



FITINFLUENCERS AND THEIR IMPACT ON BODY PERCEPTION AMONG SPANISH YOUTH: A Potential Predisposing Factor in Male Vigorexia

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a study conducted using a survey methodology, in which 1,753 Spanish male youths, aged 17 to 24 and followers of fitinfluencers, responded to questions about how this engagement influences their physical perception and evaluation. Some findings suggest that this exposure influences the distortion of their physical self-assessment. For them, fitinfluencers exhibit a “desirable” muscular definition and serve as a reference point, impacting their exercise routines (80%) and dietary habits (60%). They believe that this “ideal” body can be achieved by following the guidelines that fitinfluencers demonstrate or prescribe.

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1. Introduction

This article presents an empirical study addressing the issue of the influence that certain communications on social media have on young people. Specifically, it examines how so-called fitinfluencers (“specialists” in fitness who explain routines and exercises primarily aimed at achieving greater muscular definition and development) influence the attitudes, behaviours, and perceptions of a vulnerable audience, such as adolescents.

The study reflects on the potential psychological repercussions that following such influencers may have on young people. The exposure to defined and sculpted bodies attracts this audience, immersed in a somatic and image-driven culture, leading them to believe that by imitating the routines and prescriptions conveyed by these influencers, they can achieve these desirable bodies and, consequently, the success implicitly associated with them. However, when a young person perceives that their physical reality is far from the body they consider “ideal,” mental health issues (frustration) and/or obsessive disorders (OCD) may arise, which are unhealthy and even dangerous.

The aim of this research is to analyse the extent to which following fitinfluencers impacts this adolescent population and how this influence may contribute to disorders such as vigorexia (an obsession with muscular development).

2. Theoretical Framework

In this first quarter of the 21st century, immersion in a culture of image and appearance is an established reality. The tide has turned, and currently, “appearing” is more important than “being”. The perception of reality is no longer found on the street or through physical contact; reality is now perceived through tools such as computers, tablets, mobile phones, smartwatches—screens through which we communicate and present ourselves to the world (Rial et al., 2015).

These new technologies, which promised to bring us closer together and make life easier, have partly fulfilled their purpose, but the use we have made of many of them is not exactly the most appropriate or aligned with their original intent. We now communicate more, indeed, but predominantly in a technological and mediated manner, diminishing communication through real contact (Vidal, 2021). Even in physical encounters, it is common to observe couples or group participants more focused on their mobile phones than on interacting with each other or, indeed, physically present but silent, each immersed in their own screen.

In this context, so-called social media platforms gain particular significance; these digital platforms connect people with shared interests, values, or characteristics. WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, X platform—it is rare to find someone who is not a user of at least one (or all) of these. Life without social media is now inconceivable, and one’s social identity is defined by what is communicated and displayed on these platforms. Consequently, the importance of what we post is crucial for reaching others, generating interest, and gaining “friends,” “followers,” “members,” or “subscribers” (Martín & Medina, 2021).

2.1. Youth and Social Media

The current media landscape is undergoing a transformation in content management, both in audiovisual and digital realms, particularly on social media, driven by the constant creativity of audiences (Elías-Zambrano & Cabezuelo-Lorenzo, 2024; García-López, 2024).

Among the users of social media, young people and adolescents stand out, as they predominantly use and communicate through these platforms. Today’s youth were born and raised with new technologies, and social media is their “natural” way of presenting themselves and interacting socially. For them, having an internet connection is a necessity, as their lives revolve around the content they share and consume in this digital environment (Fanjul et al., 2019; Rial et al., 2015).

In 2024, 94% of the population in Spain participating in social media was aged between 16 and 24. Most of them have more than one social media profile and dedicate an average of 4–5 hours per day to their use and consultation (Servimedia, 2024). These data highlight the importance of these platforms in the communication and development of social relationships for young people. They offer social connection and participation. Currently, social media generates conversation, active listening, and a form of entertainment that is highly attractive to adolescent and youth audiences, who can access it

freely with few restrictions, sharing experiences with other users or consuming content posted by others (Lázaro, 2020; Quijandría, 2020).

