Online Compliments and Digital Communication: Sexual Objectification in Adolescence

Piropos online y comunicación digital: la objetivación sexual en la adolescencia

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Abstract:

Adolescents use social media as a key tool for communication, initiating and maintaining interpersonal relationships, and expressing their sexuality through bodily self-representation. This study aimed to analyze experiences of sexual objectification through "online compliments" exchanged among adolescents in digital environments; to identify the behaviors of those who send and receive such comments; to understand the intent behind their emission; and to explore the feelings and reactions elicited in adolescents who receive these remarks online. The sample consisted of 232 students (121 girls and 111 boys) enrolled in secondary and post-compulsory education in northwestern Spain, aged between 15 and 18, who participated in 20 focus groups. The main findings reveal that adolescents use social media to share personal images and videos and to engage socially through objectifying comments, particularly directed at girls. These online compliments not only mirror offline experiences but often occur with greater frequency and intensity in virtual contexts. Our results underscore the urgent need to implement comprehensive sex education programs in schools to foster healthy, violence-free socio-affective relationships.

Keywords:

Adolescents, social media, online compliments, sexual objectification, cybersexual harassment.

Resumen:

El colectivo adolescente utiliza las redes sociales como una herramienta clave para la comunicación, el inicio y consolidación de las relaciones interpersonales, así como para la expresión de su sexualidad a través de la imagen corporal. Los objetivos de este estudio fueron analizar las experiencias de objetivación a través de los "piropos online" que emite y recibe el colectivo adolescente en la esfera digital, determinar los comportamientos de quien emite y recibe estos comentarios, comprender la finalidad de la emisión, y conocer los sentimientos y reacciones que les genera al colectivo adolescente que recibe piropos en la esfera digital. Los participantes fueron 232 estudiantes (121 chicas y 111 chicos) de Educación Secundaria y Bachillerato, de entre 15 y 18 años, del noroeste de España, que participaron en 20 grupos de discusión. Los principales resultados mostraron que el colectivo adolescente utiliza las redes sociales para compartir sus propias imágenes y vídeos e interactuar socialmente a través de comentarios objetivantes, especialmente hacia las chicas. De este modo, la emisión y recepción de piropos online no solamente son una continuidad de las experiencias que se reflejan en el contexto offline, sino que son comportamientos que pueden suceder con más frecuencia y con más dureza en el contexto virtual. Nuestros resultados sugieren la necesidad de incorporar programas integrales de educación sexual en las escuelas para promover relaciones socioafectivas sanas y libres de violencia.

Palabras clave:

adolescentes, redes sociales, piropos online, objetivación sexual, ciberacoso sexual.

1. Introduction

In the digital age, social media platforms have become leading spaces for cybersocialization among adolescents, playing a pivotal role in shaping and developing their social, emotional, and communicative bonds (Rodríguez-Castro *et al.*, 2021a). The use of ICTs has become virtually universal: in Europe, 97% of young people between the ages of 16 and 29 use the Internet daily, a figure that has grown exponentially since 2015 (Eurostat, 2025). By 2024, 88% of youths within this age group in the EU were active on social media (Eurostat, 2025). According to the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC, 2024) study by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2024), 36% of adolescents in Europe maintain constant contact with friends through digital platforms –a proportion that rises to 44% among 15-year-old girls and boys. The most popular platforms among Europeans aged 13 to 24 are WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube (Global Digital, 2025).

In the Spanish context, internet use among adolescents is virtually universal: 96% regularly surf the internet or digital platforms (INE, 2025), and nearly nine out of ten log in several times daily or remain continuously connected. This hyperconnectivity

intensifies with age, as 12% of 14-year-olds spend more than four hours a day online or on digital platforms, a figure that rises to 21% among 16-year-olds (Save the Children, 2024). It is also worth noting that digital initiation is occurring at increasingly younger ages –58% begin routinely using the Internet and digital platforms by the age of 11, and nearly one in three start even before turning ten (Save the Children, 2024).

Social media platforms are the main reason adolescents go online, with 79.8% of Spanish teenagers citing them as their primary activity, and 13.3% creating content specifically to publish on these digital platforms (Save the Children, 2024). The presence of adolescents on social media is extremely high: 98.5% of Spanish teenagers are registered on at least one social network, and 83.5% are on three or more (UNICEF, 2022). The most widely used platforms among Spanish adolescents aged 12 to 17 are WhatsApp (95%), Instagram (86%), TikTok (81%), and YouTube (69%) (IAB Spain, 2025). These figures reveal a clear preference among adolescents for digital environments characterized by immediacy, interactivity, and constant connectivity, as opposed to offline spaces. However, hyperconnectivity is not without risks: 33% of Spanish adolescents aged 12 to 16 are at high risk of compulsive use of digital services, including social media (ONTSI, 2024). In this regard, the European Kids Online study (O'Neill and Dopona, 2025) ranks Spain as the country with the highest prevalence of problematic Internet use among young people aged 9 to 18. Specifically, 13% of those aged 12 to 18 exhibit cyberaddiction behaviors, and 32% are at risk.

