

# The Social Construction of Body Rejection: How Social Media, Family, and Peers Shape Adolescent Fatphobia

*La construcción social del rechazo corporal: Influencia de las redes sociales, familia y amigos en la gordofobia adolescente*



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### Abstract:

This study examines the relationship between levels of fatphobia in Spanish adolescents (aged 12-17) and perceived body pressure from three main sources: social media, family, and peer group. Using a sample of 1,082 adolescents, validated scales were applied to measure fatphobia and the pressure exerted by each group. The results show that pressure from social media is significantly associated with higher levels of fatphobia. Family pressure plays a dual role, potentially mitigating or increasing fatphobia depending on the specific social and familial context, while peer pressure presents a less linear but still significant relationship. These findings highlight the need to critically address the differentiated impact of these sources of pressure on body image, and suggest implications for educational programs and social policies aimed at reducing fatphobia in this particularly vulnerable population.

### Keywords:

Fatphobia, adolescence, social media, family, peers.

### Resumen:

*Este estudio analiza la relación entre los niveles de gordofobia en adolescentes españoles (12-17 años) y la presión percibida sobre el cuerpo desde tres fuentes principales: redes sociales, familia y grupo de pares. Con una muestra de 1082 adolescentes, se aplicaron escalas validadas para medir la gordofobia y la presión ejercida por cada grupo. Los resultados destacan que la presión desde las redes sociales se asocia significativamente con mayores niveles de gordofobia. La presión familiar muestra un papel dual, puesto que puede tanto mitigar como incrementar la gordofobia en función del contexto social y familiar específico, mientras que la presión de los pares presenta una relación menos clara, aunque significativa. Estos hallazgos permiten subrayar la necesidad de abordar críticamente el impacto diferenciado de las distintas fuentes de presión sobre la imagen corporal, sugiriendo implicaciones para programas educativos y políticas sociales que busquen reducir la gordofobia en esta población especialmente vulnerable.*

### Palabras clave:

*Gordofobia, adolescencia, redes sociales, familia, pares.*

## 1. Introduction and Background

Fatphobia is generally understood as the rejection and stigma directed toward people with overweight or obesity, also referred to as weight bias. However, for researchers such as Bastos (2019) and Gallardo (2021), fatphobia goes further, as it denotes a system of oppression that places higher-weight individuals in situations of disadvantage, injustice, and exclusion –one that is reproduced systematically. This disapproval becomes evident whenever a body diverges from normative body standards. Thus, the prejudice itself, and the consequences it generates, originate in perceptions of the body or physical appearance.

These body-related judgments develop throughout life, shaped by personal experiences and by social and cultural influences (Ricciardelli & Yager, 2016). Moreover, certain physical changes –together with psychological factors– play a crucial role (Burychka *et al.*, 2021). Body image is therefore not constructed in isolation; rather, it is the outcome of a complex web of influences. Consequently, ideal-body archetypes can be understood as a cultural construct sustained by widely shared standards that serve to attribute meanings, evaluate physical appearance, and categorize individuals based on their looks (García-Villanueva & Hernández-Ramírez, 2022). The role of culture in shaping body image is evident, for example, in cultural representations of beauty in fashion magazines and advertising (Almansa-Martínez & Travesedo-Rojas, 2017; Hormigos & Ballester, 2020).

According to Puhl (2015), fatphobia is explained largely by underlying prejudices. Studies such as Stoll *et al.* (2022) show that negative judgments about higher-weight bodies appear at very early ages and intensify over time. This rejection is frequently legitimized through claims that obesity constitutes an epidemic (Araújo *et al.*, 2018). Higher-weight individuals are also often perceived as less qualified, lacking self-control, and struggling with interpersonal difficulties –perceptions that translate into reduced success in settings such as job interviews (Kolotkin *et al.*, 2001).

