The pressure for the perfect shape.

The relation between adolescents' body image self-discrepancy and body image concerns when exposed to fitfluencer content

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Abstract

This paper reports the result of a survey study among 1.055 Spanish adolescents between 11 and 17 years old to examine how influencer-related body image concerns play a role in the relationship between body image self-discrepancy and body satisfaction. The study shows that girls, but not boys, who experience higher body image self-discrepancy have more body image concerns after exposure to fitspiration content posted by influencers, which in turn lowers their body satisfaction. There are no age differences.

Keywords: body image; body image self-discrepancy; body satisfaction; exercise; adolescents; fitspiration content; influencer marketing

Introduction

Adolescents' media use has changed drastically in recent years. In Spain, the mobile phone is the main device for connecting to Internet with a penetration of 97% among individuals over 16 years of age (IAB Spain, 2022). Almost 70% of Spanish children (10-15 years old) have a mobile phone (NSI, 2022) and checking social media is their favorite media activity (García-Jiménez et al., 2020). On these social media, they often come across fitspiration content, which is content that is focused on promoting a fit and healthy lifestyle, which is often posted by fitness and health influencers (Folkvord et al., 2020). These influencers are popular social media users who develop expertise in a particular domain (e.g., fitness, health or food) and build close relationships with their followers (Hudders et al., 2021). Most research on the impact of fitspiration content shows that it harms, rather than benefits, individuals' well-being (Cataldo et al., 2021). For example, several studies confirm

that fitspiration content can increase body dissatisfaction (e.g., Benton & Karazsia, 2015; Dignard & Jarry, 2021; Fatt et al., 2019; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).

Adolescents are highly susceptible to the impact of peers to shape how they see themselves and their bodies (Hay & Ashman, 2003). They are frequently watching influencer content on social media and develop a strong bond with these influencers (i.e., parasocial relationship; Horton & Wohl, 1956), making them more susceptible to the content these influencers post (Lou & Kim, 2019). Most research on how minors are affected by influencer content is concerned with the harmful impact of the sponsorships and dark side consumption behaviours that are embedded within this content (De Veirman et al., 2019). For instance, Smith and Hilton (2022) plea for a more strict regulation concerning the promotion of e-cigarettes on social media, as their focus group study among Scottish youth (11-16 years) suggests that influencers often glamorize vaping. Further, an analysis of the contents of German influencers who are popular among adolescents shows that the majority of the foods that were endorsed in these influencer videos were unhealthy (Winzer et al., 2022). It remains however unclear how adolescents respond to commercial fitspiration content (endorsements of food and fitness products) posted by influencers. The current study therefore aims to examine how this content affects adolescents' body satisfaction and whether this is different for adolescents who experience high (vs. low) discrepancy between their actual and ideal body image.

By means of a large scale survey study among adolescents aged 11 to 17 years (N = 1.055), this study aims to examine the relationship between body image self-discrepancy, body image concerns related to exposure to fitspiration content and body satisfaction. This study further explores if this effect is different for girls than for boys and for different age groups. This paper adds to current literature on influencer marketing by examining how exposure to such sponsored fitspiration content can affect adolescents' body satisfaction.

Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development

The Role of Influencer-Related Body Image Concerns in the Relation Between Body Image Self-Discrepancy and Body Satisfaction

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) can be used to explain the negative effects of fitspiration content posted by (fit)influencers. Social comparison refers to the urge individuals have to compare themselves with others, in order to evaluate themselves and specifically, in this case, their bodies (Festinger, 1954). These social comparisons can affect individuals' well-being, as the feeling to be better or worse off compared to others affects one's evaluation of life. When comparing one's life with those of fitfluencers, the social comparison is likely to be negative, as fitfluencers tend to show off their often thin and muscular bodies and in doing so represent societal body ideals (Alberga et al., 2018; Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). These social comparisons may be more prominent for adolescents who experience high body image self-discrepancy.

