

ADOLESCENT BODY IMAGE IN DIGITAL PLATFORM ENVIRONMENTS: EXPLORING INFLUENCER ADVERTISING AND APPEARANCE CONCERNS TOWARDS THE NOTION OF “BODY CRUSH”

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Abstract: *This study examines the relationship between influencer advertising and adolescents’ body image concerns within everyday digital platform environments. A cross-sectional survey of 1,055 adolescents aged 11-17 years in Spain assessed self-reported exposure to advertising for food and body care products and appearance-related concerns across digital platforms. Advertising exposure was positively associated with concern scores, with coefficients varying across platforms and indicators. Group comparisons also identified differences between the advertising-exposure and platform-use groups. Building on the literature on mediated relationships, the discussion introduces the notion of “body crush” as a conceptual lens for exploring how influencer bodies may become objects of aspirational attachment, extending the analysis of appearance concerns to questions of embodiment and identity in digital cultures. This study informs digital literacy and responsible advertising practices by focusing on adolescents’ evaluations of their appearance alongside the bodily ideals circulating in mediated commercial content.*

Keywords: *body image, adolescents, digital advertising, body worship, influencer, social media.*



INTRODUCTION

Contemporary adolescents have grown up in a highly interconnected digital environment characterized by various online platforms. In this digital landscape, adolescents encounter immersive advertising formats. These include advertisements integrated into digital environments in ways that feel natural and engaging, such as virtual product placements within video games or interactive ads on social media that allow users to “try on” products using augmented reality (Daems et al., 2017). They also engage with influencer-driven content that delivers non-intrusive messages (Liu et al., 2025). These messages blend seamlessly with everyday content. For example, a beauty influencer may recommend a skincare product during a make-up tutorial, or a fitness influencer may incorporate a sponsored protein shake into their daily routine. As a result, the promotion feels like a genuine part of their lifestyle (Vrontis et al., 2021).

These influencers play a crucial role in transitioning from relative anonymity to achieving a massive online presence. They accomplish this by creating captivating entertainment and promotional content for their online communities (Abidin, 2018). Influencers play a key role in shaping collective perceptions, standardizing the way personal content is presented, and acting as influential role models for adolescents (Llovet-Rodriguez et al., 2022). While research acknowledges the pervasive influence of digital influencers on adolescents, there is ongoing debate about their role. Some argue that they foster positive self-perceptions, whereas others suggest they exacerbate unrealistic body ideals, such as extreme thinness, flawless skin, and hyper-muscular physiques. These ideals are often perpetuated through heavily edited images and curated content. These tensions highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of the influencers’ dual impacts.

Considering this, research on advertising communication emphasizes a shift from purely informative messaging to content that portrays behaviors associated with influencers’ lifestyles (Liu, 2025). This trend fosters emotional connections between adolescents and products (Oprea et al., 2026). It is often supported by a concept known as “consumer well-being” ethics (Johnson, 2021), which advocates for the positive and altruistic aspects of advertising with the goal of delivering beneficial experiences (Stafford & Pounders, 2021). This ethical foundation is increasingly intertwined with the notion of “body care”. This concept refers to advertising messages that promote self-care practices, such as skincare routines, fitness programs, or wellness products. These practices are often framed as essential for achieving an idealized physical appearance (Hamm et al., 2013). While body care is positioned as a pathway to holistic well-being, in practice, these messages can emphasize unattainable standards of beauty – such as flawless skin, a perfectly toned physique, or ageless features (Merino et al., 2024).

In addition, the exploration of well-being intersects with the strategies employed by advertising and companies to enhance the perception of their brand’s “coolness” (Gladwell, 1997; Pezzuti et al., 2025). The concept of “coolness”, examined from various angles, encompasses several dimensions. These include (a) the ability to regulate emotional expression (Belk et al., 2010); (b) the immediate outcomes of expressing enthusiasm and delight (Murthy & Hodis, 2010); (c) the intersection of conformity, imitation, and a sense of belonging (Pountain & Robins, 2000); and (d) shared meanings, including language, attitudes, and values, held by individuals associated with a specific group (O’Donnell & Wardlow, 2000). More

recently, Biraglia et al. (2017) emphasized that adolescents, in particular, embrace the concept of “coolness” in advertising. This engagement signals group affiliation through two dimensions. The first involves surface-level attributes linked to a product or brand. The second reflects a deeper dimension involving social influence, including the impact of influencers on perceptions of a brand, product, or lifestyle.

In-group affiliations are prevalent among younger demographics, particularly in contexts where adolescents form parasocial relationships and engage in the idolization of influencers (Yuan & Lou, 2020). This sense of belonging is closely tied to a contemporary social and youth phenomenon referred to as “crushes.” Crushes play a pivotal role during adolescent socio-psychological development and can manifest in three distinct forms. Identity crushes involve strong admiration for someone whom adolescents aspire to emulate and view as a role model. Romantic crushes are driven by attraction to someone with whom the adolescent wishes to spend time and experience excitement. Celebrity crushes represent an idealized form that elicits fantasies but lacks interpersonal interaction (Pickhardt, 2012).

The concept of a “crush”, rooted in youth culture, describes a process in which young individuals project idealized qualities onto someone they admire. This process fosters positive feelings toward an impeccably perfect image, including their own (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). Within the realm of social media, a subset of influencers frequently contributes to the cultivation of a “coolness” collective, often by promoting engagement with body image concerns (Markey & Daniels, 2022). But the interplay between “coolness” and “crushes” often results in adolescents internalizing these concepts as benchmarks for self-worth and acceptance. This can significantly influence their mental state, as striving to emulate idealized figures may lead to feelings of inadequacy or heightened body dissatisfaction (Guest & Budhraj, 2026).