Judgments about what constitutes an “ideal body” are directly related to socially accepted norms and standards. Thus, while certain body shapes result in the stigmatization of particular groups, other body types are promoted as more desirable and are associated with success, happiness, and social acceptance (Feijoo *et al.*, 2024; Gallardo & Franco, 2020).

Among adolescents, data from the UNICEF Spain Childhood and Adolescence Opinion Barometer (Ramos *et al.*, 2025) reveal that having an attractive physical appearance is important. Adolescents also perceive this as a trait more strongly associated with girls, pointing to the persistence of gender stereotypes. The combination of bodily changes and development, specific psychological processes, and interactions with peers helps explain the prominence of physical appearance in this age group. According to Rocu *et al.* (2025), the need for acceptance and belonging leads adolescents to view physical appearance as a key dimension.

This trend is further reinforced by the fact that adolescents form part of a generational cohort highly exposed to social-media content (Sádaba, 2024; IAB, 2024). In Spain, access to the internet and social networks is widespread among children and adolescents (ONTSI, 2024). Data from the National Institute of Statistics (INE, 2024) show that 94.7% of children use the internet and 70.6% of those aged 10 to 15 own a mobile phone. Consuming social-media content has become one of the most common activities among young people in Spain. According to a survey by the digital-safety platform Qustodio (2024) conducted in five countries (Spain, the United States, Australia, France, and the United Kingdom), Spanish children and adolescents spend the most time on social media –more than an hour per day.

Social-media platforms have thus consolidated themselves as key spaces for communication, social development, and identity formation (Pérez-Torres, 2024; Lajnef, 2023; Tsaliki, 2022). Consequently, there is growing concern about their effects on adolescents (García-Matilla, 2022; Muñoz Franco *et al.*, 2023; AEPD, 2023), particularly their impact on mental health (Guzmán & Gélvez, 2023). Adolescents use social media to seek a variety of gratifications (Rivas-Herrero & Igartua, 2021; Tarullo, 2020). For example, they use it to stay informed about different topics (Zazo & Martínez-Fresneda, 2024), including well-being and beauty (Cataldo, 2021; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). Evidence shows a relationship between perceptions and

behaviors related to physical appearance and the following of influencers (Autor *et al.*, 2023; Nuss *et al.*, 2024; Breves *et al.*, 2025).

Considering the negative effects, the algorithmic functioning of social media (Manovich, 2017) can amplify exposure to content promoting unrealistic beauty standards, reinforcing stereotypes and unattainable expectations (Maldonado, 2024). Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok often highlight specific beauty ideals –frequently filtered or edited images–that may foster dissatisfaction and contribute to an increased risk of eating disorders, anxiety, depression, and harmful behaviors as adolescents attempt to conform to perceived standards (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). Although both boys and girls experience appearance-related pressure, expectations may vary significantly by gender (Fernández & Pedrón, 2022).

While extreme thinness is no longer the dominant aspirational ideal –due partly to its association with disorders such as anorexia– digital platforms have amplified the visibility of content linked to *fitspiration*, promoting bodies that are slim as well as muscular or toned as models to aspire to (Bell *et al.*, 2024; Talbot *et al.*, 2017). This *fitspiration* content results in increased exposure to material related to physical activity and “healthy” dieting, which can generate high levels of body dissatisfaction (Carrotte *et al.*, 2017; Cataldo *et al.*, 2021).

Alongside social media, the family plays a key role in transmitting body-image ideals. As De León (2010) explains, the family serves as the primary reference point in the construction of self-concept and self-esteem, including body perception. The influence of family in shaping adolescents’ body image has been documented across multiple studies and is widely recognized in the current literature. For example, parents’ comments, judgments, and expectations about the body and eating habits can shape how adolescents perceive their own physical appearance (Rodgers *et al.*, 2019; Ata *et al.*, 2007; Puhl *et al.*, 2015). This influence can be either positive or negative, depending on the nature of these messages. Supportive and accepting discourse can foster a healthy body image and high self-esteem, while constant criticism and unrealistic expectations may contribute to body dissatisfaction and maladaptive behaviors (Cortez *et al.*, 2017). In this regard, the parent-child relationship –particularly the bond with mothers– may help protect adolescents from the negative effects that social-media use has on body perception (De Vries *et al.*, 2018).

