

# Violence on social networks related to the body image of young women and its repercussions on health

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## Funding information

Etnografía digital feminista en los espacios recreativos en los que se usan y abusan drogas entre personas jóvenes, Grant/Award Number: PID2019-105122RB-I00 / State Research Agency /10.13039/501100011033

## Abstract

**Introduction:** Social networking sites perpetuate gender stereotypes, inequalities, and gender violence, generating adverse health effects.

**Methods:** This study aimed to analyze the relationship between Instagram, alcohol consumption and effects on health, through interviews and discussion groups involving adolescents (high school or university students and workers), during the period from the third to the sixth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Results:** A total of 118 individuals participated in the study. Three coding clusters were identified: (1) Inequality in the representation of men and women on SNSs; (2) Violence towards women's bodies and sexual violence on SNSs; and (3) Health problems derived from violence against women's body image on SNSs. The main focus of our analysis was the exhibition of the female body, in which eroticization of the body prevails and gender roles are perpetuated. Violence is generated towards women in the form of misogynistic attacks for daring to challenge conventional stereotypes. Many interviewees coincide that the main health effects include low self-esteem, anxiety and eating disorders.

**Conclusions:** The institutional response to the abuses and violence committed on SNSs against women is weak, and public policies are needed to protect women in these environments where they are especially vulnerable.

## KEYWORDS

body image, gender-based violence, health problems, social networking sites (SNSs)

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Currently, a large part of the process by which young people construct their gender identity takes place on social networking sites (SNSs), an environment in which inequalities and gender violence proliferate, generating negative health effects. Although this new channel of online communication has been embraced by all generations, it is most

widely used among young people. Nevertheless, unequal conditions are imposed on young women and their male counterparts when they use this channel. Young women's publication of their body image is subject to the same unwritten rules that apply in the real world and they are also subjected to violence simply because they are women. These online environments are not socially or culturally neutral, but are part of the continuum of constantly evolving social relations; and thus, the

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same gender roles, sexist stereotypes, harassment and violence against young women are also reproduced on the SNSs.

### 1.1 | Construction of identity on social networks and representation of the female body

Over the last decade, the SNSs have become the new space for socializing, where almost all generations learn about ways of acting, living and meeting in society. However, this social experience is far more intense among young people and adolescents (Hodkinson, 2017; Linne & Angilletta, 2016). In Spain, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter are the main social networks used. Of these, Instagram (66%) is among the apps which grew the fastest in 2022, due to its attractive features such as photographic filters, appealing images, and dramatic visual effects, which make it easy to glamorize any type of risky behavior (Boyle et al., 2017).

Young people create virtual identities on these SNSs, with the result that what happens in the real and virtual worlds is inseparable, and both form part of the new narrative of social identity (Calvillo & Jasso, 2018), in which they try to create an attractive, dynamic and performative identity by posting images, videos or establishing relationships with other profiles, all of which is appraised through the number of likes received (Cover, 2014; Del Prete & Redon, 2020).

They also create a body image, which includes, as well as the usual internal perceptions a subject has about his/her body, external feedback in the form of a kind of mirror, which forms a dialectical relationship with the audience between the image projected on the network and the feedback received (Núñez et al., 2004). What is more, this creation of the body image in the virtual environment occurs according to heteronormative parameters that perpetuate the existing gender inequalities attached to male and female bodies (Foucault, 2008).

The idea of man as the designer of the woman's body to satisfy his fantasies and desires has its roots as far back as Greek mythology, in Ovid's fable in which Pygmalion creates Galatea, the perfect woman. Nowadays, the gods of the market, through fashion, influencers and advertising, design modern Galateas to fit the tastes and desires of the consumers, who are generally male (Casado & García-Carpintero, 2019). The hegemonic ideal of the female body is that of a slim, perfectly built young woman, usually adopting highly ritualized, sexualized poses (Vásquez & Carrasco, 2017).

### 1.2 | Symbolic violence related to the image of women and their bodies on SNSs

On SNSs, young women suffer a new type of discrimination, imposed by the unwritten rules of social behavior, by which they are unable to participate in creating and posting content under the same conditions as their male counterparts. The new virtual environments merely serve as a continuum of the face-to-face world, in which the existing gender roles and sexist stereotypes are reproduced: modest, polite, submis-

sive behavior for women, and freedom of exhibition and speech for men (Machado, 2017).