However, exposure to public opinion always carries a risk that one must be prepared to face. When posting anything on social media, no matter how “positive” or “naïve” it may seem, one must accept that there will always be someone who disagrees or views it from a different perspective. When someone chooses to expose themselves publicly (by posting any content on their social media), they must be prepared for “hate” and criticism (Soler & Latorre, 2024). Yet, few young people have the maturity or resilience to handle such situations.

In this context, it becomes necessary to invest time and resources in investigating the repercussions that this may have on the self-esteem and physical self-perception of this group. Young people are a highly vulnerable population, as they are at a stage of life where they begin to define their identity and have a greater need for acceptance and role models. This is a phase where image is everything, and social pressure is overwhelming for them. In short, a highly sensitive and easily influenced population that requires our concern and protection (Fanjul et al., 2019).

2.2. Social Influence of Networks and Body Worship

The social influence of social media is undeniable, particularly among young people who pour their lives into these platforms in pursuit of attention, attraction, and “acceptance”. Social acceptance and the appeal of their image are dominant values for this population. To achieve acceptance, they seek popularity or follow popular figures. They strive to stand out and follow the guidelines of those who have already gained prominence on social media with the aim of achieving the same. They avoid being seen as “outsiders” because they know they may face rejection, harassment, or digital bullying. To enhance the appeal of their image, they use filters to improve their appearance and repeatedly take selfies to achieve the most flattering pose or the most attractive look (Sádaba, 2024; Varchetta et al., 2020).

This dependence on social media acceptance can lead young people to become obsessed with seeking “likes” and “followers,” and failing to achieve the expected social impact can result in feelings of failure and emotional frustration. This, as argued by researchers Davinia Martín and Marta Medina (2021, p.59), can lead to “living in a fantasy world in which one believes perfection and a body conforming to certain standards are attainable”.

Young people live in a world dominated by image, where their body and physical appearance serve as their social calling card. The body is the packaging through which individuals present and demonstrate who they are (or aspire to be). This creates a growing need for body worship; a somatic culture that views the body as an object of investment and effort, as its proper presentation to others is an asset to its owner (Fanjul et al., 2019; Sádaba, 2024).

It is true that there is currently a greater tendency towards acceptance of real bodies and body diversity. However, socially accepted somatic stereotypes, such as slim bodies for women and muscularly defined bodies for men, still prevail as the most attractive. While there is greater “permissiveness” towards different body types, the reality remains that certain body types are more appealing and are more strongly associated with desirable social values such as success, sex, and happiness (Morales, 2021). In their pursuit of a socially accepted body, young people find role models on social media who display these body types and provide guidance on the routines needed to achieve them.

2.3. Fitinfluencers and Their Influence on Body Perception

Fitinfluencers are defined as influencers who focus their communication on aspects related to fitness and routines aimed at achieving physical development and definition (Feijoo et al., 2024). In recent years, immersed in this somatic culture of body worship, this type of influencer has proliferated exponentially on social media. Alongside established beauty and fashion influencers, this new “specialty” has emerged, focusing on explaining to users the exercises they should perform based on specific physical goals (muscular definition and/or development, reducing belly fat or localized fat, achieving defined abdominal muscles, etc.). Their communities of followers are growing ever larger, with a significant portion of these followers being young people (Feijoo et al., 2023).

However, not all are professional fitness experts. Many profiles belong to non-professional users with good physical definition who proclaim themselves as “experts” and become prescribers of physical and nutritional routines for their followers. Typically, these influencers also showcase their “idyllic” lives on social media, featuring dream homes, travel, visits to luxury hotels, and even the clothing and accessories they plan to wear that day, dressing in a way that highlights how the selected outfit looks on them. Ultimately, what they “sell” is not so much healthy exercise practices but the context of success that these bodies achieve (De Brabandere et al., 2024).