Beyond risks linked to time spent online, concerns are also emerging regarding exposure to sexual content and inappropriate sexual interactions (O'Neill and Dopona, 2025). According to UNICEF's latest report (2022), more than 40% of adolescents reported having received erotic or sexual messages, one in ten has received sexual propositions from adults, and one in five could be experiencing cyberbullying. These figures highlight that, regardless of geographic context, the intensive and daily use of social media by adolescents worldwide (Bärtl, 2018) transforms these digital environments into key spaces for understanding new forms of socialization, communication, and the expression of sexuality during adolescence, as well as the impact these factors have on adolescents' psychosocial development.

In the virtual sphere, social media platforms constitute highly visual environments, saturated with images and videos focused on physical appearance and the sexualized body (Bell *et al.*, 2024; Burnell *et al.*, 2021). Adolescents on social media share and post images and/or videos in which they consider themselves to "look good," showcasing their bodies and physical attributes according to the idealized beauty standards promoted by the dominant digital culture (Berne *et al.*, 2014; Burnette *et al.*, 2017). It is noteworthy that during adolescence, physical appearance is a central element in self-perception and in acceptance and recognition by peer groups (Mayeux and Kleiser, 2020). On these digital platforms, the main function of images and/or videos is to encourage interaction through "positive" comments (Paddock *et al.*, 2025; Bell, 2019; Chua and Chang, 2016; Rideout and Fox, 2018), "likes," or emojis (Nesi *et al.*, 2018). These comments can range from objectifying remarks about physical appearance to explicit insinuations or sexual propositions (Frisén y Berne, 2020).

Thus, adolescents on social media are constantly exposed to receiving sexualized comments and/or visual reactions ("likes" or emojis) on their posts from both peers and strangers (Vandenbosch *et al.*, 2022). These forms of social interaction have become a common and normalized mode of communication among adolescents (Rodríguez-Castro *et al.*, 2021a). This practice is embedded within a digital culture that tends to reinforce the objectification of the female body, with girls being the primary

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recipients of such comments, thereby reinforcing gender hierarchies in interpersonal relationships and perpetuating power dynamics and gender stereotypes (Lameiras *et al.*, 2018, 2024; Rodríguez-Castro *et al.*, 2025).

To understand how Western culture systematically commodifies and objectifies the bodies or body parts of girls and women, we rely on Objectification Theory developed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997). This theory explains the consequences of being a woman in a culture that treats girls and women as sexual objects through body evaluation (e.g., catcalls, staring, sexual comments), as well as unwanted sexual advances, harassment, and/or sexual abuse (Kozee *et al.*, 2007). The evaluation of girls' and women's bodies through an "objectifying gaze" is defined as the behavior of visually inspecting or staring at another person's body or sexual body parts (Gervais *et al.*, 2013), with the purpose of being "used" or "consumed" by others (Fredrickson y Roberts, 1997). Focusing attention on bodies leads to "literal objectification," defined as "any situation in which a person is perceived as an object" (Heflick and Goldenberg, 2014, p. 225). In this way, objectification experiences represent a form of dehumanization, placing those who are objectified at a level inferior to human beings (Gervais *et al.*, 2013).

Experiences of objectification, through comments on women's physical appearance and sexualized bodies, often begin during the transition from childhood to adolescence, when girls' bodies start to attract the gaze, sexualization, and evaluation of boys and men (Fredrickson y Roberts, 1997; Farquhar y Wasylkiw 2007; Rousseau y Eggermont 2017; Tiggemann y Slater 2015; Ward *et al.*, 2015). This stage of development is particularly relevant to the processes of objectification and self-objectification, as experiences of sexualization of the female body increase significantly with the onset of puberty. The physical changes inherent to this stage not only transform body image but are also accompanied by a growing tendency toward self-objectification, that is, internalizing the external gaze as a form of self-evaluation of physical appearance and the sexualized body (Mustafa y Akram, 2022). In this way, girls and women bind their identity to the value assigned to their bodies and are condemned to dissatisfaction when their bodies do not fit beauty standards (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Thus, for girls and women, body dissatisfaction is more the rule than the exception, and this "normative discontent" persists in contemporary societies (Fallon *et al.*, 2014; Lameiras *et al.*, 2018, 2024), both in analog and digital contexts. Consequently, objectification experiences compromise the identity construction of girls and women, reducing them to their beauty and sexuality and disconnecting them from their bodies, thoughts, feelings, and desires, turning them into objects of sexual interest and attention from boys and men (Fredrickson y Roberts, 1997; Rousseau y Eggermont 2017; Tiggemann y Slater 2015; Ward *et al.*, 2015).

