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## Sexuality in the experience of fat adolescents: review of university students reports

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**Abstract:** Human sexuality is a broad concept socially constructed; it is influenced by normative patterns that stigmatize deviant bodies. This study is a qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory investigation on the sexual experience of 23 women and 19 men, aged 18 to 25 years, who self-described as being fat during their adolescence. Data collection was carried out using an online questionnaire composed of closed-ended and semi-open questions. The responses to the closed-ended questions were quantified numerically, and the remaining responses were categorized using the L. Bardin systematization. The results were described along two thematic axes: (1) Experience as a fat adolescent and (2) Sexuality Experience as a fat adolescent. Participants cited "laziness" as the stereotype that was mostly associated with fat individuals and the fat body was reported as having a negative influence on the sexuality experience. The fat individuals perceived themselves as fat when taking into account the current aesthetic and beauty standards; they also reported dissatisfaction with their own bodies. A small group highlighted that sexual experience had been unpleasant during adolescence; others rated their first romantic experiences as "neutral" and "pleasurable." The feelings that prevailed were "insecurity," "shame," and "denial" of their own bodies. The youngsters also experienced situations of prejudice and fatphobia and had to face the difficulties in this connection on their own. It is concluded that many fat young people did not receive social support in their adolescence, and their fat body interfered with their self-perception and their relationships in general. Further studies encompassing other variables are suggested.

**Keywords:** fat body; sexuality; adolescence.

### 1 Introduction

Adolescence can be characterized as a transitional process, marked by the passage from childhood to adulthood. Under different perspectives this period has been considered a "phase", attributing rebellion stereotypes thereto; they also reduce biological maturation and the possibility of reproduction as the only relevant events, disregarding the important influence of the social context (Bock, 2007; Ozella, 2002; Senna; Dessen, 2012). Thus, beyond the aspects involving the physical and maturational changes resulting from the natural process of puberty, adolescence can be defined as a historical and social construct (Papalia; Martorell, 2022).



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It is understood that adolescence is not a universal stage of life that will be experienced equally by all the individuals; combined with other intersections, characteristics, and situations adolescence can make individuals more prone to experiencing processes of exclusion, oppression, and stigma. The process of identity construction occurs through social interaction and the perception of oneself, the others, and the social group. It is at this time that the first experiences in romantic and sexual relationships are established (Costa; Bortolozzi, 2022; Papalia; Martorell, 2022).

In connection with the sexual initiation, non-use of condoms, unplanned pregnancy, substance abuse, and the lack of emancipatory sex education are factors that can make young people more susceptible to risky sexual behaviors (Oliveira *et al.*, 2024). The research by Lima *et al.* (2019) examined the prevalence of risky sexual behaviors in adolescents with "overweight" and "obesity"; however, it was not possible to establish relationships with this group. These data corroborate what was verified by Oliveira *et al.* (2024), who elucidated that satisfaction with one's own body contributes significantly to the chances of risky and unprotected sexual experiences. In fact adolescents who are considered fat are those who present the lowest risk rates in the processes involving the initiation of sexual practice.

Hattori, Castro, and Lopes (2013) analyzed the traits considered important for adolescents in the process of choosing romantic and sexual partners. The study included a sample of 467 Brazilian students, and the results indicated similarities between genders in the valuation of "physical traits", "health habits" and "humor"; some differences were also observed, such as the valuation of physical attributes by male adolescents, while females considered the subjective and behavioral characteristics as being more important.

Ortiz-Hernandez *et al.* (2023) interviewed 26 adolescent students from public and private schools to investigate stereotypes related to weight. The data revealed the adolescents' perception of the bodies they considered healthy, attractive, and desirable. For the girls, the ideal female body is "slender", curvy, and with visible breasts; for the boys, the ideal of male beauty was associated with a muscular and defined body. Negative comments were used with regard to fat bodies, such as being associated with lazy people who don't take care of themselves, eat poorly, are unhealthy, unattractive, depressed, unable to find romantic partners, and looking

funny. Both fat bodies and extreme thinness were associated with unhealthy conditions and not corresponding to the beauty ideals.

Black *et al.* (2025) highlighted adolescents' social representations of the body and how studies discuss the theme of Black skin bodies. In general, it was found that the racial issue is little discussed and, when mentioned, is present in discourses that address body dissatisfaction in opposition to beauty, which is represented by the white, slim, and slender body. Physical appearance and the structure of a "standard" body are pointed out as more valued by adolescents, who seek to achieve the "most desired" body.