During adolescence, peer groups also play a significant role, becoming essential points of reference in shaping body image. The need for acceptance and belonging leads young people to compare their appearance with that of their friends and classmates (Jones & Newman, 2009). Peer comments and criticism about the body can affect self-esteem and fuel body dissatisfaction (Matera *et al.*, 2013; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2005), acting as a risk factor for both emotional difficulties and eating-related disorders. Peer pressure may be particularly intense at this stage of life, when conforming to group standards often appears crucial for social acceptance (Amaya-Hernández *et al.*, 2017).

The family-school partnership is fundamental to ensuring holistic and well-rounded education at all stages, especially during adolescence. In this context, it is crucial for families and educational institutions to work together to provide adolescents with the skills, tools, and resources that foster satisfaction with their physical appearance. Media-literacy initiatives examining the influence of media and social networks can be effective in reducing weight-related stigma and fatphobic attitudes, and in promoting adolescents’ mental and emotional well-being (Vázquez-Arévalo *et al.*, 2021).

This study aims to analyze the relationship between levels of fatphobia among Spanish adolescents and the perceived pressure regarding body image from three specific sources: social media, family, and peers. Accordingly, the following research questions are posed:

1. What is the relationship between levels of fatphobia and adolescents' perception that a muscular or toned body provides social advantages or success?
2. To what extent is perceived pressure from social media related to higher levels of fatphobia among adolescents?
3. How is family pressure associated with levels of fatphobia?
4. What role does peer pressure play in shaping fatphobic attitudes?

## 2. Materials and Methods

A cross-sectional design was adopted using a self-administered online-panel survey targeting Spanish adolescents aged 12-17. A total of 1,082 individuals participated, but the effective sample consisted of 1,032 after excluding 4.9% who reported receiving professional support or treatment for issues directly related to the study variables, in accordance with the project's strict ethical guidelines. These participants responded only to general questions on digital habits and were not evaluated on fatphobia measures.

The sample was obtained through two-stage stratified sampling: in the first stage, geographic areas were selected using uniform allocation; in the second, proportional stratification was applied based on gender, age, and socioeconomic status (SES). With a 95.5% confidence level and  $p=q=0.5$ , the maximum sampling error was  $\pm 2.98\%$ .

Fatphobia was measured using the validated scale by Bacon *et al.* (2001), which demonstrated high reliability (McDonald's  $\omega = 0.915$ ). The sample was divided into quintiles, generating five distinct levels of fatphobia: (1) low or none, (2) mild, (3) average, (4) considerable, and (5) high. Pressure on body image from social media, family, and peers was also assessed using psychometric constructs with high internal reliability ( $\omega = 0.831-0.897$ ). Table 1 presents the variables used.

**Table 1. Description of the variables**

Variable	Items	Scale
<b>Fatphobia</b>	[GF1] Lazy – Hard-working [GF2] Lacking willpower – Strong willpower [GF3] Attractive – Unattractive [GF4] Good self-control – Poor self-control [GF5] Fast – Slow [GF6] Physically resistant – Lacking physical resistance [GF7] Active – Inactive [GF8] Weak – Strong [GF9] Self-indulgent – Self-disciplined [GF10] Doesn't like food – Likes food [GF11] No curves/shape – Clearly defined shape [GF12] Eats little – Eats too much [GF13] Insecure – Confident [GF14] Low self-esteem – High self-esteem	Response range: 1–5 <sup>1</sup> .
Social Success	To what extent do you think having a toned/muscular body provides more opportunities or advantages in life?	(1) No additional opportunities (2) Few additional opportunities (3) Quite a few additional opportunities (4) Many additional opportunities
Pressure from Social Media	Indicate your level of agreement with these statements referring to your environment: 1. I feel pressure from social media to appear more physically fit. 2. Social media pressure me to appear thinner. 3. Social media pressure me to improve my appearance. 4. I feel pressured by social media to reduce my body-fat level. 5. I feel pressured by social media to be more muscular. 6. I feel pressured by social media to increase the size or definition of my muscles.	(1) Strongly disagree – (5) Strongly agree