In this sense, we explore the following research questions: (RQ1) Is there a relationship between adolescents’ concerns about their body image and their exposure to influencers’ content on body care? (RQ2) What patterns of association between advertising exposure and body image concerns are observed across digital platforms? (RQ3) How do body image concern scores differ across advertising-exposure and platform-use groups?

Research on the relationship between adolescent body image and advertising has traditionally focused on harmful substances such as alcohol or tobacco (Noel et al., 2020; Romer & Moreno, 2017). More recent studies have expanded this focus (Cambronero-Saiz et al., 2026; Czubaj et al., 2025). In this context, the current study examines the associations between advertising exposure and adolescents’ body image concerns. A subsequent conceptual discussion draws on these findings and the literature on crushes and mediated relationships to formulate the idea of “body crush”.

The convergence of body ideals, identification with influencers, and aspirational consumption raises a conceptual question: how might a represented body become more than a standard against which adolescents evaluate their appearance? In influencer cultures, bodily ideals are embodied by recognizable figures whose appearance is presented alongside lifestyles, products, and narratives of self-improvement. This conjunction invites consideration of the body itself as a possible focus of admiration and aspirational attachment. We develop this possibility through the notion of “body crush”, understood as a mediated orientation toward an influencer’s body as a personally meaningful image of what one might wish to become. The

concept extends the discussion from evaluations of one's own appearance to the possible affective significance of the bodies against which those evaluations are made.

MEDIA AND ADVERTISING INFLUENCES ON ADOLESCENT BODY IMAGE

Sociocultural theories suggest that adolescents' development of self-concept is significantly shaped by societal beauty ideals, primarily propagated through mass media channels (Coyne et al., 2025; Maes et al., 2025). The portrayal of beauty standards in advertising and media content, often unrealistic and difficult to attain, plays a pivotal role in influencing adolescents' body concerns. These standards, characterized by a strong emphasis on thinness and muscularity, serve as reference points for adolescents and frequently lead to dissatisfaction with their own bodies (Höld et al., 2025).

In this context, various forms of mass media, including television, print journals, social media platforms, and advertisements, have emerged as influential forces in shaping adolescents' self-perception. This impact is particularly noticeable during the crucial developmental phase of adolescence when individuals are more susceptible to external messaging (Czubaj et al., 2025). Indeed, the ability of media to shape adolescents' body image and self-esteem establishes it as a pervasive and compelling element in the formation of adolescent self-identity (Sallis, 1993).

Remarkably, research highlights significant gender disparities in how media and advertising influence adolescent body concerns. In particular, adolescent girls demonstrate a heightened susceptibility to the impact of idealized body images in advertising, in contrast to their male counterparts (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004). Studies have shown that exposure to idealized advertisements leads to heightened levels of body dissatisfaction, negative moods, and increased appearance concerns among female adolescents. Such targeted advertising frequently contributes to elevated self-consciousness and body dissatisfaction, as young women strive to conform to the unrealistic beauty standards propagated by advertising and media (Kvardova et al., 2025).

In addition, research has highlighted that adolescents' reactions to portrayals of body ideals in the media vary and are influenced by their diverse cultural backgrounds. Adolescents from different cultural groups may exhibit distinct responses to the media's depiction of idealized bodies. These cultural influences can intersect with media messages. This creates unique challenges and opportunities for promoting a positive body image among adolescents from diverse backgrounds (David & Warrier, 2019). For instance, adolescent girls often exhibit heightened body dissatisfaction due to the pervasive promotion of unrealistic beauty standards, such as extreme thinness and flawless appearances (Schneider et al., 2013), while boys face pressure to attain muscular and athletic physiques that are often linked to societal ideals of strength and dominance (Peixoto-Labre, 2002). However, these media-driven standards are not universally internalized; adolescents' responses vary based on personal experiences and social contexts (Orduno, 2024). For instance, some may adopt these ideals because of cultural or peer influences (Ozbek et al., 2024), whereas others actively resist them by drawing on values or support systems rooted in their familial or social environments (Deek et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the processes of social comparison play a crucial role in adolescents' assessments of their bodies and identities. Peers serve as intermediaries, helping adolescents

interpret media depictions and providing points of comparison (Kraye et al., 2007). Social comparison theory underscores the importance of enhancement appraisals in adolescents' lives. These assessments serve as vital mechanisms for safeguarding self-esteem (Imtiaz, 2023). Enhancement appraisals, as described in social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), refer to strategies by which adolescents evaluate media content to maintain or boost self-esteem. For example, they may selectively compare themselves to less-idealized images or focus on their own strengths to counteract societal pressures. Similarly, individual attributes (Wood, 1989), such as self-confidence (Rosenberg, 1965), cultural background (David & Warrier, 2019), and familial support systems (Deek et al., 2025), shape how adolescents navigate media influences. This highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of their role in mitigating the adverse influence of advertising on body image (Czubaj et al., 2025).

In addition, the role of online sources is significant as adolescents increasingly turn to the internet to reinforce beauty ideals. The characteristics of digital platforms significantly mediate how adolescents engage with influencer content, including messages related to body care. Research shows that platform-specific dynamics influence the type of content adolescents consume, as well as the cognitive and emotional processes triggered by this exposure. For example, Instagram and TikTok, as visually dominant platforms, rely heavily on short-form algorithm-driven content that prioritizes appearance-focused imagery (Gurtala & Fardouly, 2023). This fosters rapid cycles of social comparison. In these cycles, adolescents frequently evaluate themselves against idealized representations, amplifying body dissatisfaction and self-criticism (Charmaraman et al., 2024). In contrast, YouTube, as a long-form content platform, offers opportunities for more detailed and reflective engagement with body care narratives – e.g. tutorials, health-focused discussions, and personal journeys (Clark et al., 2022). However, even on YouTube, the use of influencers to promote specific body ideals can subtly reinforce societal standards. This effect is moderated by the platform's capacity for context-rich storytelling (Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019). In this context, the persuasive influence of advertising is inherently linked to visual and linguistic components integrated into its digital content (Tylka et al., 2023). The utilization of idealized media models in promotions establishes normative sociocultural ideals. These ideals profoundly influence adolescents' aspirations and self-identities (Imtiaz, 2023). Visual elements such as images of idealized bodies significantly influence adolescents and shape their self-concept and body image (Leggett-James & Laursen, 2023). Additionally, linguistic elements, such as messages endorsing the pursuit of a specific body ideal, reinforce and normalize these stereotypical ideals.