Currently, Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) objectification theory is particularly relevant in the context of social media, where adolescents, especially girls, post images and videos of themselves to be viewed, objectified, and subjected to objectifying comments (Tiggeman and Barbato, 2018). These often normalized behaviors constitute forms of sexual cyberbullying that are frequently not recognized as such by those who experience or perpetrate them. Thus, social media provides a unique digital platform to deeply study the effects of objectifying comments related to physical appearance and the sexualized body (Tiggeman y Barbato, 2018).

International scientific literature shows that sexual objectification experiences among adolescents in the online sphere indicate that both viewing and posting images and/or videos on social media increase experiences of sexual objectification through the sending and receiving of online compliments focused on physical appearance and the sexualized body (Bell *et al.*, 2019; Burnell *et al.*, 2021; Butkowski *et al.*, 2019; Frisén *et al.*, 2020; Fardouly *et al.*, 2017; Feltman y Szymanski, 2018; Lin *et al.*, 2022; Manago

et al., 2015; Paddock *et al.*, 2024, 2025; Sarabia y Estévez, 2016). Girls are the ones who most frequently experience sexual objectification through online compliments, while boys are the primary emitters of these comments (Burnell *et al.*, 2021; Lin *et al.*, 2022). International studies show that between 79.2% and 85% of adolescent girls have received objectifying comments on their social media posts, focused on their physical appearance and sexualized body (Burnell *et al.*, 2021; Paddock *et al.*, 2024, 2025), followed by "likes" and/or emojis (16.7%) (Paddock *et al.*, 2025). These practices are widely normalized among adolescents and are associated with indicators of social recognition within peer groups (Paddock *et al.*, 2024).

Thus, the use of social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, which focus on visual content and immediate feedback through objectifying comments, reinforces and intensifies experiences of objectification (Tiggemann and Barbato, 2018; Frisén and Berne, 2020). These dynamics carry significant psychosocial risks, as constant exposure to objectifying comments has been linked to heightened self-objectification, body surveillance, increased concern about body image, body dissatisfaction, and lowered self-esteem (Burnell *et al.*, 2021; Rodgers and Melioli, 2016). Moreover, experiences of objectification can also lead to cyberbullying situations (Berne *et al.*, 2014; Rodgers and Melioli, 2016). Cyberbullying is very common among adolescents, and according to Rodgers and Melioli's (2016) study, nearly 90% of adolescents reported knowing someone who has been a victim of cyberbullying through objectifying comments about their physical appearance, with Instagram identified as the most frequent digital platform for such incidents.

In Spain, to the best of our knowledge, the study of objectification experiences during adolescence through online compliments on social media remains an emerging research line. This type of comment, which sexually objectifies the body or body parts of women through compliments, constitutes a form of sexual harassment. Compliments are the most common and normalized form of sexual harassment in Western cultures, particularly in countries such as Spain, Portugal, and other Spanish-speaking nations (Bailey *et al.*, 2016; Moya-Garófano *et al.*, 2022), which could lead to these behaviors being perceived as socially positive by society and/or by the recipients themselves (Moya-Garófano *et al.*, 2021). The recent study by Pérez *et al.* (2024) provides data on the magnitude and characteristics of this form of sexual harassment through experiences of sexual objectification in the online sphere. Pérez *et al.* (2024) show that 31.6% of young women aged between 18 and 35 have received comments on Instagram treating them as sexual objects. Additionally, 27% have received unsolicited sexual content, 38.3% have received mass messages without responding, 30.5% are aware that someone compulsively views their content, 16.4% have received intimidating messages, 16% have received insults or messages referring to socially perceived bodily flaws, and 2% have suffered threats, extortion, or blackmail involving the publication of sexual content featuring them.

Currently, there are no qualitative studies in the Spanish context that deeply explore objectification experiences through "online compliments" (sexual comments about physical appearance and the sexual body) on social media directed at adolescents, nor that conceptualize these behaviors as manifestations of sexual cyberbullying on digital platforms. The objectives of this study are to analyze the experiences of objectification through the "online compliments" that adolescents both emit and receive in the digital sphere; to determine the behaviors of those who emit and receive these comments; to understand the purpose behind the emission; and to explore the feelings and reactions these compliments generate in the adolescent population. All this with the aim of understanding how adolescents reproduce and adapt traditional gender dynamics from the offline world to the virtual environment, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of sexual objectification and sexual harassment in their new digital forms.

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2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

This study involved 232 adolescents (121 girls and 111 boys) who were students in the second cycle of compulsory secondary education (ESO) and the first and second years of Bachillerato, attending public secondary education institutes in the northwest of Spain. Their ages ranged from 15 to 18 years, and they were organized into 20 discussion groups.

2.2. Instrument

For the implementation of the discussion groups, an ad hoc script of questions was developed to address the objectives of this study. The question script was semi-structured for all discussion groups to ensure uniformity of the information collected. This script gathered sociodemographic data (age, gender, and academic year) and included open-ended questions on the following thematic areas: i) online compliments emitted and received in the virtual sphere, ii) the behaviors of adolescents who emit online compliments, iii) the typology of compliments emitted and received by adolescents in the online sphere, and iv) the feelings and reactions of adolescents to receiving online compliments.