In light of the studies cited (Black *et al.*, 2025; Hattori; Castro; Lopes, 2013; Oliveira *et al.*, 2024; Ortiz-Hernandez *et al.*, 2023), we can reflect that aesthetics and physical appearance are important for adolescents in the process of affective selection, and the individuals considered attractive being more valued, desired, and chosen as potential sexual and romantic partners. Adolescents who do not meet what is considered the "beauty standard" are more likely to experience this exclusion.

In the Western culture, normative ideals have been constructed and sequenced due to the supremacy of certain groups, such as, for example, white, strong, rich, non-disabled people, etc. Thus, normative standards have influenced how a particular group, body, or subject considered deviant is viewed and interpreted in the perspective of culture (Bozon, 2004; Costa; Bortolozzi, 2022). The concept of stigma coined by Goffman (1963/1988) indicates how individuals who do not conform to prevailing standards carry a "social mark", covered by differences and deviations. To a certain extent, stigma can be observed as a social condition of maladjustment and discredit, used as an instrument of social control (Bortolozzi, 2021).

When associating the experience of sexuality to people who grew up fat, it is understood that fatness can make the transition from childhood to adulthood more complex. In this manuscript, the terms "fat body" and "fat person" were used, based on the critical assumption that seeks to depathologize bodies stigmatized by "fatness" and deconstruct weight as a classificatory measure for healthy and unhealthy bodies. This view is shared by authors such as Jimenez-Jimenez and Silva (2021), Rangel (2018), and Paim, Kovaleski, and Selau (2024), who demonstrate in their research the consequences of discrimination, prejudice, and exclusion experienced by that

population, a theoretical conception on which the state of the art of the subject being addressed was based.

Jimenez-Jimenez and Silva (2021) understand that discussions about fatphobia encompass other issues, such as the control of female bodies, awareness of oppressions experienced since childhood, and lack of access to health services and public spaces. It is understood that the exclusion experienced for "being different" can also have consequences for affective and sexual experiences, since fat bodies are not socially desirable or symbols of pleasure (Jimenez-Jimenez; Silva, 2021).

Fat people are morally held responsible for their "excess fat" and for neglecting their own health. The media and contemporary society exploit and reproduce "ideal" aesthetic standards; those who deviate from those standards are not represented in this imaginary of beauty and normality, but are rather framed in pathology and illness (Bortolozzi, 2021, Jimenez-Jimenez; Silva, 2021). Women, in particular, are subjected to beauty ideals that are frequently associated with a slim body as the standard to be followed to achieve the ideal-perfect body, health, and to be valued as potential consumers of the beauty industry (Hessel; Furtado, 2019).

Studies suggest that children and adolescents considered "fat" are targets of bullying and experience impacts on their mental health, highlighting anxiety, depression, and social isolation conditions (Dias *et al.*, 2024; Forster *et al.*, 2023; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2021). In a systematic literature review, Maury Mena *et al.* (2025) point out the need for preventive actions in the school setting, in order to prevent and minimize the damage caused to the body image of children who have experienced the "weight stigma" in their psychological and social development process.

Fatphobia experienced by fat people is characterized as a prejudiced practice, revealed through hatred or aversion towards people who do not conform to the socially constructed body as healthy, beautiful, and desirable. Consequently, the main cause of psychological suffering and avoidance of situations that promote health and quality of life emerges. However, weight is not an indicator of health, but rather the systems that involve individuals integrally, such as the daily habits that promote access, self-care, and well-being (Araújo *et al.*, 2018; Bombak, 2014; Rubino *et al.*, 2020). Pearl and Sheynblyum (2025) clarify that health professionals reproduce discriminatory situations related to weight, which generates greater avoidance and lesser demand for health services.

In many cases, bariatric surgery is presented as an alternative to obtain the desired body, increased self-esteem, improved body image, and enhanced social and sexual relationships (Granero-Molina *et al.*, 2024). Franco, Vieira, and Oliveira (2022) highlight that, behind the dream of adhering to a "beauty standard", there are subjective aspects and suffering that motivate the search for surgical intervention. Reviewing the experiences of a group of women undergoing pre-surgical monitoring, the authors clarify that fat is the main reason for unhappiness, becoming an obstacle to performing femininity, beauty, and arousing their partners' desire (Franco; Vieira; Oliveira, 2022).