Within this framework, fostering a positive body image among adolescents is an essential concern. Given the significant influence of advertising and media on adolescent body concerns, interventions should prioritize equipping adolescents with essential media literacy skills (Diedrichs et al., 2011). This empowers adolescents to become active and well-informed consumers. It enables them to decipher and contextualize messages propagated through media. However, with the rise of influencer marketing, a new form of non-intrusive advertising has emerged. This raises concerns about its impact on adolescent well-being.

Digital influencers and social media platforms have played a pivotal role in driving this transformative shift. By actively promoting the message of “body care”, influencers wield significant potential in fostering a more holistic perspective on self-esteem and overall well-being (Khandelwal, 2021). However, body care as presented by influencers often involves conflicting narratives. While promoting healthy habits such as exercise and nutrition, these

messages frequently intertwine with unattainable beauty ideals (Town et al., 2023) – i.e. extreme thinness for women or hyper-muscularity for men. This duality generates mixed outcomes. Adolescents may feel inspired to pursue healthier behaviors, but they may also develop dissatisfaction with their own appearance when they fail to meet these ideals.

Such contradictions highlight the need for a more inclusive and realistic approach to body care messaging (West, 2022).

THE BODY CARE INFLUENCERS PHENOMENON

In influencer advertising, In influencer advertising, it is crucial to recognize the profound impact of digital influencers, especially among vulnerable adolescents. These profiles frequently disseminate media content that perpetuates unrealistic ideals related to appearance and wellness, such as unattainable body standards (Monks et al., 2021). Research has consistently demonstrated that these ideals, disseminated through influencer channels – such as social media platforms – significantly distort individuals' body image perceptions (Abrantes-Ferreira, 2017). This distortion is further amplified by individuals' inherent propensity to engage in social comparisons, leading to the cultivation of idealized body images among consumers (Stein et al., 2022).

Influencers wield their influence across diverse domains, with fitness and nutrition serving as prominent examples (Venciute et al., 2026). Consumers, particularly those aged 13 to 25, actively seek digital influencers on social media platforms, driven by a range of motivations (Alhothali & Aljefree, 2023). These motivations range from the pursuit of knowledge enhancement and self-improvement to the cultivation of positivity and enjoyment derived from influencer content (Mathew, 2018).

A more comprehensive examination of recent research reveals the significant influence exerted by digital fitness influencers who often take on dual roles as both brand ambassadors and endorsers of a wide range of products and services (Stein et al., 2022). The content disseminated by these influencers goes beyond simple product promotion (Feijoo & Sádaba, 2022). It extends to the propagation of ideals related to body image (Willoughby et al., 2023). What becomes increasingly evident is the mutually beneficial relationship between influencers' body image and the products they endorse, a connection that notably enhances consumer engagement.

However, when we examine the complex relationship between influencer advertising and body image, we uncover a multifaceted landscape. Fitness influencers are well-known for their ability to promote healthy behaviors (Willoughby et al., 2023). They serve as sources of inspiration for their followers, encouraging them to adopt healthier lifestyles. Nonetheless, it is important to note that these influencers also engage in objectification, particularly concerning the human physique (Basson & Weinbach, 2023). This dual nature raises concerns about the broader impact of influencer advertising on body image.

In today's digital era, adolescents who are frequent users of social media platforms are constantly exposed to influencer advertising. Balaban et al. (2023) underscored the importance of understanding the economic mechanisms behind influencer advertising and the need for transparency in sponsorships. A recurring observation in empirical research is the strong identification that consumers establish with digital influencers compared to traditional

celebrities (Venciute et al., 2026). Influencers have a unique ability to influence and build trust and foster a perceived sense of similarity (Stein et al., 2022; Tuominen et al., 2025). These are two crucial factors that mediate the impact of influencers on advertising effectiveness.

In this context, it becomes evident that exposure to various body types and ideals significantly influences adolescent behaviors (Mills et al., 2022). This influence is manifested in various ways. For example, consumers may actively attempt to modify their physical appearance and dietary choices to align with the influencers they admire. Such efforts may involve aspiring to achieve a leaner or curvier physique. This literature provides a context for examining adolescents' advertising exposure and body image concerns and, subsequently, for developing "body crush" as a conceptual proposal concerning aspirational attachment to the bodies of influencers.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study is grounded in a quantitative approach, specifically chosen for its capacity to enable a systematic assessment of adolescents' perceptions and behaviors when exposed to influencer advertising. This methodological choice establishes a robust basis for generating measurable and data-supported results (Wilson, 2019), ultimately advancing a more extensive and well-defined understanding of how advertising exposure is associated with adolescents' body image concerns in the digital landscape.

Design and Sample

To collect data for this study, we developed a customized questionnaire designed for administration to minors aged 11 to 17 residing in Spain. Our decision to conduct the study in Spain is primarily driven by our familiarity with the local research ecosystem, which significantly expedites data collection and access to the target demographic. While we acknowledge that this sample may have limitations specific to a particular adolescent demographic, as highlighted by David and Warrier (2019), it affords us the opportunity to explore the replicability of our findings within Spain's distinct geographic context. This ultimately enhances our contribution to the broader understanding of the body image phenomenon.