2.3. Procedure

Data collection took place in eight public secondary schools in northwest Galicia (Spain) during the year 2024. The research team provided the school management teams with an explanation of the study's purpose, as well as its voluntary, anonymous, and confidential nature. Regarding ethical considerations, given that the participants were minors, consent was obtained from academic supervisors and signed authorization from the mothers, fathers, and/or legal guardians for the youths' participation in the discussion groups. The discussion group sessions were held at the same schools during school hours and lasted, approximately, 45-50 minutes.

2.4. Data Analysis

Discussion groups were utilized due to the benefits this technique offers in data collection, allowing young participants to feel more comfortable responding to questions and sharing their perceptions and experiences within their peer group (Horner, 2000). All discussion group sessions were recorded to later conduct literal transcription and analysis of the collected information.

The processing of the collected information was carried out using the ATLAS.ti version 24 software, which enables the management and analysis of large volumes of data, enhancing transparency, coherence, and scientific rigor in the analytical process (Weitzman, 2000). Furthermore, this software facilitated simultaneous work among the researchers (San-Martín, 2014), allowing data triangulation to manage information processing, ensure coherence, credibility, and content relevance, and to establish thorough coding and categorization. Thus, a naturalistic content analysis was conducted following five basic rules (Ruiz-Olabuenaga, 2012): i. exhaustiveness (Bardin, 1986), which consists of categorizing all content; ii. exclusivity, meaning focusing the same idea into a single category; iii. semi-induction, involving careful precategorization or coding; iv.

category relevance, evaluating whether it is appropriate to maintain the category; and v. objectivity, which was ensured by cross-checking codifications and categorizations of content analysis among the members of the research team. The content analysis of the adolescent discourse allowed the establishment of the following primary categories: i) Online compliments emitted by adolescents on social media; ii) Online compliments received by adolescents on social media; and iii) Feelings and reactions to the reception of online compliments on social media. These primary categories were further detailed into secondary categories, through which the results are presented. The coding used for each participant included their gender followed by the discussion group number (e.g., M, FG3).

3. Results

3.1. Online compliments emitted by adolescents on social medial

3.1.1. Online compliments emitted by boys on social media

In the content analysis, it was identified that more than half of the male participants (n=67 out of 111) showed a tendency to use social media as platforms to perpetuate the practice of sending online compliments: "I send more compliments on social media" (M, FG7). Among these, 47 boys (out of 67) indicated that they send online compliments to known girls (e.g., friends or partners): "I send compliments to girls I know" (M, FG5), and 15 boys stated that they also send compliments to unknown girls (n=15 boys): "I look at girls' social media, and those I find attractive, I say whatever" (M, FG20).

3.1.1.1. Typology of online compliments emitted by boys on social medial

Nearly one third of the boys (n=31 out of 111) reported sending comments regarding the physical appearance and sexualized bodies of girls, emphasizing physical appearance as the primary focus on social media: "I tell them they have a nice ass, or something like that…" (M, FG17), "On social media, I don't hold back anymore, there I even call them 'horny' or something…" (M, FG7). Additionally, 15 boys (out of 111) admitted to sending sexually explicit requests, i.e., comments related to sexual acts: "I tell them, 'babygirl, I'm going to give it to you'" (M, FG1).

The content analysis also identified that 28 boys (out of 111) reported sending online compliments related to the physical beauty of girls: "I write on their Instagram stories 'beautiful' or something like that…" (M, FG10) "¡How beautiful you are! You're gorgeous, my girl!" (M, FG1).

3.1.1.2. The purpose of boys emitting online compliments on social media

Analysis of the boys' discourse revealed that 8 boys (out of 111) stated that the primary purpose of sending online compliments is to "flirt" with the recipient: "Yes, I say compliments online to flirt" (M, FG7), "I hooked up with my current girlfriend on social media" (M, FG16)". Even the boys point out that liking girls' posts on social media or reacting to their posts by sending them an emoticon is also considered a form of complimenting: "On Instagram, by reacting to stories with an emoticon or liking

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any post of the girl, you are already flirting with her with the intention of starting a conversation and asking her when we meet in person" (M, FG20).

3.1.2. Online compliments emitted by girls on social media

Girls send fewer online compliments compared to boys, with less than one third of them (n=25 out of 121) reporting that they send them: "I do send compliments on social media" (F, FG11). The girls who send online compliments indicated they send them to people they know, such as their friends: "On social media, I send compliments to people I know, to my friends, when they post a story on Instagram, for example, but I don't say anything rude" (F, FG14), "I also send compliments to my friends on social media" (F, FG6)". Very few adolescent girls (n=3 out of 121) reported sending compliments to strangers via social media, but they specified that these were famous people: "I send compliments to famous guys that I find very handsome, and I tell them, 'How handsome you are'" (F, FG5).