In this way, the aesthetics of women's bodies are assessed regularly on SNSs, just as happens in everyday life. They are subjected to disapproval and verbal violence at any imperfection, sign of ageing, or excess weight. This is added to the overriding need for external validation of a sexualized nature, which, on the one hand, with its awards system of "likes," encourages them to show themselves as desiring, hypersexualized subjects for male consumption, but which, on the other, punishes them with insults, harassment and sexual violence for agreeing to go along with it (Meneses & Moncada, 2008). This harassment is mainly carried out by men, who can post their ridicule, insults, harassment, and even threats, with complete freedom and impunity, facilitated by the anonymous or fake profiles which are simple to create on many of these platforms (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2017; Women's Institute, Spain, 2022).

The WHO, in its March 2021 report, declared that "Violence against women is omnipresent and devastating: one in three women suffer from it," and warned that young women are among those most at risk, with special attention given in recent years to digital or online violence (World Health Organization, 2021a). The digital dimension of violence against women is alarming, as is shown by a study carried out in 2020 by the Economist Intelligence Unit covering 45 countries, which revealed that 85% of women have experienced or witnessed online violence facilitated by technology (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021). And it entails direct and indirect costs to victims and survivors, their families, the entire community and the state. It is estimated that in 2021 alone, the cost of gender-based violence at European Union level amounted to 366 billion euros (17).

### 1.3 | Health implications

This violence has a devastating impact on women, and seriously affects women's health, with effects ranging from physical and psychological harm to financial and relational consequences (Council of Europe, 2022).

Both the imposition of the hegemonic models of beauty with normative bodies, as well as the violence suffered on SNSs for not complying with these models, usually leads to women feeling dissatisfied with their bodies, a feeling of lacking something and a continuous imperfection when compared with the perfect, slim, idealized images of women projected by advertising. This basically results in girls, adolescents and young women imposing unrealistic demands on themselves to have a slim, perfectly shaped body, which leads to mental health problems such as low self-esteem, anxiety, sleep problems, addictions and eating disorders (Cha et al., 2016; Kisa & Zeyneloğlu, 2019; Pérez-Marco et al., 2020).

Additionally, the overexposure of young women's bodies on SNSs is occasionally linked to episodes of excessive alcohol consumption (Ceballos et al., 2018), and with the normalization of alcohol consumption through advertising on SNSs (World Health Organization, 2021b), where a number of studies have indicated a positive relationship

between average alcohol intake and sexualized posts on SNSs (Curtis et al., 2018, Perez et al., 2021, Trub & Starks, 2017). Here, the World Health Organization (WHO) have warned of an increased exposure to advertising for alcoholic drinks on SNSs, where, on many occasions, images of hypersexualized young women are shown with a heteronormative model of perfection. These images have been closely linked to an earlier onset of alcohol consumption, and excessive intake, such as binge-drinking (World Health Organization, 2021b). In addition, in leisure and alcohol environments, violence against young women is proliferating and worsening, and they are the object of violence on SNSs, with videos recorded without their consent being uploaded, or receiving criticism and harassment for uploading sexualized images in these settings (Tarriño-Concejero et al., 2023), as well as other cases of suffering direct sexual harassment and violence when drunk (Romo-Avilés et al., 2023).

## 1.4 | Aim

This study aimed to analyze the relationship between Instagram, alcohol consumption and effects on health, through interviews and discussion groups involving adolescents (high school or university students and workers), during the period from the third to the sixth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (December 2020 to March 2021).

## 2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 2.1 | Design

In this study, we followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies (COREQ) (Tong et al., 2007), which encourages researchers to acknowledge and clarify their identity, credentials, occupation, gender, experience, and training, in order to minimize bias.

The study utilized a qualitative descriptive design and an ethnographic approach, which focuses on describing and comprehending phenomena from both individual and collective perspectives, based on an analysis of the specific discourses and themes, and exploring their possible meanings, as demonstrated by other authors (Álvarez-Gayou, 2003; Creswell, 1998; Mertens, 2005).

### 2.2 | Procedure

The study consisted of two phases: focus groups and detailed semistructured interviews. The Spanish EDIFEM project (Ethnography Digital Feminist), which specializes in the use and abuse of drugs in young people in Spain, conducted all the data collection with expert researchers in anthropology, social work, nursing, sociology and criminology. The interview and focus group guide included an introduction with demographic information and various questions on the influence of the pandemic on the use of social networks and alcohol consumption, risk situations, risk prevention and control strategies, health effects, and the role of health professionals in these areas. The first focus group

followed an online pilot study, and after the analysis, the research team reorganized the topics to be included in the script for future groups, which were then used in the second phase of interviews.