The study employs a quantitative questionnaire-based methodology that can be readily adapted and applied in various geographic settings for comparative analysis. Our main objective was to examine the associations between advertising exposure and adolescents' body image concerns in Spain, considering the cultural and contextual setting of the study.

A total of 1,055 participants were included in the survey, conducted with a 95% confidence level and a margin of error of $\pm 3\%$. The survey was administered via an online panel and parents with at least one child in the target age range were contacted and invited to participate. Upon their consent, parents facilitated access to the adolescent, who completed the survey independently at home under parental supervision. The sampling procedure employed a multistage, proportionally stratified approach. We used four geographical zones based on the NUT zone classification used by the EU as the primary stratum. Secondary stratification was

performed based on the socioeconomic status of the families, categorized as low, medium, and high. Surveyed individuals were selected using a cross-quota system based on sex and age.

The fieldwork for data collection took place between April and June 2022, with the following sample distribution:

- Age distribution: 28.3% were aged 11 to 12 years, 44% were aged 13 to 15 years, and 27.7% were aged 16 to 17 years (mean age of 14 years).
- Sex distribution: 53.6% were male, 46.3% were female, and 0.1% belonged to other gender categories.
- Socioeconomic level: 30.2% had a low socioeconomic level, 50.4% had a medium socioeconomic level, and 19.3% had a high socioeconomic level.

To ensure the ethical conduct of this study, we sought authorization from the legal representatives of the minor participants. This authorization was obtained through the signing of an informed consent document. This document had been previously approved by the Ethics Committee of the Universidad Internacional de la Rioja.

Measure and Procedure

The data used in this research are part of a larger project conducted by Feijoo et al. (2023), which investigates the influence of influencers on the dietary habits and physical appearance of children in Spain. For this study, we focused on the following variables:

- Body Image (BI) Concern: We assessed BI concern using a set of five items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$) based on the factors identified by Perloff (2014). Participants were asked how often they experience the following when exposed to posts featuring influencers collaborating on food or body care products:
 - (BI1) Feeling that they do not meet the expected standard in terms of their physical appearance.
 - (BI2) Experiencing frustration or anxiety when unable to achieve the image promoted by influencers.
 - (BI3) Perceiving a beautiful body as a slim and toned physique.
 - (BI4) Having their self-esteem significantly influenced by their physical appearance.
 - (BI5) Finding it necessary to set goals to attain an ideal body.

Participants provided responses on a 5-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Occasionally, 4 = Frequently, and 5 = Very frequently. The BI items assess appearance-related concerns rather than attachment to a particular influencer or their bodies. “Body crush” was subsequently developed through conceptual reflection on the findings and theoretical literature.

Exposure to digital advertising by food or body care influencers (EXP) assesses how often minors encounter such advertising across various digital platforms, including websites, browsers, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Twitch, games, Discord, Spotify, and WhatsApp. Respondents were asked the question: 'How frequently do you encounter food or body care advertising on the following platforms?' The exposure frequency was measured using a 6-point Likert scale (1 = I do not use this platform; 2 = Never; 3 = Rarely; 4 = Occasionally; 5 = Frequently; 6 = Very frequently).

From this Likert scale, two binary variables were derived. The first binary variable, EXP1, indicates the presence or absence of any advertising exposure (1 = I do not receive advertising;

2 = I receive some type of advertising). The second binary variable, EXP_Use, indicates whether the individual uses each platform (1 = I do not use this platform; 2 = I use this platform). In the original variable (EXP), the value 1, corresponding to "I do not use this platform", was excluded.

All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS (version 27). Data analysis proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive statistics were computed to examine adolescents' platform use and self-reported exposure to influencer-related food and body care advertising. Second, Kendall's Tau-b correlation coefficient was used to assess associations between exposure (EXP) and body image concern items (BI1–BI5), in line with RQ1 and RQ2. This test was selected due to its suitability for ordinal data with a high number of tied ranks, as is common in Likert-type scales. It is also robust under non-normal distribution conditions. Correlation analyses were conducted separately for each digital platform. Third, Mann–Whitney U tests were performed to examine differences in body image concern scores between groups defined by binary variables: adolescents reporting exposure versus no exposure to advertising (EXP1), and users versus non-users of each platform (EXP_Use), addressing RQ3. This test was chosen due to its appropriateness for comparing ordinal outcomes across two independent groups.

In all cases, statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. In addition to significance testing, the magnitude of Kendall's Tau-b coefficients was interpreted using predefined thresholds to distinguish between different levels of association.

RESULTS

Descriptive Analysis

Spanish adolescents most frequently used general-purpose applications, such as search engines, web pages, WhatsApp, and YouTube, with usage rates between 96% and 88%. These platforms are popular across all user profiles, regardless of their frequency of social network usage.

TikTok (77%) and Instagram (71%) were the most used social media platforms among adolescents. By contrast, Twitter and Facebook reported significantly lower usage rates. Platforms such as Twitch, which focus on live broadcasts, also maintain a notable presence.