In this regard, Zanello, Richwin, and Birck (2024, p. 13) indicate gender differences in their accounts of the romantic and sexual experiences of fat women, "[...] being hidden, fetishized as a mere sexual object to be used at inappropriate times in order to avoid prying eyes". Many women "took advantage" of fetishization as being the only opportunity for sexual involvement; in contrast the accounts of fat men highlighted that "[...] fatness<sup>1</sup> does not hinder their love lives or sexual access to women in any way [...]" (Zanello; Richwin; Birck, 2024, p. 18).

It is noted that fat women are more likely to experience emotional neglect, objectification, and fetishization of their bodies (Franco; Vieira; Oliveira, 2022; Jimenez-Jimenez; Silva, 2021; Zanello; Richwin; Birck, 2024). It is important to consider that other social markers such as race, class, sexual orientation, generation, disability, nationality, among others, can intensify suffering.

Gender oppression, racism, and fatphobia intersect insofar as their historical origins and the legacy of slavery objectify Black women and classify them as "the other" (Collins, 2019). At the same time, they are fetishized and assume the colonialist representation of the Black women as being "fiery" and "sexually uncontrollable". Black men, in turn, also experience what Collins (2019, p. 304) calls the "myth of Black hypersexuality", according to which: "[...] being white marks the normal category of heterosexuality. In contrast, being Black, indicates an unbridled and uncontrolled hyper-heterosexuality of excessive sexual appetite" (Collins, 2019, p. 304).

Furthermore, the privilege of whiteness brings some women closer to a more accepted standard, even if their body shape deviates from the slim ideal (Silva; Jimenez-Jimenez; Souza, 2024). Black women, when compared to white women,

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<sup>1</sup> The authors explain that the term "fatness" refers to the unique experience of fat people in a fatphobic society (Zanello; Richwin; Birck, 2024).

experience greater neglect and emotional loneliness (Collins, 2019). Moreover, when considering the experience of a black and fat body, we observe that situations of violence, prejudice, and exclusion are amplified (Carniel; Diercks; Jung, 2023; Silva; Jimenez-Jimenez; Souza, 2024).

If it is not only sexual desire that contributes to the selection of a partner for establishing a relationship, but also how much social prestige that body will provide, it becomes evident that the fat body does not meet the requirements to be part of the "dating market" (Costa; Bortolozzi, 2022; Jimenez-Jimenez, 2021; Vasconcelos; Sudo; Sudo, 2004) and dealing with a body understood as different can generate suffering during adolescence, especially when there is an experience of oppression, bullying, violence and fatphobia.

There is a vast body of literature related to the experiences of fat people, with many studies focusing on the impacts of "obesity" on children and adolescents (Dias *et al.*, 2024; Fortes *et al.*, 2023; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2021). In this sense, some studies have delved into adolescents' perceptions of bodies considered "outside the norm", what they consider desirable, valuable, and beautiful; and the negative repercussions on self-image and self-esteem during human development (Hattori; Castro; Lopes, 2013; Ortiz-Hernandez *et al.*, 2023; Black *et al.*, 2025).

Furthermore, recent research has focused on critically understanding the experience of sexuality among fat women (Jimenez-Jimenez; Silva, 2021; Silva; Jimenez-Jimenez; Souza, 2024; Zanello; Richwin; Birck, 2024). From this perspective, it is understood that those findings contribute significantly to this investigation, since there is a gap in the literature on the sexual experiences of fat adolescents. This analysis is based on accounts from young college students who grew up, ceasing to be or remaining fat. Therefore, this descriptive and exploratory research<sup>2</sup> (Bortolozzi, 2024; Hernández Sampieri; Fernández Collado; Baptista Lucio, 2006) aimed to investigate the experiences of being a fat adolescent and their experiences of sexuality, based on the accounts of young college students.

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## 2 Methodological approach

This investigation was submitted to and approved by the Ethics Committee of a public university<sup>3</sup>. All ethical considerations in research involving human subjects were complied with, and participants were given their rights to anonymity, withdrawal from participation, clarification of objectives and methods before their consent, as well as their free consent to participate. A Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF) was drafted, made available for reading, and registered as an acceptance document, in which the participant who voluntarily agreed should check the "yes" option to access the questionnaire, confirming his/her consent and being able to withdraw from the investigation at any time, without penalty or prejudice.