### 2.3 | Data collection

We conducted 13 focus groups (FG 1-13; P (participants)) and 38 interviews (I 1-38) using the Google Meet platform, both of which were recorded on video and audio, and later transcribed verbatim. The interviews had an average duration of 60 min, and the focus groups lasted about 90 min. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, we had to build relationships and generate trust through digital channels. Consent forms were sent via email and WhatsApp, and the participants were asked to return them before the study began.

In terms of the interviewees, we recruited individuals known to the research team, as well as contacting different associations and secondary schools, to obtain the final sample of participants. The inclusion criteria included adolescents and young adults with Instagram accounts, who accessed them primarily through informal networks and educational institutions such as universities, youth groups, and associations. The age range was based on the United Nations' definition of youth, which includes young people between the ages of 14 and 25, a unique transitional phase between childhood and adulthood in which they are experiencing identity construction and social incorporation. To balance the age and gender of the study participants, we prioritized younger individuals (between 15 and 18 years old), male and nonbinary individuals in the interviews, while the focus groups had an older age range (between 19 and 24 years old), with the majority being women.

### 2.4 | Data analysis

All the interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and throughout the fieldwork, we followed the grounded theory model (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This involved first, a general reading of the transcriptions; second, a review of emerging themes; and finally, an identification of interrelated themes.

The analysis categories were established and triangulated independently among the research team to increase the reliability and validity of the analytical process.

The codes were collected under potential subthemes or themes and compared with the emerging coding clusters by the research team, whose creativity formed a key part of the analysis and the presentation of the findings (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

This whole process was conducted with the support of NVivo 12 qualitative analysis software, following the same coding system for the results of the different research techniques applied.

### 2.5 | Ethical considerations

The research project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Granada (1944/CEIH/2021). All the participants agreed

**TABLE 1** Sociodemographic characteristics.

Variable	Total Participants (n = 118)
Age [Mean (SD)]	19.36 (2.64)
Gender [%]	
Female	57.63%
Male	39.83%
Non-binary	2.54%
Population site [%]	
Urban	63.50%
Rural	36.44%
Social media users [%]	
Instagram	100%
TikTok	62.71%
Twitter	55.93%
Facebook	27.12%
Frequency of alcohol consumption [%]	
Occasionally	62.70%
Weekly	27.97%
Almost every day	8.48%
Every day	0.85%

voluntarily to be interviewed, receiving information about the study and a letter guaranteeing confidentiality signed by the research team. They also signed an informed consent form (mostly by hand, although some also signed digitally) and in the case of minors, the consent of their legal guardians was also obtained (all signed by hand).

### 3 | RESULTS

#### 3.1 | Participant characteristics

The final group examined in the study consisted of 118 individuals, with 57.63% young females, 39.83% young males, and 2.54% who identified themselves as nonbinary. The participants came from high schools, universities, or workplaces, and ranged in age from 15 to 24 years old, with a mean age of 19.36 and a standard deviation of 2.64. Of the total participants, 63.5% lived in urban areas and 36.44% in rural areas. All the participants (100%) reported using various SNSs, with 99.15% using them on a daily basis. The three most commonly used SNSs were Instagram (100%), TikTok (62.71%), and Twitter (55.93%). Concerning alcohol consumption, 62.70% consumed alcohol occasionally (several times a year, at parties or special events), 27.97% drank weekly (1 or 2 times per week), 8.48% drank almost every day (3 or 4 times a week), and 0.85% drank every day (Table 1).

The key results related to the main categories have already been analyzed in a previous study (Tarrío-Concejero et al., 2023). In the

present study, our analysis focuses on the last phase of the qualitative content analysis, that is, on the emerging categories (Arbeláez et al., 2014), although some findings from the main categories or themes are highlighted, with the aim of reflecting on the aims of the research.

The categories were therefore classified under three main themes: (1) The COVID-19 pandemic, Instagram and Risky Drinking; (2) Risk prevention and control strategies, and (3) Effects on health.

In addition, the following coding clusters were identified: (1) Inequality in the representation of men and women on SNSs; (2) Violence towards women's bodies and sexual violence on SNSs, and (3) Health problems derived from violence against the female body image on SNSs.

The categories are described below, and the verbatim transcriptions of the interview data can be consulted in Table 2.

#### 3.2 | Inequality in the representations of men and women on SNSs

In our study, differences were found between the images projected by men and women on SNSs. Men make explicit their enjoyment, consumption and leisure, conveying a casual, carefree image, usually in the company of groups of friends. Women, on the other hand, show the perpetuation of stereotyped roles, with a modest image, content related to fashion, the body and beauty, prioritizing uniqueness and competitiveness among them. In most cases, they reveal a concern for external approval (Verbatims FG1-P7 and FG13-P4).