Body image self-discrepancy (or more general: actual - ideal self-discrepancy) refers to the discrepancy people may feel between their actual self (i.e., how people actually perceive themselves and their body) and their ideal self (i.e., the self or body people wish to attain) (Higgins, 1987; Vartanian, 2012). Moreover, as people might perceive the ideal body of a fitfluencer as an ideal self, this can make a body image self-discrepancy more salient. In addition, Higgins (1987) states that people who perceive a discrepancy between their actual and ideal self are prone to disappointment and dissatisfaction. As such, several studies have already confirmed that high body image self-discrepancy is related to higher body image concerns and more body dissatisfaction (Ahadzadeh et al., 2017; Bessenoff, 2006; Mason et al., 2022; Möri et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2021). As such, we expect that adolescents who experience high body image self-discrepancy will experience more body image concerns when exposed to influencer content endorsing food and fitness products:

H1: When exposed to fitspiration content posted by influencers, higher levels of body image self-discrepancy in adolescents will be related to higher influencer-related body image concerns.

Although literature does not always clearly distinguish between body image concerns and body (dis)satisfaction, it should be noted that, although related, the concepts are not entirely the same. Body image can be defined as the perceptions and attitudes one has about their physical appearance (Cash & Fleming, 2002). When these perfections and attitudes are negative, they are called body image concerns (Shagar et al., 2017). Body satisfaction on the other hand is defined as the degree to which one is happy with the size and shape of their body (Swiatkowski, 2016). Moreover, Perloff (2014) identified five factors that make people's body image more vulnerable to the impact of social media, namely a low self-esteem, depression, thin-ideal internalization, centrality of appearance to self-worth and perfectionism. Perloff (2014) argues that negative effects of appearance-focused social media content are not unidirectional, but rather that these factors determine higher body image concerns. Moreover, it is expected that higher scores on these vulnerability factors constitute higher body image concerns, which may lead to a lower body satisfaction (Perloff, 2014).

H2: Higher body image self-discrepancy in adolescents is related to more body image concerns when exposed to fitspiration content posted by influencers, which is in turn related to lower body satisfaction.

Health-Related Exercise Motivation

Although previous research has mainly focused on the negative effects of fitspiration content, there is reason to believe that they can elicit positive effects as well. As such, a high body image self-discrepancy can motivate people to minimize this discrepancy (Festinger, 1954; Vartanian, 2012). Moreover, when adolescents feel a discrepancy between their actual and ideal self, due to the ideal influencer, it is possible that this might motivate them to

become more like the influencer and thus diminish the discrepancy. A potential behavior to diminish this discrepancy could then be to increase one's exercise behavior. This can also be linked to the social cognitive theory, which states that people learn by imitating others (Bandura, 2001). Hence, by looking at the exercise behavior of influencers on social media, adolescents might imitate these behaviors and use this to become like the influencer and thus close the gap between their actual and ideal self. This idea is also supported by several studies on fitspiration content. As such, Pasko and Arigo (2021) found in their survey study that fitspiration content motivated students (18-22 years) more if they had negative feelings about the self. Another survey study among Australian men (17-27 years) found that fitspiration content was related to more appearance-related exercise motivation. As such, it can be expected that a higher body image self-discrepancy, although it is related to increased body image concerns, can elicit higher exercise intention. See Figure 1 for the conceptual model.

H3: Higher body image self-discrepancy in adolescents is related to more influencer-related body image concerns, which in turn is related to a higher health-based exercise motivation.

The Moderating Roles of Gender and Age

There is reason to believe that the abovementioned effect of body image self-discrepancy on body image concerns depends on adolescents' gender. As such, literature suggests that, in general, men tend to have lower body image self-discrepancies compared to women (Vartanian, 2012). In addition, a survey study among 293 British people found that the body image self-discrepancy and the body dissatisfaction of men was not significantly impacted by body ideals in the media, while for females significant increases in body image self-discrepancy and body dissatisfaction were found (Möri et al., 2022).

H4: Girls (but not boys) with high (versus low) body image self-discrepancy may experience more body image concerns after exposure to fitspiration content posted by influencers.