3.1.2.1. Typology of online compliments emitted by girls on social media

Content analysis revealed that 25 girls (n=25 out of 121) sent sexually themed compliments about the sexualized body, or specific body parts, of the recipient: "Many times I tell my friends, 'What a hottie'" (F, FG9), "I tell him, 'What a body'" (F, FG19). The analysis also found that these girls made comments about the recipient's physical beauty: "If a friend posts a story on Instagram, I write 'handsome'" (F, FG5), followed by comments related to sexual relations: "I tell him, 'I'll eat your mouth or see you tomorrow in bed' or things like that…" (F, FG3).

3.2. Online compliments received by adolescents on social media

3.2.1. Online compliments received by girls on social media

Almost all the participating girls (n=96 out of 121) reported receiving compliments through social media: "I receive many compliments on social media" (F, FG3). They identified Instagram and the instant messaging app WhatsApp as the social media platforms through which they most frequently receive compliments: "Yes, we receive compliments on social media such as Instagram or WhatsApp" (F, FG6).

3.2.1.1. From whom girls receive online compliments on social media

Two-thirds of the participants (n=74) indicated from whom they receive online compliments. More than half of these girls (n=43) stated they receive compliments from known individuals, some (n=12) specifying that these come from their friends, especially male friends: "The compliments I receive on social media are all, or mostly, from people I know and g*et al.*ng with, that is guys who follow me and whom I follow, so just acquaintances" (F, FG3), "The compliments we mostly receive on social media come from friends" (F, FG6).

Nevertheless, a significant portion of adolescent girls, just under one third of them (n=31), reported also receiving online compliments from strangers: "I have received compliments on my social media posts from unknown boys" (F, FG9), "from unknown boys or even fake accounts you don't know" (F, FG12). Some girls even reported receiving private messages: "Mostly from strangers, and not just on a post you upload, sometimes they message you privately" (F, FG12).

3.2.1.2. Typology of online compliments received by girls on social media

One third of the participants (n=36) stated that they receive online comments with sexual content referring to their sexualized body: "I receive quite a few sexual comments on Instagram or TikTok about my body" (F, FG14). The participants recognize a wide range of sexualizing comments, differentiating between comments they receive about their body, about specific parts of their body: "They respond to my Instagram stories saying things like 'What boobs!' or something like that" (F, FG15), comments related to sexual relations: "I posted photos in a bikini on social media and received comments like 'I'd fuck you all over'" (F, FG11), "They say, 'You're hot, ¡I'd do anything to you!'" (F, FG5), as well as multimedia reactions to content they previously posted on social media: "Sometimes they respond with fire emojis and you already know what they mean or want…" (F, FG6), "You get the usual fire or devil emojis when I post a story on Instagram" (F, FG15).

The participants reported that they have also received unsolicited multimedia comments of sexual content: "But we also receive highly sexual photos… that you didn't ask for" (F, FG15). Some participants even received unwanted sexual requests asking them to post photos or videos on social media showing their body or parts of their sexualized body: "It has happened to me that I post a story wearing sweatpants and a huge sweatshirt, and they reply, 'We want to see your body with a little less clothing'" (F, FG14).

Furthermore, some of the participating girls (n=10) expressed having received compliments related to their beauty, as well as multimedia reactions to content they previously posted on social media: "You receive comments like 'How beautiful!' or also an emoticon referring to your beauty" (F, FG9).

3.2.2. Online compliments received by boys on social media

Content analysis identified that less than one-third of boys reported receiving online compliments: "Yes, I do receive compliments on social media" (M, FG5), "Well, I do receive some online" (M, FG4).

3.2.2.1. From whom boys receive online compliments on social media

Twenty-three boys (out of 111) reported receiving compliments on social media from people they know, such as friends: "I only receive them from people I know, because I don't follow strangers" (M, FG5), "They're people I know, and only friends or acquaintances can respond to me" (M, FG10). Nevertheless, eight boys (out of 111) also reported receiving online compliments from unknown girls: "I've received comments from unknown girls who follow me, but I don't know them, saying 'How handsome' and such" (M, FG1), "I've received compliments on social media from unknown girls who reply to my posts" (M, FG20).

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3.2.2.2. Types of online compliments received by boys on social media

Very few boys (n=7) indicated the types of compliments they receive through social media. All of them stated receiving comments related to their sexualized body: "Compliments like 'You're so horny'" (M, FG4), or they have also received comments about their physical attractiveness: "I've been told I'm handsome" (M, FG16).

The participants pointed out the significant influence of digital platforms in receiving compliments, highlighting that they often receive compliments about their physical appearance through multimedia reactions to content they have previously posted online. For example, "You get a reply to an Instagram story with a fire emoji as a compliment" (M, FG5).