When a young person, immersed in a world of image and appearance, perceives that achieving good physical definition can lead to success (social, economic, sexual, etc.), their motivation and interest in attaining it soar. However, the frustration and disappointment that arise when they fail to achieve this are also magnified, affecting them with greater intensity and proportion (Fanjul, 2019).

Constant exposure to idealized images of beauty and perfection on social media can impact aspects such as self-esteem and well-being (Stefani & López, 2023). When the self-perceived image does not align with the images of celebrities or fitinfluencers they follow, it affects their self-esteem and can foster dissatisfaction with their own body image. The self-perceived physical appearance influences an individual’s subjective well-being, and when the body does not meet the ideals pursued on social media, adolescents become trapped in a spiral of growing frustration and dissatisfaction (Fanjul et al., 2019). This is due to the social comparison facilitated by social media. Young people, despite following the same routines, may not realize (or refuse to acknowledge, as they are immersed in the same imaginary) that the images, videos, and other digital content they consume are carefully selected and meticulously edited to present the most perfect and idyllic aspects of life (Alcázar, 2023).

Numerous studies have demonstrated the negative influence that the portrayal of a perfect body has on the self-perception and self-esteem of recipients. Many studies have focused on what is posted, followed, and shared on social media (Feijoo et al., 2023; Pingarrón, 2022). To address this issue in Spain, in May 2024, Royal Decree 444/2024 was published in the Official State Gazette (BOE), regulating the requirements for being considered users of special relevance on video-sharing platform services, in development of Article 94 of Law 13/2022, of 7 July, General Audiovisual Communication Law (BOE, 2024). However, despite these initiatives, many legal gaps and intricacies remain in this field, particularly regarding the stereotyped use of the male figure, as little attention has been paid to the issue this poses for men as well (Fanjul et al., 2019).

Many fitinfluencers are men, as the pressure to achieve muscular definition and development is more pronounced for the male gender (Feijoo et al., 2024). Many of their followers are young males who see them as relatable and trustworthy role models who can help them achieve the desired muscular development and attain a sculpted, attractive body that will pave the way for greater social acceptance and easier achievement of various goals.

2.4. Vigorexia, Social Media and Fitinfluencers

This context (image culture, youth, social media, fitinfluencers) can foster the development of disorders and conditions linked to somatic concerns and dissatisfaction when the body perceived as “adequate” or “ideal” is not achieved, particularly among young people experiencing the peak of their physical changes, where most of their values centre on their image and physical appearance. One such condition is vigorexia.

Muscular dysmorphia or vigorexia is characterized by a pathological (even obsessive) concern with muscular development, coupled with a distorted perception of one’s own body, leading the individual to never be satisfied with the muscle and definition achieved and to always seek more (Baile, 2011). Although physical definition is pursued by both men and women, muscular enhancement and development are goals more commonly sought by males, which is why most individuals affected by vigorexia are men. Furthermore, social and media pressure on the male body considered beautiful and successful focuses on muscular, lean, and fat-free bodies. The preferred and popularly deemed “ideal” male body model is the so-called “fitness” type: mesomorphic, athletic, with developed and broader shoulders and chest than the waist, defined abdominal muscles, and well-defined, strong arms and legs (Fanjul, 2019; Pope et al., 2000). Male fitinfluencers all exhibit these physical characteristics and, therefore, quickly establish themselves as desirable physical role models that part of the youth population takes as references to achieve the desired muscular development.

As previously noted, social media facilitates this connection between users with common interests, so young people seeking physical role models find prescribers on these platforms to follow and consult. As mentioned, some of these influencers are professional fitness experts (such as Sergio Peinado; 1.7M followers), but many others self-identify as “experts” while merely being users who physically align with that stereotype. Their strategies to attract followers vary widely: some, like Tomas Mazza (2.4M followers), focus primarily on showcasing their training routines; others, like Jimmy Drew Fitness (84.8K followers), do the same but emphasize their sexual attributes; and others, like Joelus (46K followers), comment on various audiovisual content unrelated to sports but occasionally filter in their workouts, diets, and lifestyle or subtly display the products they consume to maintain their physical appearance.