Table 1. Digital platform utilization

	Non Users		Users		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
YouTube	42	4.0%	1,013	96.0%	1,055	100.0%
Browsers	61	5.8%	994	94.2%	1,055	100.0%
WhatsApp	89	8.4%	966	91.6%	1,055	100.0%
Websites	121	11.5%	934	88.5%	1,055	100.0%
Games	139	13.2%	916	86.8%	1,055	100.0%
TikTok	238	22.6%	817	77.4%	1,055	100.0%
Instagram	306	29.0%	749	71.0%	1,055	100.0%
Spotify	427	40.5%	628	59.5%	1,055	100.0%
Twitch	651	61.7%	404	38.3%	1,055	100.0%
Twitter	685	64.9%	370	35.1%	1,055	100.0%
Facebook	687	65.1%	368	34.9%	1,055	100.0%
Discord	725	68.7%	330	31.3%	1,055	100.0%

TikTok and Instagram are identified as the primary social networks where adolescents encounter advertising related to food and body care, as illustrated in Figure 1. In contrast, more widely used applications, such as YouTube, search engines, or web pages, are reported to have a slightly lower prevalence of this type of persuasive content. Less commonly used platforms such as Spotify, Twitch, or Twitter lag in the dissemination of such content. Additionally, it is unusual to encounter publications of this type on platforms such as Discord or WhatsApp.

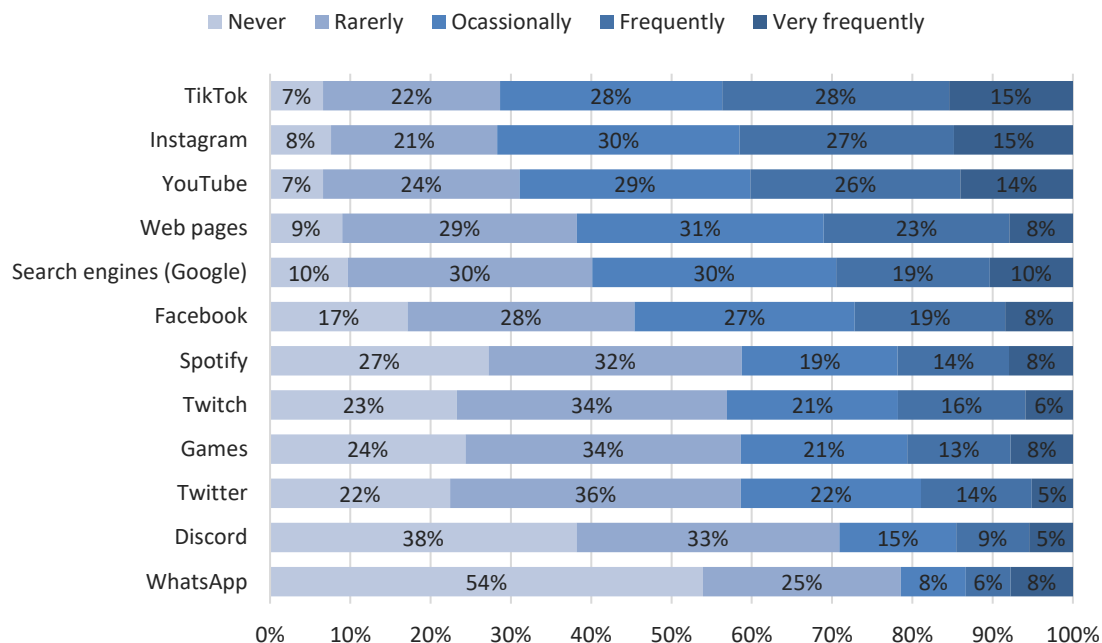


Figure 1. Frequency of food and body advertising exposure across platforms in adolescents.

After establishing the extent of exposure to digital advertising related to food and body care, it is pertinent to examine the emotional and self-esteem responses reported by the surveyed minors when encountering such persuasive content disseminated by influencers. Across the five items, approximately 12% to 28% of the respondents reported frequent or very frequent appearance-related concerns.

Table 2. Percentages of answers to the question "When you see posts from influencers collaborating on food or fitness products, how often do you feel the following sentences?".

	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Very frequently
(BI1) You feel that you are out of step and that your physical presence does not quite reach the standard.	33.6%	33.4%	19.1%	9.5%	4.4%
(BI2) You feel frustrated or anxious or you withdraw into yourself for not being able to achieve the image they portray.	47.2%	27.2%	13.9%	7.3%	4.4%
(BI3) You feel that a beautiful body is a thin and toned body.	20.4%	22.3%	29.7%	18.6%	9.1%
(BI4) You feel that physical appearance determines greatly how you value yourself.	20.1%	24.5%	29.3%	19.1%	7.1%
(BI5) You feel like you set goals to get that perfect body.	33.6%	30.3%	22.2%	10.9%	2.9%

A closer examination of Table 2 shows that approximately 28% of respondents frequently or very frequently endorsed a thin and toned body ideal, while approximately 26% reported appearance-based self-evaluations. Approximately 12-14% of respondents reported feeling below the expected appearance standard, experiencing frustration or anxiety, and setting appearance-related goals frequently or very frequently.

Frequency of Exposure to Advertising and Level of Body Image Concern

Our analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between exposure to advertising on digital platforms and adolescents' body image concerns, particularly regarding influencer posts (RQ1). Increased exposure consistently aligns with higher levels of body image issues. This trend was observed across all social networks examined, except for Facebook, as detailed in Table 3. Across the platforms reported in the table, greater reported advertising exposure was associated with higher appearance-related concern scores.

Table 3. Correlation Analysis of Body Image (BI) and Exposure (EXP) Variables.

	BI1	BI2	BI3	BI4	BI5
Websites (n=934)	0.181	0.174	0.163	0.169	0.202
Browsers such as Google (n=994)	0.170	0.163	0.148	0.165	0.207
YouTube (n=1,013)	0.154	0.162	0.153	0.166	0.189
Instagram (n=749)	0.119	0.138	0.155	0.160	0.164
Twitter (n=370)	0.176	0.230	0.147	0.166	0.208
TikTok (n=817)	0.209	0.187	0.171	0.181	0.200
Twitch (n=404)	0.125	0.183	0.151	0.124	0.151
Games (n=916)	0.183	0.228	0.160	0.146	0.195
Discord (n=330)	0.144	0.219	0.167	0.130	0.165
Spotify (n=628)	0.135	0.195	0.121	0.124	0.137
WhatsApp (n=966)	0.160	0.215	0.071	0.094	0.178
Represented using Kendall's Tau b statistic.					