3.3. Feelings and reactions to receiving online compliments on social media

3.3.1. Girls' feelings and reactions to receiving online compliments on social media

The participating girls reported experiencing more negative than positive feelings when receiving compliments through social media, highlighting feelings such as displeasure or discomfort as the most common emotional responses.

Regarding negative feelings, one third of the participating girls (n=32) expressed their displeasure at receiving online compliments: "I don't like receiving compliments online" (F, FG3), "Receiving them on social media, for example, makes me feel a bit anxious" (F, FG6), "I find it disgusting" (F, FG16). Some adolescent girls (n=15) pointed out that they feel particular discomfort when online compliments focus on their sexualized body; they feel objectified, which contributes to their emotional distress: "On Instagram, when you start getting to know someone and they immediately start with stuff like 'You're so hot,' it feels bad because you don't know them at all, and instead of asking about your life, they just start with 'You're so hot,' 'What tits you have,' and that makes you feel awful" (F, FG19), "Because they see us for our looks, treat us like objects, something you can throw a compliment or a comment at and we're supposed to like it" (F, FG11).

These girls predominantly express rejection, especially when the sender is an unknown boy, causing them discomfort and distress: "It makes you feel uncomfortable" (F, FG9). Furthermore, the girls also refer to the feelings of guilt that such comments provoke: "And you always think it's your fault, but it's never your fault. And I don't know, it also makes you feel uncomfortable" (F, FG4).

Regarding positive feelings experienced by adolescent girls when receiving online compliments, very few (n=10) reported feeling pleased to receive them. However, eight girls revealed that they particularly appreciate compliments from their friends on social media, suggesting that such comments positively influence their mood: "Often, it boosts your self-esteem when people you know tell you how beautiful you are" (F, FG6), "If someone I know pays me compliments respectfully, it doesn't bother me" (F, FG15), "If friends compliment me, obviously I love it, but otherwise, no" (F, FG3).

Girls' reactions to receiving online compliments, 37 participants expressed that they avoid interacting with the sender. More than half of these students (n=22) reported reacting by ignoring the boy who sent the compliment: "The typical thing is that he sends you a request or messages you privately and you just don't respond" (F, FG14). Some of them (n=8) highlighted that they respond by deleting or blocking the sender on their social media to set clear boundaries and prevent future uncomfortable

situations: "Sometimes on social media, I prefer to delete them" (F, FG12), "What I do is block them, because first they send a compliment, then they respond to your stories with lovestruck emojis, but I block them and move on" (F, FG15).

However, only a few adolescent girls (n=6) highlighted that they had responded by expressing their displeasure to the sender of the online compliments. These girls demonstrate their rejection of behaviors that make them feel uncomfortable, such as receiving online compliments, by providing negative feedback to the sender: "Sometimes on social media, I respond negatively to convey my feelings" (F, FG12), "If I trust the person, I say, ¡'Hey! What are you doing?' and tell them off, because that's not acceptable" (F, FG15), "I told him, ¡'You're an idiot!'" (F, FG6).

3.3.2. Boys´ feelings and reactions to receiving online compliments on social media

Analysis of the participating boys' discourses revealed that only a few (n=13) articulated their feelings about receiving online compliments, with the majority admitting to feeling positive about it. Notably, among the boys who expressed their sentiments, most reported experiencing pleasure, satisfaction, and even pride upon receiving online compliments: "I felt good" (M, FG1), "It's perfect if a stranger tells me, in fact, I keep talking to her. If you're direct and all that, perfect, I accept everything" (M, FG8), "I like it. I mean, it makes me proud" (M, FG20).

However, some adolescent boys (n=6) did not express any significant emotional response, indicating neutral feelings upon receiving online compliments. None of the participating boys reported negative feelings regarding online compliments, suggesting a possible absence of adverse experiences in this regard: "I don't care about receiving online compliments" (M, FG25), "I don't pay much attention either, it doesn't bother me" (M, FG4), "I don't give them much importance because you don't see the person, and you can't tell if they're serious or not. Through the screen, you just don't know" (M, FG5)".

Regarding boys' reactions to receiving online compliments, three participants expressed that their response involved deleting the online compliment or even multimedia sexual content when such inappropriate material appeared on their devices, especially if parental supervision of their electronic devices was in place: "It was from a girl I didn't know, and I deleted the photo" (M, FG16), "I'd look at it first and then delete it. I have the problem that my mom checks my phone" (M, FG12).

4. Discussion

The objective of this study has been to analyze the online compliments exchanged by adolescents within the digital realm, to identify the behaviors of those who send and receive these comments, to understand the purpose behind their delivery, and to explore the feelings and reactions elicited among the adolescent cohort receiving compliments in the virtual sphere. The study aims to uncover how adolescents transfer and perpetuate traditional gender dynamics from the offline environment into the virtual space.