1 Step 1: For items 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, and 12, score as follows: 1 2 3 4 5. Step 2: For items 1, 2, 8, 9, 11, 13, and 14, apply reverse scoring: 5 4 3 2 1. Step 3: Sum the scores of all items to obtain the total score, then divide by 14. Higher scores indicate greater fatphobia, whereas lower scores reflect lower levels of fatphobia (Bacon *et al.*, 2001).

Family Pressure	<p>Indicate your level of agreement with these statements referring to your environment:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I feel pressured by social media to reduce my body-fat level.</li> <li>2. I feel pressured by social media to be more muscular.</li> <li>3. I feel pressured by social media to increase the size or definition of my muscles.</li> </ol>	(1) Strongly disagree - (5) Strongly agree
Peer Pressure	<p>Indicate your level of agreement with these statements referring to your environment:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I feel pressure from my peers to reduce my body-fat level.</li> <li>2. I feel pressure from my peers to get in better shape.</li> <li>3. I feel pressure from my peers to improve my appearance.</li> </ol>	

Source: Data compiled by the authors

Descriptive analyses were conducted, along with Chi-square tests of independence (using Cramér’s V as the effect size) for nominal variables, and one-way ANOVA (with  $\eta^2$  as the effect size) for group comparisons. Data were analyzed using the SPSS software.

The study was carried out in accordance with the ethical guidelines established in the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the host university (Ref. PI:066/2023). All participants and their legal guardians were informed about the study’s objectives, procedures, and data-confidentiality measures, and provided informed consent prior to participation.

### 3. Analysis and Results

The distribution of the sample across the five levels of fatphobia identified by the scale used (Bacon *et al.*, 2001) is presented in Table 2. The largest group corresponds to the mild fatphobia level ( $n = 282$ ), followed closely by the considerable fatphobia group ( $n = 204$ ) and the low or no fatphobia group ( $n = 203$ ). The moderate fatphobia group is the smallest ( $n = 142$ ), while the high fatphobia group is similar in size to the considerable level ( $n = 201$ ).

Regarding the mean scores obtained for each group, there is a clear upward progression from Group 1 (2.19 points), representing low or no fatphobia, to Group 5 (4.29 points), which reflects the highest intensity of negative attitudes toward individuals who are overweight. This pattern indicates that participants classified into higher levels exhibit stronger prejudices or more negative attitudes toward bodies that deviate from the normative body ideal.

**Tabla 2. Niveles de gordofobia**

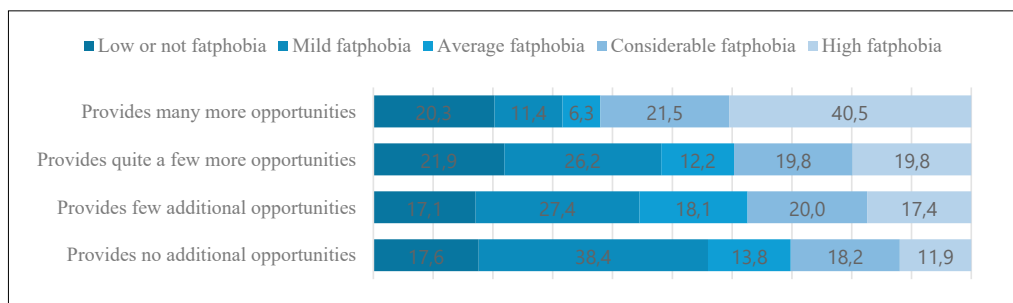
Group	Definition	N	Group Mean
1	Low or no fatphobia	203	2.19
2	Mild fatphobia	282	2.94
3	Average fatphobia	142	3.17
4	Considerable fatphobia	204	3.56
5	High fatphobia	201	4.29