When a young male begins to work on his physical development and starts achieving some muscular definition, the feedback from his environment (family, friends) is social reinforcement through comments and praise for the results of his efforts. When he posts images of his defined body on social media, this reinforcement is exponentially amplified. This is coupled with the self-satisfaction of observing his body beginning to take shape and approaching the body he aspires to achieve (Fanjul, 2019). This phenomenon, per se, is neither negative nor problematic. The issue arises when this pursuit of muscular development becomes an obsession because the young person is not fully satisfied with how he looks or because he does not achieve the successes he expected from that body and attributes it to insufficient muscle mass. Alternatively, the young person may seek to achieve the desired muscular development and definition in the shortest possible time, bypassing the culture of effort that natural attainment would require. Whatever the triggering factor, when a young person enters this spiral of physical dissatisfaction and obsession, the problem of vigorexia is already latent (Fanjul & González, 2011; González et al., 2012; Tasso, 2023).

In addition to the physical risks associated with excessive training typical of potentially vigorexic individuals (muscle tears, injuries, disproportionate muscular development, etc.), there is the danger of consuming anabolic steroids to achieve the desired muscular development. These substances (oral or injectable) can be easily obtained via the internet, but their use without prescription or supervision by a professional poses serious health risks to the user (cancer, liver failure, cardiovascular mortality). However, the market for these substances online is accessible to anyone, with nonexistent, minimal, or easily circumvented barriers to access (Benlloch & Consuelo, 2022; Muñoz, 2014).

3. Methodology

As previously discussed, due to their characteristics and life circumstances, young males appear to be the most sensitive and vulnerable population to developing a disorder such as vigorexia. Therefore, the aim of this research is to investigate the impact that fitinfluencers may have on the physical perception and evaluation of the young people who follow and consume their content on social media, and to estimate the extent to which this may influence their behaviour and lead to attitudes or predispositions typical of potentially vigorexic individuals.

To this end, an empirical study with a primarily quantitative approach was conducted through the development of a questionnaire comprising 21 closed-ended questions (although three of these included an open-ended response option to allow respondents to elaborate or clarify as needed). The questionnaire was validated by a panel of 10 experts who tested it and assessed its reliability using Cronbach’s alpha method, yielding a reliability value of 0.9. The questionnaire achieved a confidence level of 94% with an estimated margin of error of 5.8%.

To encourage honest responses, the questionnaire was designed to be completed anonymously, requiring respondents to provide only the variables of “age,” “gender” (with options of “male,” “female,” or “other”), and nationality (with options of “Spanish” or “Other”). The next item asked whether they frequently followed any fitinfluencers on social media. For the survey to be considered valid for the purposes of this research, only responses from individuals who identified as “male,” were aged between 17 and 24, had Spanish nationality, and frequently followed a fitinfluencer were included in the sample. In total, 1,753 surveys were validated and accepted for the study.

The first three questions of the questionnaire aimed to identify which social media platforms the respondent uses most frequently and their primary purposes for using them. The next four questions focused on determining the extent to which respondents follow and engage with fitinfluencer profiles,

their motivations for doing so, and their assessment of the influencers' physical definition. Following these, five questions were designed to gather information on the respondent's perception of their own physical appearance, what they consider to mean "being in good physical condition," and the advantages they believe an ideal physical definition can offer. The subsequent three questions returned to the topic of fitinfluencers, asking whether these influencers represent the body type the respondent aspires to achieve and whether following these profiles has influenced their exercise and dietary routines. The final six questions focused on ascertaining whether, as a result of following the influencer's profile, the respondent has sought information on sports nutrition for muscle growth or anabolic steroids, and the extent to which they consume or have considered consuming such products.

The survey comprises 64 variables subjected to univariate analysis and cross-tabulation. All variables are categorical and correspond to qualitative scales, with each category assigned a number to facilitate analysis. The variables are grouped into mutually exclusive and exhaustive intervals or sets of values.

4. Results

Following the analysis of the responses, we present below some of the most significant findings of the study.