The results obtained clearly demonstrate that online compliments are a common and normalized form of interaction among adolescents on social media. This practice, far from being harmless or playful, perpetuates dynamics of sexual objectification (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997; Burnell *et al.*, 2021; Paddock *et al.*, 2025), reinforces gender hierarchies in interpersonal relationships, and reproduces gender stereotypes (Lameiras *et al.*, 2018; Rodríguez-Castro *et al.*, 2012, 2025). The adolescent

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participants in our study report frequently sending and receiving online compliments through social networks or other digital media, with boys identified as the primary senders and girls as the recipients of objectifying and sexualizing comments regarding their physical appearance and sexualized bodies.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that intensive use of and exposure to the internet and social media among adolescents is associated with an increase in experiences of sexual objectification, particularly among preadolescent girls, adolescents, and young university women (Butkowski *et al.*, 2019; Fardouly *et al.*, 2018; Lin *et al.*, 2022; Manago *et al.*, 2015; Tiggemann y Barbato, 2018; Lin *et al.*, 2022; Rodgers y Melioli, 2016). In particular, Burnell *et al.* (2021) find that 85% of university students, mostly girls, frequently receive objectifying comments about their physical appearance and sexualized bodies on social media, especially on Instagram. Social media thus emerges as a key space for cyber-socialization, where online compliments serve not only as communication but also reflect offline male power and control dynamics (Smahel *et al.*, 2020).

The results of the present study also reveal that boys issue online compliments to both known and unknown girls, whereas girls tend to direct online compliments primarily to known boys. This finding reflects how girls communicate in the online sphere with greater caution compared to boys, being acutely aware of the risks they face as females when interacting with strangers online. As Rodgers and Melioli (2016) assert, the anonymity and disinhibition afforded by Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) facilitate the emergence of cyberbullying scenarios, especially when online interactions pertain to physical appearance, a phenomenon particularly pernicious for young women and females. Cyberbullying is highly prevalent among adolescents, with 90% of the adolescent cohort reporting knowing someone who has been a victim of cyberbullying due to their physical appearance, with girls prominently noted as the primary victims (Rodgers and Melioli, 2016). In this vein, Berne *et al.* (2014) highlight that adolescents tend to normalize cyberbullying situations, accepting that anyone can become a victim and hence must be prepared to navigate such encounters when engaging on social media platforms.

The types of online compliments exchanged, clear differences emerge between the sexes. Boys tend to issue online compliments related to girls' beauty, physical appearance, and sexualized bodies, with physical appearance being the primary focus for compliments on social media, followed by comments soliciting sexual relations. On the other hand, girls typically direct online compliments toward boys' beauty or physical attractiveness. These findings align with previous research demonstrating that objectification and sexualization of girls' physical appearance and sexualized bodies in digital spaces is a common and normalized practice among adolescents (Burnell *et al.*, 2021; Paddock *et al.*, 2024, 2025). In this respect, Burnell *et al.* (2021) note that 60% of adolescent boys admit to posting sexual comments on social media targeting photos and videos shared by girls, specifically highlighting certain parts of their sexualized bodies or physical appearance. This practice reinforces the notion that the female body remains the principal object of evaluation and desire in adolescent digital culture, thereby perpetuating the dynamics of inequality and objectification that characterize both offline and online spaces.

The typology of online compliments received, the study's findings identify that the majority of adolescent girls are recipients of objectifying remarks focused on their beauty, physical appearance, and sexualized bodies, including unsolicited and unwanted propositions for sexual relations. Such comments came from both known and unknown boys. In contrast, boys predominantly received online compliments concerning their beauty and/or physical attractiveness, mostly from acquaintances. These findings concur with prior qualitative research (Burnell *et al.*, 2021; Paddock & Bell, 2021, 2024). It is crucial to underline

that online compliments addressing physical appearance and sexualized bodies reflect a troubling trend of objectifying and sexualized commentary experienced by girls within the virtual sphere, as it epitomizes the reduction of girls' worth to their physical appearance and sexualized forms. It is also important to highlight that receiving online compliments can heighten adolescents' concern and pressure to conform to the beauty standards promoted on social media (Kvardova *et al.*, 2023; Saiphoo and Vahedi, 2019), thereby further reinforcing such standards. However, these virtual interactions fulfill an additional social function, as they enable adolescents to gather information about their acceptance and valuation within peer groups (Chua and Chang, 2016). Thus, the need to receive comments and "likes" becomes an indicator of approval not only on an aesthetic level but also socially. Consequently, garnering more "likes" on objectified images can be interpreted as positive reinforcement, increasing the frequency with which such content is posted (Bell *et al.*, 2019).

The results of the current study invite reflection on the role of social media as agents of socialization that reinforce dominant beauty standards, especially concerning the female body image. During adolescence, physical appearance and sexual attractiveness become key elements for obtaining social status within peer groups. Girls perceived as attractive, sensual, or erotic tend to be accepted, while those who do not conform to aesthetic ideals—such as having a slim or athletic body—may face rejection or exclusion (Mayeux and Kleiser, 2020). This pressure to fit into beauty ideals promoted on social media generates ongoing concern about body image (Calzo *et al.*, 2012; Mayeux and Kleiser, 2020), which can become a persistent issue extending into adulthood (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997).