While adolescence is an important phase in the development of body image concerns (Voelker et al., 2015), research shows that adolescents in early (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013) as well as late (Ashikali et al., 2014) adolescence are affected by ideal images in the media. Accordingly, in our study we do not expect any differences in age with regard to the relation between body image self-discrepancy and influencer-related body image concerns.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Method

Design and Sample

A survey study among 1.055 Spanish adolescents between 11 and 17 years was conducted (M_{age} = 14 years, 53.6% was male). The sampling procedure was multistage, stratified with proportional allocation, using four ad hoc aggregate geographical areas as the first stratum (following the classification of NUT areas used by the EU) and a second level of stratification according to the socioeconomic status of the families (low, medium and high). The final selection of the adolescents to be surveyed was made according to cross quotas of gender and age. The fieldwork took place between April and June 2022. The adolescents were recruited via a panel service. This study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the university of the first author. Furthermore, the guardian of each participating adolescent was asked for their informed consent.

Measures and Procedure

Participating adolescents first provided demographical information about their gender and age. After that, they completed the measures for the variables of interest of this study. Participants' *body image self-discrepancy* was measured using the Contour Drawing Rating

Scale (CDR), developed by Thompson and Gray (1995). This scale consists of a range of nine contour drawings of male and female models (1 = very thin, 9 = very large). Participating adolescents were asked to use the drawings to indicate what they consider to be their actual body and their ideal body. Body image self-discrepancy was calculated by subtracting the ideal body image score from the actual body image score, using absolute values. The higher the score on this scale, the higher the discrepancy participants experienced between their actual and ideal body image.

Further, all other constructs were measured on a 5-point Likert-scale. *Body image concerns* evoked by influencer content were measured with five items (α = .87), based on factors defined by Perloff (2014) that can place youth at risk for body image concerns, namely low self-esteem, depression, perfectionism, internalization of the thinness ideal, and centrality of appearance to self-worth. Body satisfaction was measured with one item (Fanjul Peyró et al., 2019). Last, adolescents' health-based exercise motivation was measured with one item (Fanjul Peyró et al., 2019). Appendix 1 shows a detailed overview of the measures.

Results

Means

Overall, the adolescents in our sample score low on body image self-discrepancy (M = .93, SD = 1.12) and are fairly satisfied with their body (M = 3.68, SD = .95). In addition, they have a moderate health-related exercise motivation (M = 3.64, SD = .89) and experience few influencer-related body image concerns (M = 2.34, SD = .94). See Figure 2.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Girls (M = 2.46, SD = .99) experience more influencer-related body image concerns compared to boys (M = 2.25, SD = .88, $t(985) = -3.54$, $p < .001$) and tend to be less satisfied with their body (M_{girls} = 3.63, SD = 1.00; M_{boys} = 3.73, SD = .88, $t(978) = 1.84$, $p = .033$).

There are no significant differences between boys and girls with regard to self-discrepancy ($t(907) = -.71$, $p = .24$), nor health-based exercise motivation ($t(1052) = 1.34$, $p = .09$).

[Insert Figure 3 here]

With regard to age, regression analyses show that age does not predict self-discrepancy ($B = -.03$, $SE = .02$, $t = -1.55$, $p = .12$). Age does significantly predict influencer-related body image concerns ($B = .05$, $SE = .02$, $Beta = .098$, $t = 3.19$, $p < .001$), indicating older adolescents experience more influencer-related body image concerns. Further, age negatively predicts body satisfaction ($B = -.03$, $SE = .02$, $Beta = -.065$, $t = -2.10$, $p = .036$), indicating that older adolescents are less satisfied with their body. Finally, age does predict health-based exercise motivation ($B = .04$, $SE = .014$, $Beta = .089$, $t = 2.91$, $p = .004$), indicating that older adolescents have higher health-based exercise motivations.