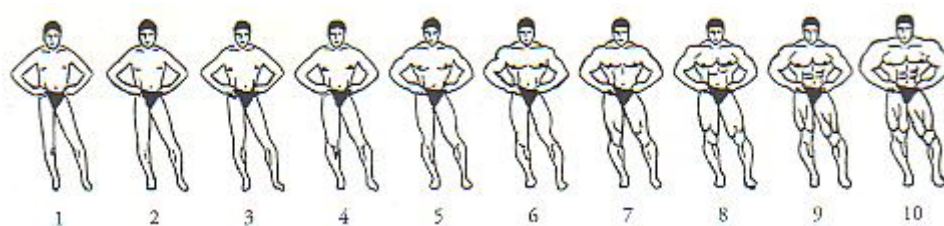
Regarding the use and consumption of social media, the applications most frequently used by these young people are WhatsApp (99%), Instagram (91%), YouTube (84%), and TikTok (79%). They primarily use these platforms to stay in contact with friends/family, to obtain information on topics of interest, for entertainment, and to make contacts or pursue romantic/sexual connections. There is also a degree of "specialization" in the use of these platforms. In this regard, WhatsApp is used more for staying in contact with friends/family (93%), Instagram and TikTok for obtaining information on topics of interest (89%), TikTok and YouTube for entertainment (82%), and Instagram for making contacts and pursuing romantic/sexual connections (71%).

In relation to the types of content typically consulted or followed on social media, the most prominent themes are those related to sports or physical activity (88%), contacts and romantic/sexual connections (85%), leisure (83%), and entertainment (80%).

Regarding the following or consultation of fitinfluencer profiles, 70% of respondents stated that they do so frequently or very frequently. The primary reason for doing so is their desire to improve their physical appearance (91%), and the aspects they focus on most in these profiles are their muscular definition (87%) and their lifestyle (72%).

Subsequently, to assess their physical appearance and what they considered "being in good physical condition," respondents were presented with the following scale of muscular definition and development":

Figure 1. Somatic scale

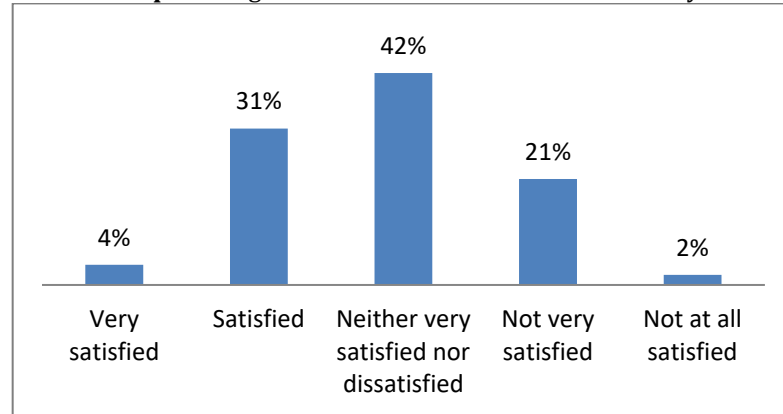


Source: Baile, J. I. (2005). *Vigorexia. How to recognise and avoid it*. Madrid: Síntesis.

Regarding the assessment of their physical appearance, 80% of respondents placed themselves between profiles 3 and 4. In contrast, when indicating which profile they considered to represent "being in good physical condition," they pointed, in almost equal proportion, to profiles 6 and 7. Nearly the same proportion believes that this type of physique (profiles 6 and 7) leads to greater success (being more liked, more popular).