The study included 42 college students (23 women and 19 men), aged between 19 and 23 years. Regarding racial self-identification, 30 subjects declared themselves as white, 9 as brown or mixed race, 2 as black, and 1 as Asian, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 — Characterization of the participants

| Color        | White |       | Brown/mixed race |       | Black |      | Yellow |      |
|--------------|-------|-------|------------------|-------|-------|------|--------|------|
|              | No.   | %     | No.              | %     | No.   | %    | No.    | %    |
| <b>Men</b>   | 14    | 33.3% | 2                | 4.7%  | 2     | 4.7% | 0      | 0%   |
| <b>Women</b> | 16    | 38.1% | 7                | 16.6% | 0     | 0%   | 1      | 2.4% |
| <b>Total</b> | 30    | 71.4% | 9                | 21.4% | 2     | 4.7% | 1      | 2.4% |

Source: The authors (2026).

The college students' specific selection for participation in the study aimed to address the perception of the young population and standardize the variable of the educational context. Preference was given to participants who remembered with greater accuracy the changes that occurred in their bodies during puberty, as well as the social aspects that encompass adolescence, which may still have repercussions on their experiences.

In this sense, the sample was intentional and of convenience due to the ease of access to the university's public that met the study inclusion criterion: young college students. Although this sample is non-probabilistic and limited to a geographical

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<sup>3</sup> Project registered on the Brazil Platform. Approval Opinion: 3.391.313.

region, without representativeness, this type of recruitment ensures contextual uniformity and faster data collection (Shaughnessy; Zechmeister; Zechmeister, 2012).

In the group of 42 young people, 29 (69%) indicated they were studying at a public university, while 13 (30.9%) indicated studying at a private university. Regarding the courses of study of these participants, they were distributed as follows:

Table 2 — Characterization of the study participants regarding their field of study

| Course field | Human<br>(Psychology, Pedagogy, Law, etc.) |       | Biological Sciences<br>(Medicine, Physical Education, Biology) |       | Exact Sciences<br>(Physics, Computer Science, Informatics) |     | Communication<br>(Radio and TV, Public Relations, Design) |      |
|--------------|--|-------|--|-------|--|-----|---|------|
|              | No.  | %     | No.  | %     | No.  | %   | No.   | %    |
| <b>Men</b>   | 9  | 21.4% | 3  | 7.1%  | 5  | 12% | 2   | 4.7% |
| <b>Women</b> | 18   | 42.8% | 3  | 7.1%  | 0  | 0%  | 2   | 4.7% |
| <b>Total</b> | 27   | 64.3% | 6  | 14.3% | 5  | 12% | 4   | 9.5% |

Source: The authors (2026).

All participants were enrolled in universities located in the interior of the State of São Paulo. The majority, 90.5%, was pursuing higher education in the city of Bauru, while 9.5% were distributed among the cities of Botucatu (2.4%), Jaú (2.4%), Assis (2.4%), and São José do Rio Preto (2.4%).

For data collection, a questionnaire with closed and semi-open questions was developed, based on thematic axes, in order to cover the questions necessary to meet the intended objectives. The information is summarized in Table 3 below:

Table 3 — Thematic axes of research and objectives of the questions

| Axis                             | Objectives  |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Axis 1: Personal data            | Characterize the participant.   |
| Axis 2: Self-image               | Identify what makes the person consider him/herself as fat, why they lost weight (or not), and how.   |
| Axis 3: Stigma and prejudice     | Identify perceptions and experiences of discrimination associated with being fat, whether in the family, at school, in health services, in leisure situations or other places, as well as feelings and actions resulting therefrom. |
| Axis 4: Fat body and Sexuality   | Investigate past and present affective and sexual experiences; also assess whether there is a connection in the discourse between affective/sexual relationships and the fat body.  |
| Axis 5: Coping with difficulties | Assess personal repertoire and/or social support for coping with difficulties related to experiencing a fat body and sexuality.   |

Source: The authors (2026).

The questionnaire's functionality was tested in a pilot situation with two similar participants in order to make the necessary improvements; few changes were needed, such as: inserting the option for doctors in the "Healthcare Professionals" section and adding other questions like: "Did you feel comfortable answering the questions?" and "Would you like to suggest something to someone who has experienced the same situation as you?". In short, the final version of the instrument was organized in the Google Forms and data collection occurred online. The social networks *Facebook* and *Instagram* were used to release the information on the research; this would allow potential participants to share the information and refer other university students, a technique called "snowball" (Bortolozzi, 2024; Vinuto, 2014).