Women are subjected to a discourse with double standards: on the one hand, the sexualization of their image is rewarded, and they pose according to masculine tastes and desires—like modern “Galateas”—and measure their acceptance through the number of likes; on the other, by doing all this they are the target of criticism, even from their closest circles of friends (Verbatims FG5-P2 and FG13-P5). Most of the people interviewed stated that SNSs promote sexual commodification (Verbatims FG5-P2 and FG13-P5).

#### 3.3 | Violence towards women's bodies and sexual violence on SNSs

There is a consensus among the people interviewed that the photos and images uploaded by young men on SNSs are not criticized or ridiculed, and if they are, never to the same extent as those posted by women.

Criticism about the body and the image of young women is frequent, and sometimes leads to harassment, which is perpetrated with impunity using false profiles; many women refer to the state of defenselessness they find themselves in when faced with these aggressors (Verbatims FG1-P5, FG12-P6, FG3-P2, I1, I17).. There is also violence of sexual content and once again, the double gender standards are evident: the explicit heteronormative sexualization is favorable to young men, whereas women are criticized for doing the same things (Verbatims I16, FG2-P3, I8, FG11-P1).

**TABLE 2** Verbatim transcriptions of interview data.

Categories	
<p><u>Category 1:</u> <u>Inequality in the representations of men and women on SNSs</u></p>	<p>Focus Group 1, mixed, 19-24 years old, (FG1-P7): If the guys upload a photo with a polo shirt, with their friends, it's great.. And we.. I don't know, there are lots of videos with make-up, saying "have this body, follow this diet".. it's like: "oh god, we have to wear good make-up, we have to go out with our hair like this, there's no way we can tie our hair up in a bun, like"..</p> <p>Focus Group 13, girls, 19-24 years old, (FG13-P4): Because I think that, after all, it's what we've always been taught.. "you have to be careful because you have to act like a lady".. sometimes it's just little comments, maybe even from your mother or your family.. it seems that it's linked to the fact that we're worth more the more beautiful we are and the better we look in front of everyone, and boys have never had that problem I'd say.</p> <p>Focus Group 5, boys, 19-24 years old, (FG5-P2): If a girl shows her body, she'll get much more "likes" and there'll be much greater repercussions.. if the girl is going to sexualize herself for a few likes, the message she gets is: "No! It's what you should do because that's how you get more likes and.. You're going to have more followers, more impact, etc., etc., etc." Know what I mean? That's somewhere where I do see a difference between men and women on social networks.</p> <p>Focus Group 13, girls, 19-24 years old, (FG13-P5): It's even happened to me that my boyfriend's friends, both girls and boys, have told him: "Look at what your girlfriend's sharing, she's sharing photos in a bikini, she's.. That's because she's looking for something".</p> <p>Focus Group 1, mixed, 19-24 years old, (FG1-P5): I think social networks often become a kind of social market in which women are the target of bored men, let's say, speaking of hegemonic heterosexuality, right?.. In other words, the experience that a woman has on a social network is usually related to her sexualized body, to her sexuality..</p> <p>Interview (non-binary) 24 years old, urban, <b>I01</b>: Nudes are the currency of the 21st century, they're like the new Bitcoin... but let's not sell ourselves like steaks in a sex market, right?.. you're putting yourself on sale as if you were something to buy—I don't know, it's a case of the double standards of sexual liberation.. but sending a nude is making you into an object. It's like you're saying: "This is what I've got, do you want to fuck it?". It's like the butcher showing you a steak—it's the same thing in the end, you know.</p>