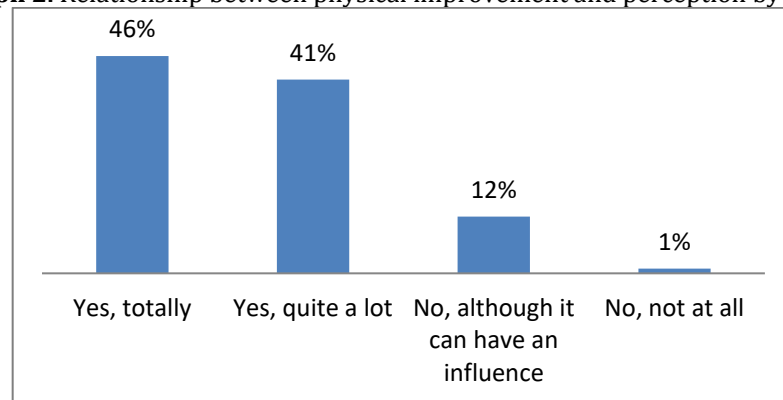
Of the respondents, 73% reported being "satisfied" or "neither very nor slightly satisfied" with their body, but 87% of them believe that improving their physical appearance would enhance how others perceive them.

Graph 1. Degree of satisfaction with their own body



Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

Graph 2. Relationship between physical improvement and perception by others



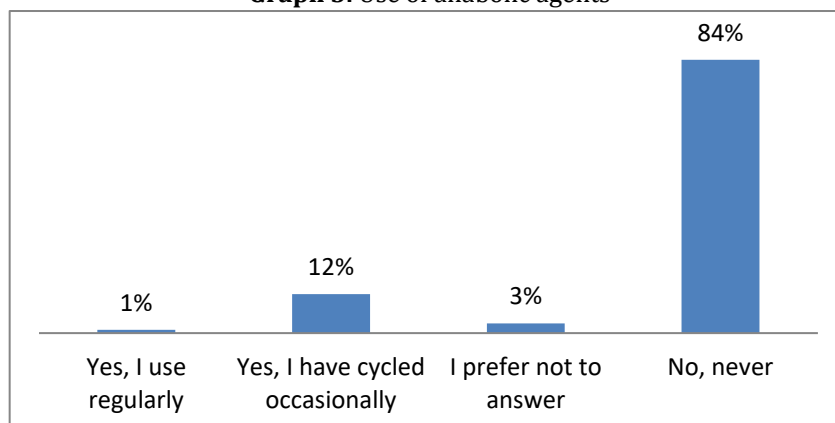
Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

When asked whether the fitinfluencers they follow represent the body type they would like to achieve, 98% responded affirmatively. Regarding whether consulting these profiles had influenced their exercise and dietary routines, over 80% confirmed that they had significantly or considerably influenced their sports routines, and 60% stated that they had also significantly or considerably influenced changes in their dietary routines.

Regarding the question of whether they had sought information on products that promote muscle growth (protein supplements such as shakes, whey, or bars), 75% responded affirmatively. When asked whether they consume any such products, 56% reported doing so frequently or very frequently.

The same questions regarding anabolic steroids yielded more varied responses. Approximately 50% of respondents had at some point sought information on these products. However, the percentage of males who reported consuming or having consumed them at some point drops to 13%, which, despite being lower than the percentages for other questions, remains a concerning figure.

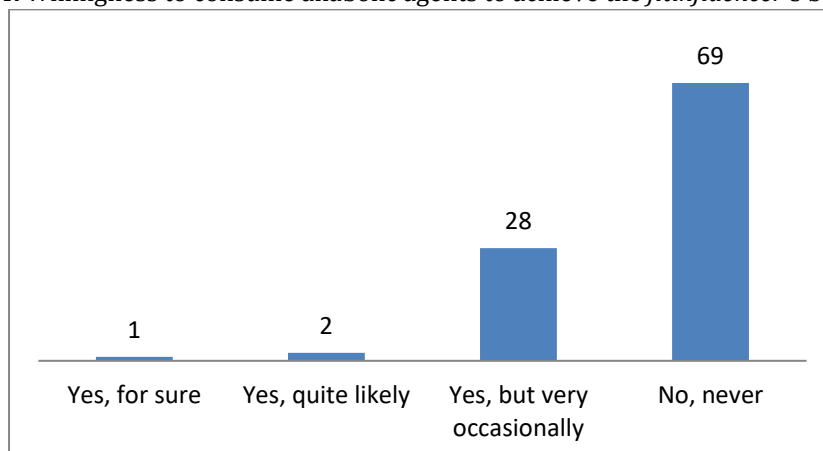
Graph 3. Use of anabolic agents



Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

Finally, the last question asked whether, to achieve the physical appearance of the fitinfluencers they consult or follow, they would be willing to consume anabolic steroids. Here, the percentage of affirmative responses (albeit to varying degrees) reached 31%.