Correlational Analysis

A correlational analysis, using Pearson correlation, reveals a positive correlation between body image self-discrepancy and influencer-related body image concerns ($r = .19$, $p < .001$), and health-based exercise motivation ($r = .11$, $p < .001$), and a negative correlation with body satisfaction ($r = -.33$, $p < .001$). Influencer-related body image concerns are positively related to health-based exercise motivation ($r = .26$, $p < .001$) and negatively to body satisfaction ($r = -.44$, $p < .001$). Body satisfaction is negatively correlated with health-based exercise motivation ($r = -.13$, $p < .001$). See table 1 for the correlations.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Hypothesis Testing

First, we report the results of a simple mediation analysis testing the mediating role of influencer-related body image concerns in the relation between self-discrepancy and body satisfaction with PROCESS model 4. The results reveal a significant indirect effect ($c' = -.06$, $SE = .01$, 95%CI = -.0854; -.0364). Self-discrepancy is positively related to influencer-related

body image concerns (a = .16, SE = .03, t = 6.23, p < .001) and these influencer-related body image concerns are negatively related to body satisfaction (b = -.39, SE = .03, t = -13.87, p < .001). In addition, the analysis reveals a significant direct effect of self-discrepancy on body satisfaction (c = -.21, SE = .02, 95%CI = -.2556; -.1651). H1 and H2 are confirmed.

Second, we conducted a similar mediation analysis, but with health-based exercise motivation as the dependent variable. The results show that a higher self-discrepancy leads to more influencer-related body image concerns (a = .16, SE = .03, t = 6.23, p < .001) and these concerns are positively related to health-based exercise motivation (b = .24, SE = .03, t = 8.06, p < .001). The indirect path is significant (c' = .04, SE = .01, 95%CI = .0217; .0540), as well as the direct path (c = .05, SE = .02, t = 2.07, p = .04). This confirms H4.

Third, we report the results of a moderated mediation analysis to test the moderating impacts of gender and age. First, a moderated mediation analysis with body satisfaction as dependent variable and gender as moderator, using the PROCESS macro 7 of Hayes, reveals a significant moderated mediation (c' = -.08, SE = .02, 95%CI = -.1232; -.0343). The analysis further reveals that the indirect negative effect of self-discrepancy on body satisfaction through influencer-related body image concerns is only significant for girls (c' = -.09, SE = .02; 95%CI = -.1268; -.0622), and not for boys (c' = -,02, SE = .02, 95%CI = -.0470; .0149). A second analysis with health-based exercise motivation as dependent variable shows a similar significant moderating role of adolescents' gender (c' = .05, SE = .01, 95%CI = .0219; .0761). This analysis shows that the indirect effect of self-discrepancy on health-based exercise motivation through increased influencer-related body image concerns is only significant for girls (c'= .06, SE= .01, 95%CI = .0365; .0789), but not for boys (c' = .01, SE = .01, 95%CI = -.0084; .0292). Regarding age, there are no significant moderated mediations, neither on body satisfaction (c' = .01, SE = .01, 95%CI = -.0058; .0156), nor on exercise intent (c' = -.01, SE = .01, 95%CI = -.0101; .0035). H3 is confirmed.

Discussion

As current research on the impact of fitfluencers mainly focuses on young adults, this explorative study investigated their impact on a younger age group, namely adolescents. Adolescents are not only highly susceptible to the impact of influencers, adolescence is also a crucial period in the formation of body image concerns. This implies that adolescents' body image may be very vulnerable to the effects of the idealized bodies of fitfluencers on social media. The results of a survey study among Spanish adolescents between 11-17 years revealed that more body image concerns are evoked when exposed to influencers endorsing food and fitness products when adolescents experience higher self-discrepancy. This in turn lowered their satisfaction with their body. However, these body image concerns also positively contributed to health-based exercise motivation, which may positively impact upon adolescents' health behaviors. Our study further showed that this indirect relationship is significantly moderated by gender, but not by age. In particular, the study shows that adolescent girls experienced more body image concerns after exposure to fitfluencer content compared to boys, and that they are less satisfied with their body. In addition, the adolescent girls who experienced high self-discrepancy appeared to be especially vulnerable to body image concerns when exposed to influencer content. Although age did not moderate the indirect effect of self-discrepancy on body satisfaction through body image concerns, age did predict body image concerns, body satisfaction and health-based exercise motivation. Older adolescents had more body image concerns, were less satisfied with their body and had higher health-based exercise intent. Exposure to influencer content related to food and fitness can be especially harmful for adolescent girls who experience high self-discrepancy, as it is related to lower body satisfaction. At the same time, it may increase health-based exercise motivation, which may benefit the health of the adolescent. More experimental research is needed to examine how fitspiration and influencer content affects adolescents.