<p><u>Category 2:</u> <u>Violence towards women's bodies and sexual violence on SNSs.</u></p>	<p>Focus Group 1, mixed, 19-24 years, (FG1-P5): Normally they're men, in most cases, who persecute other women or other men.. And I think it's very invisible violence, in the sense that, well, it's expressed in a very individual way. It's not one person facing off against another in public but.. I don't know, they're like online dead-ends.</p> <p>Focus Group 12, girls, 19-24 years old, (FG12-P6): There's a lot of hate around on Tik-Tok, Twitter and Instagram—there's a lot of toxicity and hate. Mostly, I don't know, things about your body, that you don't shave your armpits, you have to lose weight, you have to gain weight, eat a hearty meal.. it's horrible. And to tell the truth, most of these people are not really who they say they are—that is, they're accounts created with a false name, fake photos, and they're used to insult people and ruin many people's lives.</p> <p>Interview (non-binary), 24 years old, urban <b>I01</b>: Well, for example, I don't know, the fat person or the person with a disability, who's not the typical slim white person from a gym, etc., etc., etc. Know what I mean? When it's not a stereotyped beautiful body, but a bit unusual.. because there's a kind of divine regulation on Instagram, you know, the more stereotyped you are, the more followers you have.. I have friends who don't have a stereotyped body and they post a photo in a bikini.. and that's it, the typical thing, the first idiot who comments say: "You're fat, how can you upload a photo in a bikini"—or something like that—"you should be ashamed".</p> <p>Focus Group 3, boys, 15-19 years old, (FG3-P2): Upload a photo in a bikini and there are people who attack you a lot. And it's like: "Oh, you have stretch marks there, you've got cellulitis. How can you post that if you've got a fat tummy?"</p> <p>Interview (girl), 20 years old, urban, <b>I17</b>: In September, I reported it and then in November it reappeared again.. I told him: I've filed a complaint against you.. I was afraid to go out, I didn't feel at ease going down the street, because I didn't know who I was then. Whenever I went out, I always went with someone, with a neighbor, or called someone on the phone because I was afraid.. Of course, what bothers me most about this whole issue is not the fact that they're harassing me, which is obviously horrible, but the fact that the police don't do anything about it, you know? That's what annoys me most, that they even put the blame on me because I uploaded a photo in a bikini.</p> <p>Interview (boy) 18 years old, rural, <b>I16</b>: I've never seen anyone say anything bad to him. They don't say anything bad to boys.</p> <p>Focus Group 2, girls, 15-19 years old, (FG2-P3): If a boy gets dirty with some girls, he's like "Oh, he's the fucking boss, I don't know what." Like "look at that guy..", as if he was the king. But if a girl uploads something, it's like "look, what a bitch—she's being a slut."</p> <p>Interview (boy) 18 years old, rural, <b>I08</b>: The girl uploads a photo in a thong.. And that's it: "She's a slut, I don't know what"—but it doesn't have to be like that.. right?</p> <p>Focus Group 2, girls, 15-19 years old, (FG2-P3): There's a video on Tik-Tok,.. with a guy saying "women are like laws, they're there to be broken" and he was like.. And the guy who showed it to me was laughing—but you should have seen my face.. Let's see, there are jokes and jokes, but to me, that's no joke. You don't play with that—that's crossing the line. You can joke about many things, but about that? No way.</p> <p>Focus Group 11, girls 15-19 years old, (FG11-P1): Come on, lately, there was a movement on Tik-Tok called April 24, which went viral, which was called "the day of the rapes", that day, well, you could go out and supposedly you could rape a girl and nothing would happen to you.</p> <p>Focus Group 2, girls, 15-19 years old, (FG2-P7): Even in my environment, they can call you a "slut" just for drinking.. For drinking.. I had a friend, well, a person I knew, who posts photos when she goes to a party and I saw one in which she was a bit too drunk—she uploaded it and a guy gave her a hard time.. In fact, that girl still gets bullied today just for uploading those stories. At high school, some of my classmates started calling her a "slut" and threatened to hit her, just for that.</p>