The observed coefficients varied across platforms and concern indicators (Figure 2). For BI1, the largest coefficient reported in Table 3 is for TikTok ($\tau_b = .209$). For BI2, the largest coefficients were for Twitter ($\tau_b = .230$), games ($\tau_b = .228$), and Discord ($\tau_b = .219$), respectively. For BI5, the largest coefficients were for Twitter ($\tau_b = .208$), browsers ($\tau_b = .207$), and websites ($\tau_b = .202$).

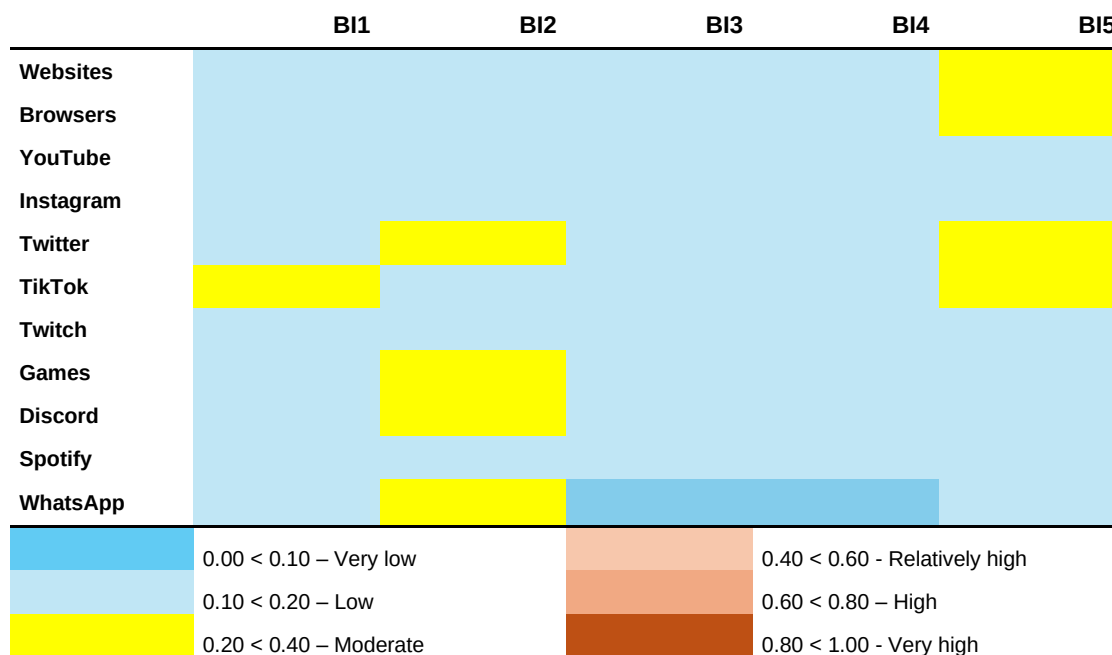


Figure 2. Interpretation of correlation magnitude between BI and EXP.

In addressing RQ2, the patterns of associations differed across concern indicators and platforms. TikTok showed the largest coefficient for BI1, whereas Twitter showed the largest coefficients for BI2, BI4, and BI5, and TikTok for BI3. Therefore, the results describe variations across platforms rather than a consistent concentration of stronger associations on visually oriented platforms.

To address RQ3, body image concern scores were compared between adolescents who reported advertising exposure and those who reported no exposure and between users and non-users of each platform. These comparisons examined how the concern scores differed across the two group classifications.

As illustrated in Table 4, the advertising-exposure groups differed significantly on all five body image concern items for websites, browsers, YouTube, and games. Significant differences were also observed across all five items for Twitter, TikTok, Discord, Spotify, and WhatsApp usage. Instagram and Twitch showed a more selective pattern of significant comparisons, whereas none of the advertising-exposure comparisons reached statistical significance for Facebook. Platform users and non-users differed significantly on all five concern items for Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. For Facebook, significant differences were observed between BI1, BI2, BI4, and BI5. These comparisons show that the platform-use groups also differed in their reported appearance-related concerns.

Spotify users and non-users differed significantly on all five concern items. This pattern extends the platform-use findings beyond predominantly visual social networks and warrants further investigation into the characteristics and experiences of these user groups.

Table 4. Significant differences between adolescents exposed to advertising and those not exposed, and between platform users and non-users.