The data collection period was estimated to be 3 months; invitations to participate were made during the months of August, September, and October 2019. The online survey gathered 43 respondents; one questionnaire was excluded due to the presence of mockery and satire directed at fat people, which also indicated the participant's lack of interest in the study. Finally, the final sample consisted of 42 participants, indicated by the capital letter "P" followed by a sequential cardinal number.

The data were reviewed using a quantitative-qualitative approach. Initially, the objective responses were organized and tabulated using non-parametric statistics. Subsequently, the responses to the semi-open questions were reviewed, that is, the qualitative data were read in full, exhaustively, and grouped into thematic categories defined *a posteriori* according to the methodological proposal described by Bardin (2020). The review revealed categories associated to the experience of being a fat adolescent and the impacts on the sexuality experience.

The results were analyzed from two thematic axes that resulted in different categories. This organization is shown in Table 4.

Table 4 — Thematic axes and categories

| THEMATIC AXES                       | CATEGORIES  |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Experiences of being a fat teenager | Negative feelings related to having a fat body.   |
|                                     | Relationship with one's own body and social influence: discrimination, bullying, and prejudice. |
|                                     | Influence of thinness and aesthetic standards.  |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Experiencing sexuality as a fat teenager | A body that deviates from the aesthetic standard and is not sexually desirable.  |
|  | A body that is socially discriminated against and deemed unattractive: repercussions that lead to repressed sexuality. |
|  | A body that generates insecurity and low self-esteem, preventing the establishment of affective/sexual relationships.  |

Source: The authors (2026).

### 3 Experience of being a fat teenager

Participants indicated adjectives they considered they were attributed to fat people during adolescence. The most associated stereotypes were "lazy" (85.7%), "chubby" (64.3%), "funny" (61.9%), "friendly" (38.1%), "slow" (35.7%), "intelligent" (14.3%), "boring" (7.1%), "bad-tempered" (4.8%), and "ugly" (4.8%). In the "other" category, they highlighted the characteristics "unhealthy", "chubby", "dirty", "idiot" and "sick".

The results are similar to the findings of Lima, Ramos-Oliveira, Barbosa (2017) and Ortiz-Hernandez *et al.* (2023), with the main stereotypes related to fat people being "laziness", "lack of willpower", "neglect of health" and "unattractiveness", reasons which, in a way, hold the fat persons responsible for their excess weight, disregarding other variables such as genetic factors and the absence of environments that promote quality of life, inclusion of different bodies and integral health (Bombak, 2014; Rubino *et al.*, 2020; Pearl; Sheinblyum, 2025). In addition, characteristics such as "being a woman" (83.3%), "being LGBTQIAPN+" (76.2%), "being black" (73.8%), "being poor" (66.7%) and "being short" (35.7%) were pointed out as conditions that can contribute unfavorably to the experience of sexuality, when added to a fat body.

It is considered that intersections such as gender, race, class, and sexual orientation contribute to the experience of being a fat adolescent, influencing the experience of sexuality in distinct ways (Carniel; Diercks; Jung, 2023; Costa; Bortolozzi, 2022; Silva; Jimenez-Jimenez; Souza, 2024). Costa and Bortolozzi (2022, pp. 79-80) indicate that "Subjects considered outside the norm experience double repression, as they are stigmatized, marginalized, oppressed, suffer violence and prejudice, further hindering the process of expressing their sexuality".

Regarding personal perception of the fat body, participants indicated that they began to perceive themselves as "fat" based on personal standards (76.2%) and

comparison with social groups, especially with friends (71.4%). In addition, this perception was also influenced by family members' assessments during childhood and adolescence (64.3%) and by a medical diagnosis of obesity (59.5%).

The most frequently reported feelings experienced during adolescence were body denial, shame, unhappiness, insecurity, and disappointment. Souza and Gonçalves (2023) also highlight the prevalence of feelings such as sadness, inferiority, low self-esteem, shame, and guilt in the experience of fat adolescents. These reports exemplify:

My general feelings about my body were of shame and non-acceptance. For a long time I struggled with my weight in various ways and never achieved an acceptable result and because of my shame about it I always tried to hide my body in different ways (coats, poor posture, among others) (P6, 2019).