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Categories	
Category 3: <u>Health problems derived from violence against the body image of women in SNSs</u>	<p>Interview (girl), 20 years old, urban, <b>I18</b>: A guy who was about 18-20 years old went to a party.. and met a girl, and they did things and the boy recorded it without her consent and sent it to his friend's groups and uploaded it in Instagram. Obviously, he had a lot of legal problems.. but I also find it really pathetic and unpleasant that boys, for example, upload videos of girls dancing that they don't even know—not just for recording them, but for uploading them too.</p> <p>Interview (girl) 20 years old, urban, <b>I17</b>: Two years ago, a boy abused me.. At that moment, I didn't know what had happened, because I was very drunk and I only found out about it three months later. Anyway, I said: "it was a bad night and I went out to party, period!" But when I was out partying three months later... a boy touched me and I remembered it and had an anxiety attack and I said: "Oh, I think this experience has had a negative effect on me". And I kind of started to analyze what had happened a bit and I said: "OK, they've abused me", but I didn't want to do anything out of fear, out of fear of thinking about my parents and thinking, "What will they think if their daughter has been abused?" Then, thinking about my friends, I said to myself: "They're going to criticize me or say something bad", and I wasn't able to tell anyone about it until six months later.</p> <p>Focus Group 13, girls 19-24 years old, (FG13-P4): You notice the photos of you that people save—you can see it: "4 people have saved your photo" and they're always the same; the ones where you're showing more of your body or are wearing a vest or a bikini..</p> <p>Focus Group 13, girls 19-24 years old, (FG13-P3): In the end it's tiring, and you end up saying: "Well look, I'm not going to upload it because 25 guys are going to make the same comments, and it's not worth it".</p> <p>Interview (girl) 20 years old, urban, <b>I17</b>: I stopped using Instagram, because..., you're using your social network, and suddenly someone appears out of the blue, and starts threatening you or harassing you—it changes your life.</p> <p>Focus Group 13, girls 19-24 years old, (FG13-P5): So, I'm thinking of stopping sharing photos—you feel bad, and if you have to stop and think about everything you share, it's not worth it to me, because in the end if they want to criticize you for what you share, they'll do so. It's something that, especially in cities, happens all the time, so I don't think it's worth it to let them win. Let's say, yes, that we girls have to watch out what we share.</p> <p>Focus Group 13, girls 19-24 years old, (FG13-P2): "I don't care what you tell me because it's my body, I love myself and that's it. And I upload this because I feel like it."</p> <p>Interview (non-binary), 24 years old, urban, <b>I01</b>: Well, just shut up! Don't even write anything! Don't waste your time writing—unfollow it if you don't want to see it and that's it. But don't write anything, because behind that account there's a person, you know?</p> <p>Focus Group 7, mixed, 15-19 years, (FG7-P4): I think it does always affect you, but it's mostly due to the environment we live in. In other words, if you see publications of fashion models right now, they're all super slim, and the girls assume that they have to have that type of body.</p> <p>Focus Group 2, girls, 15-19 years old, (FG2-P1): For example, maybe you upload a photo, right? And someone comments to you "you're really ugly" or "you're fat", or something. Then your mind begins to process it until you start believing it. So, from there, you start to change physically, but first mentally. So, I think that it's very important, because many times you end up saying, "Well, I'm going to stop eating" or "I'm going to eat less, I'm not going eat this anymore, I'm going to lose weight."</p> <p>Interview (girl), 16 years old, rural, <b>I32</b>: ... There was a point when I saw a lot of people like that, a lot of slim people, and I had a problem with eating, I stopped eating to lose a lot of weight, and I think it definitely affected me. From seeing people who are very slim, with a perfect body, it might make you feel worse physically and say: "I want to change this", or have very low self-esteem. I think that seeing that on social networks affects you... Well, I stopped eating so much, in other words, I cut my meals down a lot. Maybe I skipped meals, my mother began to notice it, I had very low self-esteem, I always had a very.. like I was always very down, and then my mother began to take me to psychologists, the psychologist helped me a lot, I started to eat properly again. It took a few months, and then I started to eat again, I began to have self-esteem and everything.. No, I didn't realize it at that time, I just looked in the mirror and I didn't think I looked good. I didn't think my image was good, I wanted to change it completely, but I didn't know where that idea came from, I didn't know where it originated ... after that, I uploaded fewer photos of my body—my body or my face—for that reason, no... maybe I used a lot of filters on it so I looked better.</p> <p>Focus Group 10, boys, 19-24 years old, (FG10-P1): I have friends, for example, who get really into social networks and have even had breast enlargements. They've even been posting about it, after the operation and everything, they've been reporting on social media. They've even shown people.. I mean, they've even shown what the scar looks like, OK? I've even got friends who are monetizing their content right now. Two friends in particular who are monetizing it, using the Onlyfans App, monetizing their operations.</p> <p>Focus Group 10, boys, 19-24 years old, (FG10-P2): They're already so unattainable, [the image of models], thanks to cosmetic surgery. Before, maybe it was about being slim. I don't know, maybe having curves and that, but now it's about having your lips thickened, breasts enlarged, your belly flattened.. Everything. So it has a big influence.</p> <p>Interview (boy) M15 19 years old, rural, <b>I15</b>: It isn't good to see the messages and for example, if you're seeing them alone you can get an anxiety attack. So, I personally delete them instead of looking at depressing things. This way, I avoid them a bit if I'm alone, because if not, I think about what they say and then many things can happen.</p> <p>Interview (girl), 20 years old, urban, <b>I17</b>: I was mortified by the thought of getting a message from him threatening me or talking rudely about my family—it was very oppressive, a lot of anxiety, a lot..</p> <p>Focus Group 11, girls, 15-19 years old, (FG11-P2): I wanted to go out quietly with my friends, I also wanted to wear a skirt and when I found out, [about the threat on Tik Tok of generalized rape on April 24], I didn't want to go out any more ... I wasn't just afraid for myself, but for all of us, I think that many of us were afraid to go that day.</p> <p>Focus Group 11, girls, 15-19 years old, (FG11-P1): And there was a boy who threatened her in all kinds of ways, telling her that where he knew her house was.. so she began to feel afraid all the time and had to see a psychologist.</p>