Source: Data compiled by the authors

### 3.1. Fatphobia and the Perception of a Toned Body as a Marker of Success

A significant association was identified between levels of fatphobia and the perception that having a muscular or toned body provides clear social advantages ( $\chi^2(12, N = 1032) = 49.066, p < .001, V = .11$ ). Among adolescents with the highest levels of fatphobia, 40.5% firmly believe that a muscular body offers more opportunities or advantages in life. This finding indicates that the internalization of success-oriented body ideals is closely associated with more negative attitudes toward diverse bodies—particularly higher-weight individuals.

**Figure 1. Degree to which a toned/muscular body provides more opportunities or advantages in life, according to level of fatphobia (%)**



Source: Data compiled by the authors

### 3.2. *Perceived Pressure from Social Media, Family, and Peer Groups*

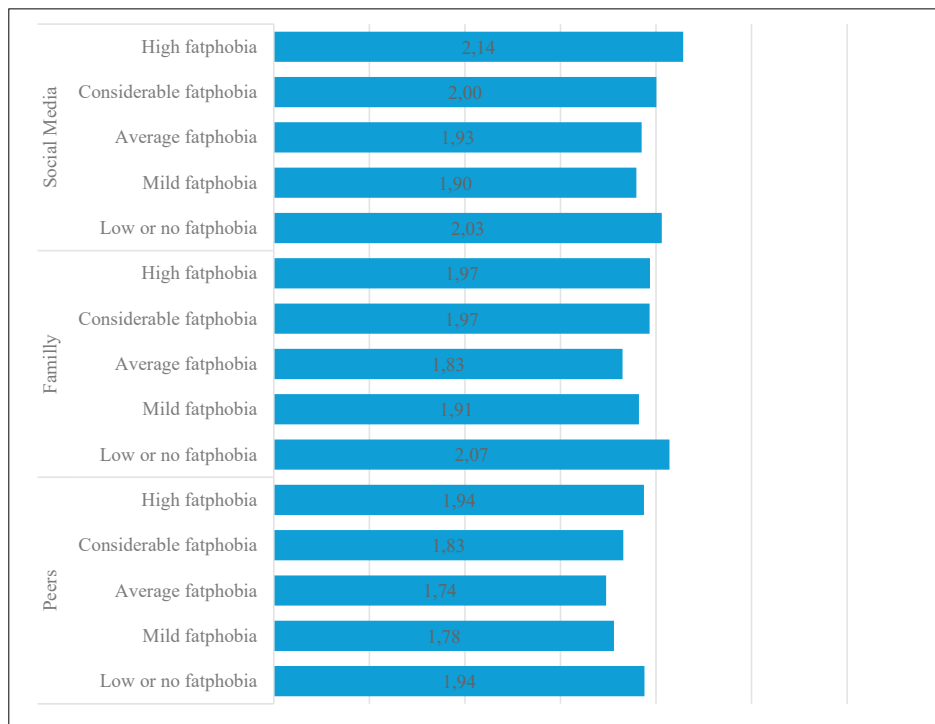
Statistically significant differences were found between the different levels of fatphobia and the perceived pressure on body image from three key sources: social media, family, and peers.

Perceived pressure originating from social media showed a clear association with higher levels of fatphobia ( $F(4, 983) = 2.89$ ,  $p = .021$ ,  $\eta^2 = .012$ ). This association was particularly pronounced among adolescents with considerable or high fatphobia, suggesting that greater consumption of and exposure to idealized body content on social media is linked to stronger rejection of higher-weight bodies.

Family pressure also showed a significant association, although with a more complex pattern ( $F(4, 996) = 2.64$ ,  $p = .032$ ,  $\eta^2 = .011$ ). Adolescents with the lowest levels of fatphobia reported high levels of family pressure, possibly due to protective concerns. However, pressure was similarly elevated among those with considerable or high fatphobia, suggesting that family messages may play both protective and reinforcing roles depending on the body- and health-related narratives that predominate within the household.