I didn't like what I saw in the mirror, I was dissatisfied, disappointed about myself for not being able to 'have a better body', totally insecure in all areas of life; I was ashamed of my clothes, but I was determined to change the situation (P8, 2019).

Some participants highlighted that they suffered bullying during childhood and adolescence; one participant felt much more affected and associated this occurrence to a gender performance considered "effeminate": "During childhood and adolescence, I suffered prejudice and bullying because I was fat and, on top of that, more effeminate. This affected my self-esteem and confidence in myself" (P4, 2019). Psychological consequences associated with bullying were evidenced in the research of Dias *et al.* (2024), Forster *et al.* (2023), Rodrigues *et al.* (2021), and Maury Mena *et al.* (2025).

Comparisons occurred during this period, such as not having the same body type as other teenagers who were considered slim, and being portrayed as "the ugliest in the group" or "the ugly girl in the group of pretty friends". Furthermore, family members reciprocated with disapproval and control over her diet; one participant highlighted that her mother repeatedly told her she would be "the fat, lonely girl".

Not fitting the body standards of other teenage girls brought many negative consequences in various areas, at home always under constant stares and comments emphasizing the need to eat less, and especially in terms of romantic relationships at school, where, because she weighed more than her friends, she was seen as the ugliest in the group (P15, 2019).

People would not talk to me, and most of the time I was alone. Only those who saw they could take advantage of my being nice approached me. Besides, I liked helping people who had difficulties at school, but in the end I realized that all my friendships revolved around that. My image was always associated with the ugly girl in the group of pretty friends. My mother always said I would

be that fat, lonely girl. Later, at 13, I started avoiding eating between meals and doing a lot of exercise during the week. I practically spent the whole day at the gym (swimming, aerobics, and weight training – all together). I was ashamed of being myself (P9, 2019).

It is noticeable that the personal self-image was built by the notions of "difference", influenced by the medical discourse and normative standards linked to social instances such as family and school (Bortolozzi, 2021; Jimenez-Jimenez; Silva, 2021; Hessel; Furtado, 2019). However, these contexts can also play an important role in both deconstructing prejudices and reproducing fatphobia. Souza and Gonçalves (2023) indicate that adolescents feel more comfortable discussing the subject in the school context, avoiding talking about prejudice and fatphobia with their families. On the other hand, the existence of a fatphobic, violent, exclusionary, and inaccessible school structure for larger bodies is noted (Paranhos; Jimenez-Jimenez, 2023).

The relationship that the family establishes with the adolescent is important for the development of a positive self-image; however, Zanello, Richwin, and Birck (2024) described situations of discrimination regarding fat bodies in the family setting, with the mother figure being the main agent of fatphobic comments towards daughters. Menezes, Ferreira, and Melo (2020), similarly to the data in this study, mention that one participant was called fat and had her diet controlled by her grandmother; another received comments from her father that she would never find a boyfriend and would be replaced by a thin woman.

Beauty and aesthetic standards exert a great influence on how adolescents perceive their bodies. Body dissatisfaction, the desire to lose weight, and the lack of a social, family, and school support network can trigger dysfunctional behaviors and eating disorders (Ferreira; Andrade, 2020). Living with a fat body and not recognizing oneself as someone "desirable" resulted in unpleasant situations and in feelings considered bad: "Having a mirror and looking at yourself and seeing someone that you wouldn't even want yourself to be is really bad, especially during adolescence when you start to feel attracted to other people and it's not reciprocated" (P8, 2019).

Frustration was present because, often, weight loss was not successful or as expected:

I believed that my fat body was something bad and that I would only be happy and complete with a thin body, but I couldn't achieve that body, so I felt like a person without willpower, without self-esteem, and constantly dissatisfied and incomplete (P9, 2019).

The study by Souza and Gonçalves (2023, p. 248) demonstrates that body dissatisfaction and the pursuit/desire for weight loss are present in adolescence, regardless of gender: “[...] there is a unanimous preference for the thin body, as being the ideal, the most coveted, the most beautiful, and that, to feel good about one's body, one must be thin”. In this context, it is considered that being a fat adolescent can influence the sexuality experience.

#### **4 Sexuality experiences as a fat teenager**

Being fat influences sexuality for 85.7% of the survey participants. This association was considered "relative" by 9.5% and 4.8% "do not believe" this relationship exists. Similarly, 92.8% considered a fat body sexuality experience in adolescence to be perceived as "negative" and 7.1% understood it as "neutral".