In the extracts, they denounce the portrayal of alcohol consumption in leisure settings on SNSs with verbal violence of a sexual nature and in some cases involving criminal actions such as crimes against sexual intimacy by taking advantage of a woman's drunkenness. One of our interviewees even reported a case of rape in a leisure environment (Verbatims FG2-P7, I18, I17, FG13-P4).

The reactions to the experience of sexualization and harassment on SNSs make many of the women interviewed stop uploading photos and videos and, according to them, so do many profiles of famous young women, influencers or content creators (Verbatims FG13-P3, I17). In other cases, we found some of the women interviewed felt empowered as a reaction to the criticism and misogyny experienced on SNSs. There were also some reactions from the men interviewed expressing their awareness of the problem and the need to act by preventing the insults from escalating, and putting forward positive suggestions (Verbatims FG13-P5, FG13-P2 and I1).

### 3.4 | Health problems derived from violence against the body image of women on SNSs

The social imaginary that exalts idealized bodies leads to disorders related to body image, mainly in adolescents and young people, when they compare themselves to the slim, perfect, idealized models projected by advertising. These problems are compounded when they receive negative criticism of their own photos posted on the SNSs, which leads to problems of self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy, imperfection, addictions, eating disorders and even anxiety attacks, as confirmed by many interviewees (Verbatims FG7-P4, FG2-P1, I32).

In some cases, these problems drive young women to undergo cosmetic surgery, most commonly breast enlargements, but also abdominoplasty or profile or lip augmentation, which are the most frequent. Some of these women then go back to using the SNSs again to earn money to finance the cost of surgery (Verbatims FG10-P1, FG10-P2).

In all cases, they report health problems, fear and anxiety derived from violence and harassment on SNSs (Verbatims I15, I17, FG11-P2, FG11-P1).

## 4 | DISCUSSION

This qualitative study aimed to analyze the relationship between Instagram, alcohol consumption and effects on health, through interviews and discussion groups involving adolescents during the COVID 19 pandemic. The main findings point towards an unequal representation on SNSs of masculine and feminine roles, which perpetuates patriarchal gender roles, different forms of violence against the body image of women on SNSs, and health problems related to the hegemonic, normative body image exhibited in advertising and the collective imagination.

As regards the masculine and feminine roles portrayed on SNSs, the content of the images focuses almost exclusively on showing the

erotized female body and perpetuating gender roles. Young women therefore get more "likes" when they conform to the beauty norms of slimness and hypersexualization, as found in other studies (Bell et al., 2018; Moreno, 2021). To do this, they project a near-perfect version of themselves in the virtual world: for instance, on Instagram, the interviewees edit their images, stories or reels using different filters, all of which turn the women into a product, bringing their image closer to the socially accepted levels of perfection and increasing their popularity (Martín, 2021; Martín & Chaves, 2022).

The digital dimension of violence against women should be understood as a comprehensive term which covers a wide range of online actions and facilitated by technology, which gives these violent acts more anonymity, a wider audience and greater permanence (Council of Europe, 2022). Violence against women's image and body on SNSs, as reported in our study, mainly takes the form of criticism of her body and its representation in SNSs. At times, they are harassed and criticized for hypersexualization, the result of gender surveillance and misogynist attacks for daring to challenge the conventional stereotypes by revealing the basis of a deeply unequal and discriminatory gender normative model (Dunn et al., 2017).

As regards health effects, many of the interviewees agree on the importance given to a person's physique on SNSs, with the ideal look being slim and hypersexualized, which is rarely achievable and which inevitably makes them compare themselves with others, producing dissatisfaction with their body which can lead in turn to various types of psychological problems, such as low self-esteem, anxiety (Portillo et al., 2021) and eating disorders (Ojeda et al., 2021). In fact, a close link has been demonstrated between the use of SNSs such as Instagram, with its emphasis on sharing images, and concern for body image leading to various negative health effects (Goodyear, 2020; Shah et al., 2019). In our study, as in previous research, many of the participants have related this hypersexualization of the body on SNSs with alcohol consumption, thus adding the harmful effects produced by alcohol, mainly binge drinking, to these negative effects (Romo-Avilés et al., 2020).

It should also be noted that, in recent years, there has been a movement by women considered "curvy" on SNSs, protesting in their posts about the conventional canons of beauty, conveying the image of an empowered woman, and promoting a body image which does not fit in with these norms (Blanes, 2017; Sánchez, 2018). However, in our research, none of the female interviewees stated that they had a "curvy" profile, although they did agree that they felt empowered to upload their photos because they felt confident that they had the same right to do so as young men, regardless of whether they fitted the existing norm of beauty or not.