With respect to peer pressure, a significant but non-linear relationship emerged ( $F(4, 989) = 2.65$ ,  $p = .032$ ,  $\eta^2 = .011$ ). The analysis showed higher levels of perceived pressure at the extremes—among adolescents with either very low or very high fatphobia. This pattern suggests a multifaceted influence of the peer group, which may either reinforce or mitigate fatphobic attitudes depending on the adolescent's specific relational and social context.

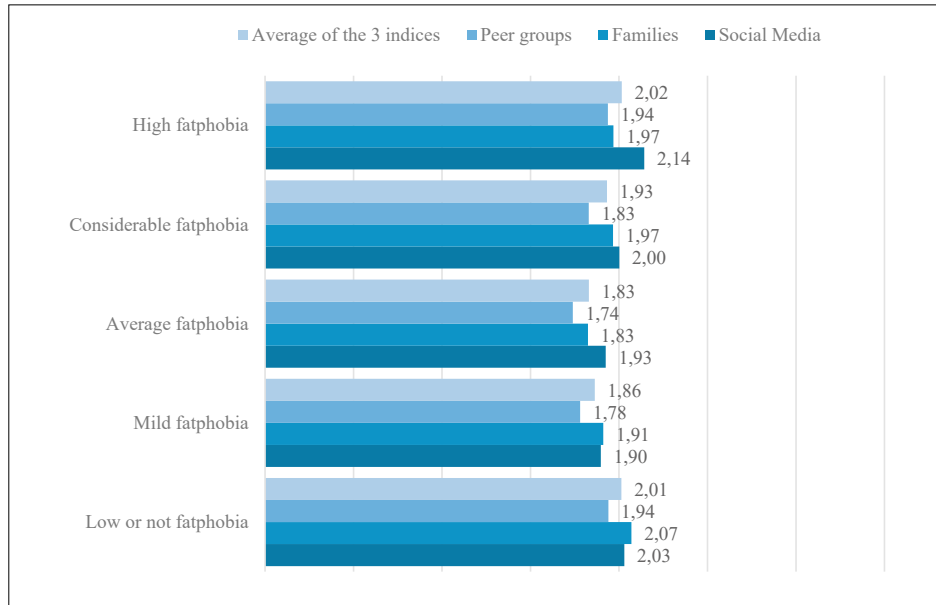
**Figure 2. Degree of perceived pressure by level of fatphobia (mean values)**



Source: Data compiled by the authors

Finally, a direct comparison of the perceived pressures originating from social media, family, and peers revealed notable differences. Among adolescents with the highest levels of fatphobia, perceived pressure from social media was significantly greater, exceeding, on average, peer pressure by approximately 0.20 points and family pressure by 0.17 points. In contrast, among adolescents with moderate or low levels of fatphobia, family pressure emerged with values equal to –or even higher than– those perceived from social media, suggesting a possible protective or mediating role of the family environment in relation to the potentially negative influence of body- and appearance-related digital content.

**Figure 3. Degree of perceived pressure by level of fatphobia (mean values)**



Source: Data compiled by the authors

#### 4. Conclusions

This study provides evidence of how different sources of pressure –social, family-based, and digital– differentially influence levels of fatphobia among Spanish adolescents.

The strong association between viewing a toned or muscular body as a marker of success and higher levels of fatphobia is particularly noteworthy. It confirms that the internalization of aesthetic standards can foster prejudice toward bodies that diverge from normative ideals, in line with previous research (Ata *et al.*, 2007; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). This association helps explain how the social construction of the ideal body may be linked to discriminatory behaviors and the negative internalization of diverse or higher-weight bodies.