The justifications for this perceived negative influence were related to the consequences in the affective and sexual life. Fat persons are not always seen as desirable partners (Jimenez-Jimenez; Silva, 2021; Franco; Vieira; Oliveira, 2022), and stigmas such as "desexualization", "fetishization" and "animalization" characterize the experience of their sexuality,

Because there is a certain 'desexualization' of fat individuals, as if people didn't see a fat person as possessing sexuality, desire, and the potential for affection to fulfill that desire. I see that fat people are quite marginalized; it's much harder for them to experience their sexuality. And when we are sexualized, it's something very fetishized and almost animalizing us (P17, 2019).

Again, suffering was reported due to the moral judgment of needing to "strive" to be thin: "This has already made me very sad and demotivated with myself. It wasn't a healthy process and I had to put a lot of efforts to detach myself from this ideal of a thin 'standard person'" (P4, 2019).

Fatphobia has been identified as the main "cause" of the repression and distortion of the sexuality and image of fat people,

Because the society we live in is fatphobic, the construction of the image regarding the body and its expression, as well as the expression of its sexuality, are repressed and distorted by socially accepted standards (P6, 2019).

Based on the above, we can reflect on the representation of fat bodies as being "asexual" and "desexualized" while simultaneously being "objectified" comparable to animals, and with their fatness physical characteristics being a source of fetish, desire, and pleasure. It is also questioned why people desire "fat bodies" and, at the same time, do not publicly acknowledge them as potential romantic partners. In this perspective, Jimenez-Jimenez (2020, p. 359) states that "[...] bodies that are socially stigmatized in public become sources of pleasure when they are in private, away from socially imposed gazes and judgments".

Furthermore, Franco, Vieira, and Oliveira (2022) describe the dehumanization of fat women, when they are humiliated and compared to animals, such as being called a "fat cow" by a partner. Zanello, Richwin, and Birck (2024) highlight in their research that sexual objectification occurs to the extent that fat women experience "casual" and "no-strings-attached" sex. However, despite sexual involvement, these women are not recognized or chosen for romantic relationships which only generate expectations around a possible courtship.

The participants' personal perception of the overall quality of their sexual experiences as adolescents was classified as "unpleasant" by 28.5%, "complicated" by 26.2%, "average" by 23.8%, "calm" by 14.3%, and "pleasurable" by 7.1%. When compiling the data considered positive, such as "calm" and "pleasurable" sexuality, a prevalence of only 21.4% was found, meaning that the majority of respondents did not consider their sexual experiences as "good".

Being fat means having a body that deviates from the social aesthetic standard and does not arouse sexual desire, causing limitations such as the possibility of "taking off clothes", "flirting", experiencing romance, and exploring sexuality: "We do not see ourselves represented as desirable bodies, we do not have the same freedom to take off our clothes and show our bodies, explore them, even flirting or having a romance is difficult for us" (P25, 2019).

A common situation among the group of friends was highlighted by one of our participants:

Personally, I've always had difficulty dealing with my own body, not finding myself desirable, and this is kind of always confirmed when I go out with my skinny friends and they are usually the targets of attraction from others, while I am not (P8, 2019).

Dealing with the “competition” of seeing their friends, considered “attractive” and “thin” more easily chosen for potential romantic relationships enhances the conviction of “not being desirable”. The context is similar to that shown in the research by Zanello, Richwin, and Birck (2024, p. 12): “It was common to report going out with friends and all of them being approached romantically and sexually by a boy, except for them [the fat ones] [...]”.

Social discrimination and the representation of an "unattractive" body, causing "repulsion" also led to the experience of repressed sexuality, marked by the belief of not being able to feel pleasure or not deserving a romantic relationship.

Fat people suffer various forms of discrimination throughout adolescence and adulthood. I myself had almost no sexual experience during adolescence, and even after chatting with many people, I was unable to establish romantic relationships due to discrimination associated with my body image (P4, 2019).

The vulnerability of fat young people is much greater than that of people who are thin or simply conform to social standards. Therefore, there is often repulsion on the part of others at the thought of a fat person experiencing pleasure, making it necessary to repress such expressions (P1, 2019).