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Figures

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

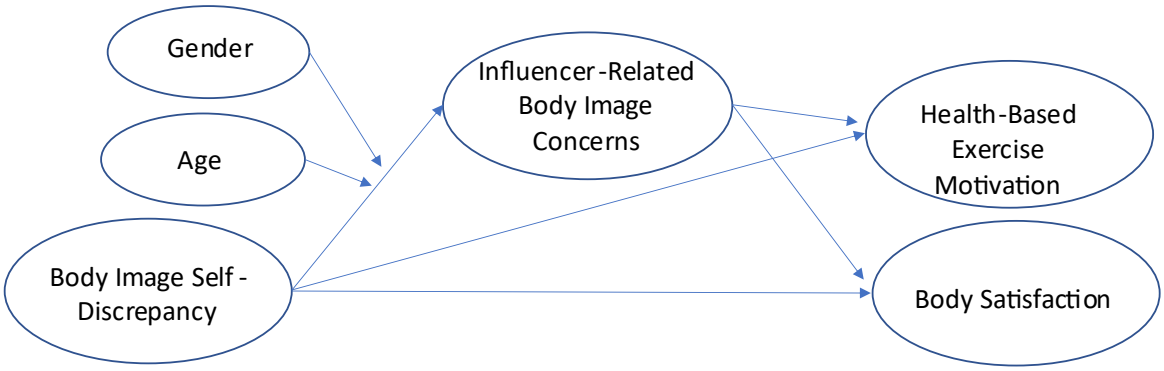


Figure 2. Means of the variables

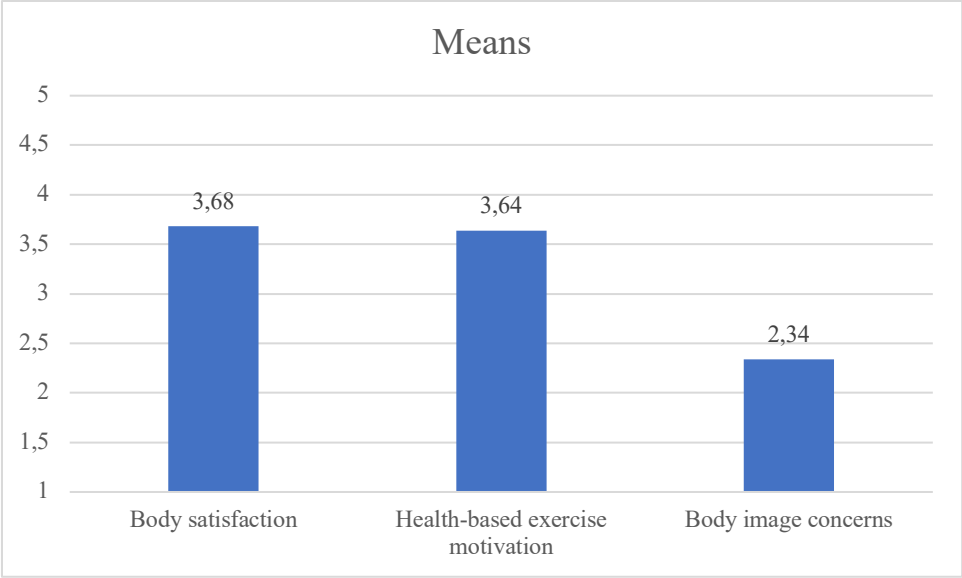
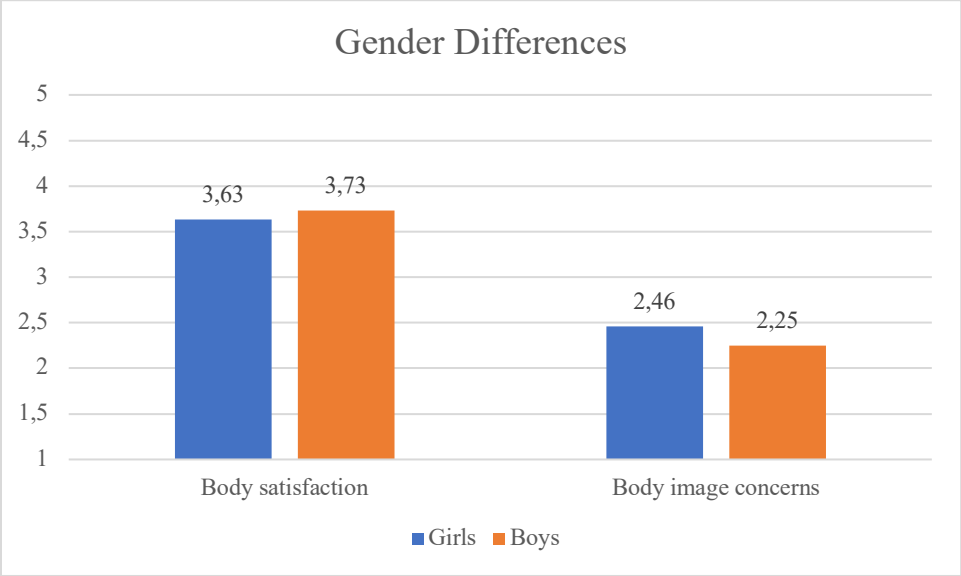


Figure 3. Gender differences in body satisfaction and body image concerns



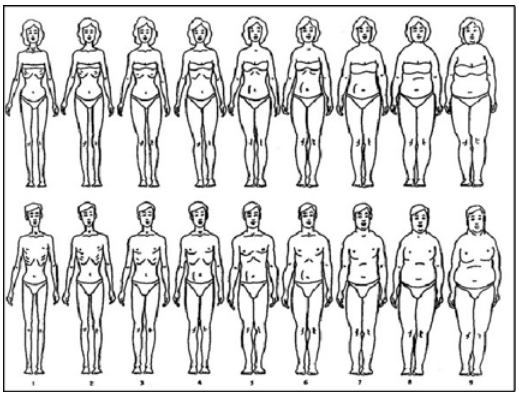
Tables

Table 1. Correlations

	Body image concerns	Body satisfaction	Health-based exercise motivation
Body image self-discrepancy	.19***	-.33***	.11***
Body image concerns		-.44***	.26***
Body satisfaction			-.13***

Appendix

Appendix 1: Measures

Construct	Items	Scale	Reference
Body image self-discrepancy	1. What do you consider to be your ideal figure? 2. Which figure do you think best represents your current figure? 		Thompson and Gray (1995)
Body image concerns	When you see posts of influencers collaborating on food or fitness products, how often do you feel the following? 1. That you are not up to standard and that your physical presence does not sufficiently meet the standard. 2. You feel frustrated or anxious about not being able to achieve the image they convey. 3. A beautiful body is a slim and toned body. 4. Physical appearance determines a lot about how you value yourself. 5. You need to set goals to achieve that perfect body.	1 = Never, 5 = Very frequently	Adapted from Perloff (2014)
Body satisfaction	Are you satisfied with your body and physical appearance?	1 = Not at all and 5 = Very much	Fanjul Peyró et al. (2019)
Health-Related Exercise Motivation	Do you think you need to increase your exercise to have a healthy body?	1 = Not at all and 5 = Very much	Fanjul Peyró et al. (2019)