One of the most significant findings concerns the predominant influence of social media as a source of body-image pressure associated with elevated levels of fatphobia. This result reinforces prior studies (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016) showing that digital platforms play a central role in disseminating rigid, normative, and often unrealistic body ideals. High exposure to this type of content appears to strengthen prejudices toward bodies that depart from these standards, generating substantial negative effects on body acceptance and attitudes toward higher-weight individuals.

Family pressure showed a more complex pattern, functioning as both a protective and an amplifying factor depending on the specific context. This finding aligns with earlier research (Neumark-Sztainer *et al.*, 2010; Rodgers & Chabrol, 2009) underscoring the family's central role in shaping and mediating body ideals. Family influence thus depends largely on the narratives and messages prevalent within the home: positive, acceptance-oriented messages may buffer the negative effect of external pressures, whereas negative or highly demanding messages about the body may reinforce fatphobia. This highlights the critical importance of educational interventions aimed at parents and caregivers, strengthening their role in preventing discriminatory attitudes toward diverse bodies.

Regarding peer pressure, the results were less clear-cut, showing non-linear yet significant relationships. This pattern is consistent with prior literature suggesting that peer influence is multifaceted and highly dependent on adolescents' social and relational dynamics (Jones & Crawford, 2006; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001). One possible explanation is the diversity of peer contexts (close friends, schoolmates, sports groups, etc.) and the distinct ways in which these social environments may moderate fatphobic attitudes.

From an applied perspective, these findings underscore the importance of addressing fatphobia in both educational and institutional settings and within the family environment. The results suggest that the family can act as a protective agent against predominant fatphobic messages, but also—as shown in certain contexts—as a channel that inadvertently reinforces such messages if not addressed consciously. It is therefore essential to foster opportunities for open, non-judgmental conversation at home about body diversity, the value of the body beyond appearance, and the impact of aesthetic pressure on adolescents' mental health. Promoting such dialogue about body image, social norms, and exposure to social-media content is a key strategy for preventing the internalization of fatphobic attitudes and fostering well-being. This conclusion aligns with recommendations from previous studies, including the Teen On Fit report (2024), which emphasizes that family dialogue helps cultivate a more critical, empathetic, and healthy understanding of one's own body and that of others.

Among the limitations of this study, the cross-sectional design stands out, as it prevents the establishment of clear causal relationships between variables. Additionally, the use of self-administered questionnaires may introduce biases linked to social desirability or to difficulties in acknowledging one's own negative attitudes. A particularly promising direction for future research is the incorporation of qualitative approaches that delve more deeply into how attitudes toward the body are constructed and transmitted within the household. Conducting dyadic interviews (e.g., mother-daughter or father-son) would allow researchers to capture how families talk about—or avoid talking about—body image. This shared lens would offer a more nuanced understanding of the family's role as a key context for reproducing or challenging fatphobic discourse, and would contribute to the design of more sensitive and contextually informed interventions.

This study confirms that adolescent fatphobia is closely related to social pressure arising from multiple contexts, particularly social media, which emerge as the primary source of negative influence on body image. Adolescents exposed to higher levels of pressure from digital platforms tend to display more negative attitudes toward higher-weight bodies, thereby reinforcing prejudice and discriminatory behaviors.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that the family context plays a complex and dual role, capable of both buffering and reinforcing fatphobic attitudes depending on the dominant discourses and values within the household. This insight

underscores the strategic importance of families in preventing and reducing body-related prejudice and highlights the need to promote educational programs specifically targeted at parents and caregivers.

### 5. Specific contributions of each author:

	Author Contributions
Conceptualization and study design	Patricia Lafuente-Pérez, Begoña Ladrón-de-Guevara, Beatriz Feijoo.
Methodology	Beatriz Feijoo.
Data collection and analysis	Beatriz Feijoo.
Discussion and conclusions	Patricia Lafuente-Pérez, Begoña Ladrón-de-Guevara
Writing, formatting, revision, and approval of manuscript versions	Patricia Lafuente-Pérez, Begoña Ladrón-de-Guevara.

### 6. Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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