Another aspect that affects health is the comparison between peers on SNSs. In this case, Instagram facilitates this comparison by their quantifiable system showing the number of followers, views and "likes." Some of the interviewees affirmed that this can generate anxiety, as shown in some studies which demonstrate the danger of such unreal comparisons based on fabricated images which make them feel dissatisfied with their own bodies (Alvarado, 2018).

Added to this, there is the increasing use of cosmetic surgery by women to achieve an unattainable body ideal, which, in many cases,



leads to major health problems. This field has been studied extensively, and is often linked to the objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), which provides a framework for understanding women's motivation to perform cosmetic surgery. Among the factors are greater self-objectification, self-monitoring, and body shame, which cause girls to be more likely to consider and agree to cosmetic surgery, as reflected in our study (Gillen & Markey, 2021; Vaughan & Lewis, 2015). Finally, related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), an important aspect which is a growing trend to consider in research, the Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, pointed out that gender equality serves as both a fundamental human entitlement and a crucial cornerstone for fostering a sustainable global community. Despite strides made in recent decades, the trajectory toward achieving gender parity by 2030 remains off-course. With women and girls comprising half of the world's population, they inherently embody half of its potential. However, pervasive gender disparities persist worldwide, hindering societal advancement. On a global scale, women continue to earn, on average, 23% less than their male counterparts in the labor market, while dedicating approximately three times the amount of time to unpaid domestic and caregiving duties. Persistent challenges such as sexual violence, exploitation, unequal distribution of domestic labor, and discrimination in public roles further impede progress towards gender equality (United Nations. Goal 5)

#### 4.1 | Limitations and strengths

Firstly, due to the use of a convenient sample, it is hard to generalize the findings of this study to all Spanish adolescents during the pandemic. Additionally, the study only focused on adolescents from specific regions in Spain, and the recruitment process (using the snowball effect or convenience sampling) may have excluded other adolescents from other areas who may have experienced these issues differently.

However, the study has notable strengths. It is the first study to explore the relationship between the culture of alcohol consumption and Instagram use among a sample of Spanish adolescents and workers during the third to sixth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the study was conducted by experienced professionals and researchers in the field of adolescence, risk, and qualitative methodology, who conducted high-quality systematic research.

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS

There is a gender gap in the unequal representation of masculine and feminine roles on SNSs, and they are governed by the traditional gender mandates of body, beauty and sexualization for women, while remaining meek and subservient. Only women are subjected to such a hypernormativity of the body to the exclusion of other body images, and this can lead to a number of health disorders and problems caused by such unattainable canons of beauty. To this must be added the misogynous violence against women's images and bodies on SNSs, which expresses itself through mockery, insults or harassment

of women who break this rule in an attempt to project a successful or attractive self-image.

On the other hand, it seems that men can act on SNSs just like they can in public, without anyone recriminating their presence or criticizing the way they are, thus enforcing the same stereotyped gender rules as in real life.

This research also reveals the weak institutional response to the abuse and violence against women committed on SNSs and the need for public policies to protect young women from the different types of violence committed on social networks. This research has implications for the improvement of teachers with a gender perspective on topics that address the current health of women on SNSs. It is also a starting point to consider for further research that analyzes the relationship between Instagram, alcohol consumption and effects on health, since no previous qualitative studies have been found that address these issues with an analysis of inequalities based on gender.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All the authors have materially participated in the research and manuscript preparation. All the authors have approved the final manuscript. Specific roles: **Maria Ángeles García-Carpintero:** Research; conceptualization; methodology; formal analysis; investigation; data curation; writing—original draft; writing—review and editing. **Lorena Tarrío-Concejero:** Research; conceptualization; methodology; investigation; writing—review and editing. **Rocío de Diego-Cordero:** Research; conceptualization; methodology; data curation; writing—review and editing.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank the project research team, who made the interviews and focus groups possible. Like the participants, without them, the study would not have been possible. Funding for this study was provided by the project: "Etnografía digital feminista en los espacios recreativos en los que se usan y abusan drogas entre personas jóvenes" (PID2019-105122RB-I00 / State Research Agency /10.13039/501100011033). This organization played no role in the study design, collection, analysis or interpretation of the data, writing the manuscript, or the decision to submit the paper for publication.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced in any way the work presented in this paper.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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**How to cite this article:** García-Carpintero Muñoz, M. Á., Tarriño-Concejero, L., & de Diego-Cordero, R. (2024). Violence on social networks related to the body image of young women and its repercussions on health. *Public Health Nursing*, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phn.13317>