as evidence of truth. Influencers become legitimate not because of their distance from adolescents but because of their popularity. This marks a shift from previous conceptions of influencers as peers or "someone like me" (Kim et al., 2023), a shift already hinted at by Cotter (2019), who noted how online visibility creates a meritocratic aura around influencers, increasing their credibility as aspirational figures regardless of relational proximity.

According to EO4, qualitative analysis facilitated the identification of a set of interrelated dimensions through which professionals interpreted influencer-driven body ideals and fatphobic normative assumptions. Figure 3 presents six dimensions identified through the qualitative interpretation, which form an interpretive model of digital moral pedagogy: (1) *Exposure* brings adolescents into contact with curated images of thin and toned bodies framed as healthy and aspirational. (2) *Identification* gives these bodies emotional and cultural significance. (3) *Comparison* turns that significance into self-evaluation. (4) During *value imposition*, influencers present aesthetic traits that can be conceived as moral expectations, framing thinness or discipline as evidence of worth. This logic reshapes (5) *self-concept*, linking appearance to self-effort and success. As a result, adolescents may adopt harmful behaviors and reproduce (6) *fatphobic* understandings. This confirms Atherton's (2021) account of cultural fatphobia and Lupton's (2015) pedagogy of disgust, in which judgments operate less through explicit exclusion and more through tacit moral reasoning embedded in everyday consumption.

Figure 3 also clarifies how body image and moral development perspectives operate at different and complementary analytical levels. Exposure, identification, and comparison concern the processes through which socially salient bodies become relevant standards for bodily self-evaluation, consistent with social comparison and body image research (Ata et al., 2011; Festinger, 1954; Fioravanti et al., 2022). The transition toward value imposition concerns a different evaluation level. From the developmental perspective discussed by Smetana and Turiel (2006), bodily appearance is not an inherently moral matter. In this case, the relevant question is how adolescents differentiate and coordinate the heterogeneous domains of social evaluation. The qualitative results suggest that, within influencer culture, aesthetic conventions may become implicated in judgments about people when bodily conformity is interpreted through characteristics such as discipline, self-control, effort, or success. Banerjee et al.'s (2020) account of moral self-presentation further helps situate these evaluations within adolescents' concerns with how the self is presented and appraised.

Nevertheless, several results complicate this pattern. A lower prevalence of elevated fatphobia was observed descriptively among adolescents selecting family or peer referents rather than influencers, while the qualitative accounts also highlighted more functional and multidimensional understandings of health as a counterpoint to appearance-based evaluation. This

suggests that the moralization of body image does not follow a uniform sequence and should not be assumed to operate in a cycle. When health is interpreted in non-visual, experiential terms, the grip of aesthetic normativity weakens and echoes clinical positions that decouple body size from wellness (NICE, 2025; WHO, 2020), as well as suggest potential counter-narratives: alternative bodies grounded in ability, vitality, and plural embodiment (Chen et al., 2024).

Fatphobic aesthetic moralism specifies a particular configuration in which aesthetic, health-related, and moral evaluations converge around body size in influencer-driven digital environments. Previous research has documented the moral meanings attached to fatness, including associations with laziness, irresponsibility, deficient self-regulation, and moral failure (Atherton, 2021; Frazier, 2022; Kuhn, 2025; Puhl & Heuer, 2009). In the present study, these evaluations appear to be articulated through an aestheticized understanding of health: thin, toned, and disciplined bodies can operate as socially recognizable signs of self-control, adequacy, and success.

Practically, this points to school-based prevention initiatives that use guided analysis of influencer posts and structured peer discussion to examine how claims about healthy lifestyles, body transformation, and self-discipline link appearance to personal worth. Such activities could be complemented by clinical screening for restrictive eating, compulsive exercise, and persistent body monitoring when these practices are framed as self-improvement, and by group-based youth interventions addressing appearance-based ridicule, exclusion, and validation through both platform metrics and AI-mediated feedback, including likes, comments, follows, and generated curated body-related content.

Limitations and future directions

This approach presents methodological and conceptual limitations that should guide the further development of fatphobic aesthetic moralism. Categorizing continuous fatphobia scores into sample-derived strata entails information loss and limits threshold generalizability. Because the qualitative phase intentionally followed up the influencer-related EO2 pattern, it could not determine the relative contribution of other socializing agents. Findings from Spanish adolescents may also vary across cultural settings, media ecologies, and platform aesthetics, requiring broader testing. Therefore, the framework requires testing across diverse cultural and platform scenarios, as assuming universality risks overlooking local aesthetic hierarchies and sociocultural understandings of beauty.

In addition, longitudinal research could reveal whether moralized body judgments intensify, diversify, or shift as adolescents age, migrate across platforms, or participate in counter-narratives. Although this study focused on adolescents as recipients of moralization, it did not address their capacity for critique or resistance, despite evidence that they can appropriate, parody, or subvert platform norms.

The framework would also benefit from a deeper analysis of platform infrastructures. Beyond influencers' mediation,

understanding how recommendation systems, monetization models, and tools –filters, metrics– shape interactions would refine the model. In this sense, fatphobic aesthetic moralism captures how digital environments seem to aestheticize moral judgments and stratify bodies. Further research should explore how adolescents legitimize self-surveillance and the policing of others, with implications for mental health and normative body learning.

Conclusion

This study uses fatphobic aesthetic moralism to describe a particular configuration in which aesthetic, health-related, and moral evaluations of body size converge within influencer-driven digital environments. The results indicate that adolescents selecting influencer-based body referents showed a higher prevalence of elevated fatphobic attitudes, and that, within professionals' accounts, thinness, muscularity, discipline, and bodily optimization can acquire meanings that extend beyond aesthetic desirability to encompass self-regulation, adequacy, and personal worth. In this context, fatphobic aesthetic moralism captures the intersection between the aestheticization of health, fatphobic moral valuation, and the visibility and authority of influencer bodies. Rather than treating body-image processes as inherently moral, this framework highlights how aesthetic conventions may become implicated in judgments of the self and others when bodily appearance is interpreted as evidence of effort, responsibility, or failure.

Author contributions

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 Validation: A.V.V., B.F.
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 Investigation: A.V.V.
 Resources: B.F.
 Visualization: A.V.V., B.F.
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Declaration of interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Data availability statement

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

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Supplementary material

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