		BI1		BI2		BI3		BI4		BI5	
		EXP	Use	EXP	Use	EXP	Use	EXP	Use	EXP	Use
Websites	Z	-2.082*	-3.433*	-1.765	-3.456*	-2.521*	-2.865*	-3.194*	-3.945*	-3.446*	-3.735*
	Sig.	0.037	0.001	0.078	0.001	0.012	0.004	0.001	0.000	0.001	0.000
Browsers	Z	-0.818	-4.197*	-0.489	-3.801*	-0.310	-3.412*	-0.073	-3.928*	-2.065*	-3.729*
	Sig.	0.413	0.000	0.625	0.000	0.756	0.001	0.942	0.000	0.039	0.000
YouTube	Z	-1.185	-2.588*	-2.122*	-3.523*	-1.482	-3.155*	-2.594*	-4.285*	-2.937*	-3.711*
	Sig.	0.236	0.010	0.034	0.000	0.138	0.002	0.010	0.000	0.003	0.000
Instagram	Z	-5.708*	-2.186*	-5.365*	-2.678*	-4.154*	-1.843	-6.598*	-2.282*	-7.425*	-1.538
	Sig.	0.000	0.029	0.000	0.007	0.000	0.065	0.000	0.023	0.000	0.124
Facebook	Z	-4.442*	-0.282	-5.721*	-0.893	-1.911	-0.390	-3.062*	-1.134	-7.002*	-0.073
	Sig.	0.000	0.778	0.000	0.372	0.056	0.697	0.002	0.257	0.000	0.942
Twitter	Z	-4.596*	-2.442*	-6.045*	-3.545*	-2.018*	-2.547*	-3.495*	-2.296*	-6.192*	-3.501*
	Sig.	0.000	0.015	0.000	0.000	0.044	0.011	0.000	0.022	0.000	0.000
TikTok	Z	-6.753*	-2.969*	-4.654*	-3.799*	-3.935*	-2.759*	-6.561*	-3.427*	-7.645*	-3.056*
	Sig.	0.000	0.003	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.006	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.002
Twitch	Z	-4.098*	-0.532	-3.551*	-2.715*	-1.374	-2.276*	-2.663*	-1.255	-5.144*	-1.757
	Sig.	0.000	0.595	0.000	0.007	0.169	0.023	0.008	0.209	0.000	0.079
Games	Z	-0.388	-6.466*	-1.233	-7.239*	-0.267	-4.377*	-0.972	-4.912*	-0.453	-5.548*
	Sig.	0.698	0.000	0.217	0.000	0.790	0.000	0.331	0.000	0.651	0.000
Discord	Z	-3.440*	-3.082*	-3.810*	-4.642*	-0.553	-3.851*	-2.040*	-2.597*	-3.851*	-2.823*
	Sig.	0.001	0.002	0.000	0.000	0.581	0.000	0.041	0.009	0.000	0.005
Spotify	Z	-4.508*	-3.598*	-5.317*	-4.655*	-3.692*	-2.567*	-4.106*	-3.346*	-6.929*	-2.924*
	Sig.	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.010	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.003
WhatsApp	Z	-4.706*	-4.810*	-3.518*	-6.596*	-3.439*	-2.130*	-4.429*	-2.658*	-6.107*	-5.079*
	Sig.	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.001	0.033	0.000	0.008	0.000	0.000

Significant differences reported with the Mann-Whitney U test.

* $p < 0.05$

Regarding RQ3, the group comparisons reveal a pattern of differences in body image concern scores across advertising-exposure and platform-use groups. Together with the correlations, these findings locate appearance-related concerns within adolescents' encounters with commercial content across different digital environments.

DISCUSSION

Social media influencers are increasingly shaping adolescents' body image perceptions. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Spotify, and Twitch expose adolescents to promotional messages by influencers that emphasize idealized body standards. This raises critical questions regarding the impact of such content on adolescents' self-image.

To address our first research question (RQ1), we must consider the paradoxical relationship between "influencer positivity" and the reported prevalence of negative emotions among adolescents. Although some influencers promote positive body image, approximately 12% to 28% of respondents reported frequent or very frequent appearance-related concerns when viewing influencer promotional posts. This phenomenon parallels similar occurrences observed in traditional mass media contexts (Kvardova et al., 2025). This incongruity prompts us to question whether influencer advertising genuinely promotes self-care and overall well-being, as proposed by Town et al. (2023).

As illustrated in Table 2, the most frequently endorsed items concerned the thin and toned body ideal and appearance-based self-evaluation. These responses place bodily standards and self-worth at the center of the discussion on adolescent body image. This idealization extends from the long-established stereotypical beauty standards perpetuated by the media in previous eras (Höld et al., 2025).

However, despite the prevailing stereotypical notion of the “perfect” body, the level of concern observed among adolescents regarding body image, does not entirely align with the extent of frustration and anxiety they experience (Coyne et al., 2025; Maes et al., 2025). Surprisingly, only a modest range of 12% to 14% of adolescents reported feeling distressed by the pursuit of this “ideal body”. This incongruity prompts a fundamental inquiry into the societal acceptance of unrealistic aesthetic standards, which have become deeply ingrained in popular youth culture through the influence of content creators.

Similarly, the findings in Table 5 add to this picture by showing differences in body image concern scores across advertising-exposure and platform-use groups. This pattern supports considering commercial encounters alongside platform participation when examining adolescent body image. This perspective connects with the broader literature on influencer relationships and advertising (Yuan & Lou, 2020; Willoughby et al., 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021; Stein et al., 2022).

This advertising connection raises questions regarding the effectiveness of current regulations in protecting adolescents’ mental health. For example, the European Commission’s Digital Services Act (DSA) prohibits targeting advertisements based on the browsing and behavioral data of users under the age of 18 (European Commission, 2022).

Platform-use comparisons also reveal differences in appearance-related goals, appearance-based self-evaluation, and perceived discrepancies from bodily standards. These patterns invite consideration of appearance-focused content and practices discussed in social media research. This observation aligns with the findings of Vizcaíno-Verdú and Tirocchi (2021) in their analysis of sexual objectification within TikTok dances, where facial expressions and idealized bodies prominently feature alongside a notable degree of sexualization. This outcome is consistent with previous research highlighting the significance of visual elements in adolescents’ perceptions of body image (Leggett & Laursen, 2023).

The differences observed between Spotify users and non-users broaden the discussion beyond predominantly visual platforms. They raise questions about the content encountered, patterns of platform use, and characteristics of adolescents engaging with music streaming environments. Fleischer’s (2021) discussion of “Spotification” and Siles et al.’s (2019) work on playlists and social affect offer contextual perspectives for developing these research questions. Further research should examine whether and how such experiences relate to bodily expectations and self-perception.