Graph 4. Willingness to consume anabolic agents to achieve the *fitinfluencer's* body style.



Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The research conducted appears to confirm several concerning issues that warrant further study and analysis, such as social pressure regarding image and physique, the values socially associated with these, and the dangers of becoming obsessed with aesthetic concerns or idealized beauty.

As observed, virtually all young people today use some form of social media (99%) and place great importance on the image they project on these platforms (85%). Social media serves as their primary connection to “social reality” (83%), and they dedicate considerable time to its use and consultation. Many follow celebrities or influencers across various themes.

In our study, 72% of young males who follow and consult fitinfluencer profiles not only focus on their muscular development (and the exercises they perform to achieve it) but also on the lifestyle they lead. Thus, the context in which these influencers present their content also significantly influences their followers, typically showcasing environments that denote success or a high quality of life.

When it comes to assessing what they consider “being in good physical condition” compared to their own physical appearance, a significant distortion regarding muscular development is evident. Although 80% consider themselves to be in good or “normal” physical condition, 87% believe that improving their physical appearance would enhance how others perceive them. In other words, they believe that greater muscular definition and development would lead to increased social success (being more liked, more popular).

For them, the fitinfluencers they follow embody this type of muscular definition and, therefore, serve as role models, influencing many to alter their exercise routines (80%) and dietary habits (60%). This confirms the level of impact these influencers can have on young people, who believe that the “ideal” body they aspire to can be achieved by following the guidelines shown or prescribed.

Of the participants surveyed, 56% consume some form of protein supplement (shakes, whey, bars) that promotes muscular development, and, more concerning, 13% have consumed or have at some point consumed anabolic steroids. Additionally, nearly half have sought information about these products, and 31% would consider, to some extent, consuming them to achieve the muscular definition exhibited by the fitinfluencers they see on social media.

Such thoughts and attitudes may be a precursor to a serious issue like vigorexia. An obsession with muscular development is already a warning sign, and the consumption of anabolic steroids to achieve it poses a significant health risk.

Thus, it appears that fitinfluencers may contribute (whether consciously or not) to this body dissatisfaction and obsession with muscular development, which can lead to vigorexia. If some of their followers are insecure young people with vulnerable self-esteem who view them as role models to emulate, it is crucial that these public figures become aware of their potential influence on sensitive mental health issues. Clearly, they are not the primary cause of the problem, but they may constitute a

predisposing or triggering factor by promoting this type of physical stereotype and encouraging (directly or indirectly) the belief that achieving such bodies will lead to the pleasures and success they display on their channels.

As with any pathology, prevention, particularly through education, is the best approach. It is vital to deepen efforts in teaching young people and adolescents to critically analyse the visual messages they receive (especially on social media), to value and respect their own bodies, to understand their possibilities and limitations, and, ultimately, to critically evaluate and protect themselves from stereotyped models, the obsession with perfection, and excessive body and image worship.

We acknowledge the limitations of this study, as the sample used, while significant, is not fully representative of the youth population. It would be necessary to expand both the sample size and the scope of the research to include other factors that could be cross-referenced with these findings to assess their mutual influence. For instance, it would be highly valuable to explore the interplay between online and offline influences on young people's obsession with muscular development. This could involve investigating the "gym culture" where competitive dynamics among users (e.g., who can do more repetitions or is stronger) are prevalent, studying the recommendations made during training or in locker rooms regarding nutrition, supplements, and routines for muscle growth, and analysing the obsession with mirrors, gym selfies, and comparisons with the muscular development of other peers.

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