Diverse studies highlight that frequent objectifying comments in the digital sphere about women's physical appearance and sexualized bodies are linked to elevated levels of self-objectification, surveillance, and body dissatisfaction (Rodgers and Melioli, 2016; Wang *et al.*, 2022). As Paddock *et al.* (2025) note, such sexualized comments may foster a widespread perception that physical appearance and the sexualized body are the most important personal attributes, particularly for girls. This dynamic can influence the construction of female gender roles and drive the need for girls to conform to traditional gender norms when receiving or soliciting compliments about their physical appearance and sexualized bodies (Ward and Grower, 2020).

The results of this study highlight an interesting aspect of adolescent digital interaction: objectifying comments are not only recognized as online compliments but also interpreted through "likes" and emoticons as forms of sexual interaction. Bell *et al.* (2019) explain that various social media interactions serve multiple purposes, with sending or receiving "likes" on sexual content being equivalent in meaning to objectifying comments. Kaye *et al.* (2016) further note that emoticons function to nuance sexual comments, adding emotional intensity to the messages. It is critical to emphasize that sexual comments about physical appearance and sexualized bodies on social media are constant, unbounded, and can be publicly viewed and reinforced through "likes" and emoticons, thereby amplifying their psychosocial impact on adolescents (Burnell *et al.*, 2021; Vendemia and DeAndrea, 2021). This evolving semiotic system involves the use of emojis as coded language expressing sexual meanings among youth, significantly shaping their digital socialization and identity development.

The findings of this study highlight the divergent emotional responses that online compliments provoke among adolescents. Boys exclusively reported positive emotions upon receiving online compliments, such as pleasure and satisfaction. Conversely, the majority of girls expressed predominantly negative feelings, including displeasure, discomfort, distress, and even fear.

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These outcomes align with the qualitative study by Paddock *et al.* (2025), which illustrates that girls frequently experience negative emotions in response to objectifying remarks concerning their physical appearance or sexualized bodies on social media. The study also found that 10 adolescent girls expressed positive attitudes toward receiving online compliments from acquaintances, but not from unknown boys or men. However, Moya-Garófono *et al.* (2021) caution that even when compliments are perceived positively, they may have harmful short- or medium-term effects for girls and women by reinforcing body shame and promoting sexual self-objectification, surveillance, and control. Regarding reactions to online compliments, adolescents reported defensive behaviors such as rejecting, ignoring, or blocking the sender on social media. Only 6 girls indicated they explicitly expressed dislike toward the compliment sender. This aligns with Pérez *et al.* (2024), who found that victims of cyberbullying typically choose to delete or block their harassers as a primary coping strategy.

The results of this study reflect that adolescents use social media as a key tool for communication, initiating and consolidating interpersonal relationships, and particularly for constructing their identity, including expressing their sexuality through body image (Boyd, 2014). Social media play a significant role in perpetuating sexual discrimination and sexual violence behaviors toward girls and women. The study also points to a concerning situation where adolescents actively share their own images and videos, engaging socially through objectifying and hypersexualizing comments, especially directed at girls. Thus, the sending and receiving of online compliments are not only a continuation of offline experiences but can also happen more frequently and with greater severity in the virtual context due to the features and functionalities of digital platforms.

5. Conclusions

The present study highlights how experiences of sexual objectification through online compliments (sexual comments about physical appearance and the sexual body) among adolescents constitute a subtle yet persistent form of sexual objectification directed at girls. These experiences transfer, reinforce, and perpetuate offline gender stereotypes, power dynamics, and inequalities into the virtual world (Rodríguez-Castro *et al.*, 2025). Notably, social media not only replicate but may also amplify such objectifying behaviors toward girls, normalizing sexual (cyber)harassment behaviors. Hence, there is an urgent need to promote and implement affective-sexual education interventions with a gender perspective focused on digital literacy. Such programs would empower adolescents to identify, transform, and eradicate experiences of sexual objectification in both offline and digital realms (Rodríguez-Castro *et al.*, 2021b). The ultimate goal is to build egalitarian analog and digital societies free from sexual objectification targeting girls and women.

6. Specific contributions of each author:

	Name and surname
Conception and design of the stuyd	Rosana Martínez Román and Yolanda Rodríguez Castro
Methodology	Rosana Martínez Román and Yolanda Rodríguez Castro
Data collection and analysis	Rosana Martínez Román, Alba Adá Lameiras and Yolanda Rodríguez Castro
Discussion and conclusions	Rosana Martínez Román, Alba Adá Lameiras and Yolanda Rodríguez Castro
Writing, formatting, revisión and approval of versions	Rosana Martínez Román, Alba Adá Lameiras and Yolanda Rodríguez Castro

7. Conflicts of Interest

The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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