When read alongside the literature on crushes and parasocial relationships, the findings raise broader questions about the place of influencer bodies in adolescent self-perception. The endorsement of bodily ideals and the setting of appearance-related goals concern the standards against which adolescents evaluate themselves. These standards, however, can also be embodied by recognizable influencers, bringing bodily aspiration into contact with admiration for a mediated figure. At this intersection, we propose the notion of “body crush” as a form of aspirational attachment, in which an influencer’s body becomes a personally meaningful reference for an imagined bodily self. Building on Pickhardt’s (2012) discussion of identity crushes, this concept directs attention to the possible relationship between admiration for a role model and the wish to embody particular aspects of their appearance.

Identity crushes imply a deep admiration for someone whom adolescents aspire to emulate, perceiving them as leaders or role models. Applied to the context of such influencers, this suggests that adolescents may idealize perfect bodies presented on social media, seeking to replicate their habits and lifestyles in pursuit of an idealized body image.

The analytical interest of “body crush” lies in bringing together bodily aspiration and attachment to a represented figure. Endorsing a beauty standard, wishing to change one’s appearance, and investing an influencer’s body with personal significance are related possibilities, but they need not coincide with each other. This distinction offers a direction for research into how adolescents relate to particular embodied ideals, including whether these relationships are adequately captured by the existing concepts of ideal internalization, wishful identification, and parasocial attachment.

CONCLUSION

This study situates adolescent body image concerns within mediated cultures in which influencer advertising brings commercial messages into contact with bodily ideals. Our findings associate reported advertising exposure with appearance-related concerns, including the endorsement of a thin and toned body ideal, appearance-based self-evaluation, and goals directed toward an ideal body. These representations circulate within platforms where visibility, desirability, and recognition are continuously negotiated, providing a cultural context for understanding bodily evaluation and aspiration.

In addressing the research questions, we observed positive associations between advertising exposure and appearance-related concerns (RQ1), with coefficients varying across platforms and concern indicators (RQ2). Comparisons between advertising-exposure groups and between platform users and non-users also revealed differences in concern scores, with patterns of statistical significance varying across platforms and items (RQ3). When read alongside the literature on identification and mediated relationships, these patterns invite consideration of how the bodies represented by influencers may acquire significance beyond their role as appearance standards. We develop this question through “body crush”: a mode of aspirational attachment in which a represented body becomes a personally meaningful reference for comparison, projection, and an imagined bodily self.

Thus, these findings invite a reconsideration of adolescent development as embedded within digitally mediated contexts in which commercial and cultural logics converge. The circulation of curated bodies provides a setting in which appearance standards may acquire both evaluative and aspirational significance. By articulating “body crush”, this study extends that discussion toward the possible affective relationship between adolescents and embodied ideals, opening a line of inquiry into embodiment, human technology, and identity in adolescence.

LIMITATIONS

Limitations must be acknowledged to contextualize these findings. The cross-sectional design captures associations at a single point in time and does not establish their temporal direction. Greater advertising exposure may precede appearance-related concerns, but existing concerns may also relate to the content adolescents seek, encounter, or recall; shared contextual factors may contribute to both. Furthermore, separate group comparisons do not estimate the independent or relative contributions of advertising exposure and platform use.

The reliance on self-reported data from Spanish adolescents may introduce biases such as selective recall or social desirability, which could affect the accuracy of reported advertising exposure and appearance-related concerns. Furthermore, the scope of the study is limited to platforms widely used at the time of data collection, such as TikTok, Instagram, and Spotify, which may not fully capture the rapidly evolving digital landscape or the potential influence of emerging technologies.

In addition, the quantitative approach, which is robust in identifying statistical relationships, cannot capture the nuances of adolescents' lived experiences or contextual factors influencing their responses to influencer content. A complementary qualitative approach would provide richer insights into how advertising dynamics interact with personal identity formation and self-perception. Despite these limitations, the research lays the foundation for understanding how digital advertising interacts with adolescents' self-perceptions and provides actionable insights for addressing these challenges.

A further boundary concerns the conceptual proposal of "body crush". The questionnaire did not directly assess attachment to or identification with an influencer's body, so the study could not establish the presence, prevalence, or correlates of this proposed experience. Its formulation is a *post hoc* theoretical contribution whose empirical evaluation requires dedicated measures and evidence of its distinction from related constructs.

SOCIETAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The associations observed between advertising exposure and appearance-related concerns bring commercial content into the discussion of adolescent digital well-being. Considered alongside the literature on influencer advertising and bodily ideals, these findings support attention to the responsibilities of advertisers, influencers, and platforms in communicating with younger audiences. These considerations provide a basis for discussing media literacy, advertising transparency, and diverse body representation.

At the policy level, these findings can inform discussion of safeguards for adolescents encountering body-related advertising content. Key actions could include ensuring the clear labeling of sponsored content to promote transparency, implementing algorithmic controls to limit the promotion of content that emphasizes unrealistic body ideals, and establishing accountability mechanisms for influencer collaborations to safeguard adolescents' mental health.

At the societal level, media literacy programs in schools can empower adolescents to critically evaluate the media they consume. These programs should prioritize teaching adolescents how to recognize advertising strategies, resist harmful social comparisons, and embrace diverse representations of body types and beauty standards. Additionally, parents and educators play an essential role in fostering open discussions about the unrealistic nature of many beauty ideals that circulate online and in encouraging adolescents to develop healthier relationships with their own bodies. Integrated across educational and regulatory settings, such efforts may support more critical engagement with commercial content and a more inclusive digital environment for adolescents.

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