In my experience at school, with classmates and family, I constantly felt that they were trying to control my relationship with my body, always belittling or demeaning it. [...] I had some friends at school and in my neighborhood; however, I noticed that the girls weren't as attracted to me as they were to other boys who had a more athletic build and were more confident. I think it's a social issue of prejudice against fat bodies and also, on my part, not thinking that anyone would want to have a more affectionate relationship with me and that they would feel comfortable being with me (P6, 2019).

The literature indicates that there is an improvement in the sexual performance of fat people after bariatric surgery; one of the indicators thereof is weight loss, improved self-esteem, and reduced shame during sexual intercourse (Granero-Molina *et al.*, 2024; Lima; Silva; Farias, 2023). The results of the research by Franco, Vieira, and Oliveira (2022) bring up the idea that, by achieving thinness, women would be "beautiful" and capable of achieving an ideal relationship, represented by the figure of the "perfect man": "[...] while slim and beautiful, they will be able to experience their sexuality, whether through the expectation of feeling sexual desire, or through the reproduction of symbols linked to sexuality" (Franco, Vieira, Oliveira, 2022, p. 08).

The respondents also indicated how their first sexual experiences occurred during adolescence. Out of these 45.2% reported to have started these experiences in a context of affective-romantic involvement, 40.5% in situations considered "neutral", that is, without the presence of affection, and 14.3% indicated that their first sexual

relationships were "violent", although they did not provide details about the type of violence they were referring to (psychological and/or physical).

Violence in affective and sexual relationships has been a global public health problem, almost always related to gender issues. Costa and Costa (2015) indicate that a large proportion of adult men who commit sexual violence began these behaviors during adolescence, when this segment of the population is highly susceptible to develop aggressors or victims. In this connection, Godoi and Neves (2012) analyzed body representations, such as race, "obesity", beauty, and sexual violence through the film *Precious* (2009). The authors highlighted issues concerning the vulnerability of the main character, a black, fat girl, who had been suffering sexual violence from her father at home and other forms of violence in other contexts.

Jimenez-Jimenez and Silva (2021, p. 329) clarify how blame falls on fat people, stating: "We begin to cultivate guilt, fear, and shame for remaining with this body that nobody wants to have and that nobody wants us to have". This entire context generates insecurity and low self-esteem, influencing the person's fear of relating to peers and to other people,

Theoretically, being fat doesn't prevent you from engaging in any sexual act, but your psychological state does. If you want to engage in any such activity and you feel 'insecure,' this will prevent you from feeling comfortable even to refuse consent (P17, 2019).

As a fat person, I have experienced unpleasant situations such as bullying and aggressive comments directly related to my weight, directly affecting my sexuality, causing me not to express it out of shame and insecurity (P6, 2019).

This experience caused me to grow up with certain insecurity, taking off my shirt when it was very hot, feeling ashamed to expose my body in public. I always remember the jokes about my man boobs and belly. The image I had of my body was one of disgust. I believe this made me insecure about my self-esteem and to relate to other people (P4, 2019).

Regarding the difficulties faced in this process, 69% of the participants reported dealing alone with the challenges associated to their own sexuality while 23.8% had the support of friends, 4.7% sought support from health professionals, and 7.14% felt they had no difficulties experiencing their own sexuality. Importantly, one participant reported not having experienced difficulties for having been in a relationship with a fat person like him during adolescence, which may indicate the importance of representation and identification with similar body types.

Menezes, Ferreira and Melo (2020) mention some strategies used by fat women in situations considered difficult, linked to the aesthetics and appearance of their bodies. For them, facing and dealing with disrespectful situations involves adopting the strategy of "moving on"; others report that they used "good humor" or "mockery" as coping mechanisms.

## **5 Final Considerations**

The data obtained reveal important issues in the consideration of relationships between fat bodies, beauty standards, and sexuality. There are certain peculiarities in the experience of sexuality for a fat person that makes that person, in general, feeling deprived of his/her right to such experience. Often, this is due to being stigmatized and taught to deal with the body in a "problematic" way, or even due to social impediments, which are internalized and manifested through difficulties, suffering, or the overcoming of challenges.

We found among the participants a significant influence of the social environment, the media, and hegemonic standards on the development of self-image in the perception of one's own body as fat, as well as to create the desire to lose weight. The very perception of being fat was reported through indicators of a subjectivity that represents social models originating from powerful social instances such as family, school, and the media. Furthermore, the feelings associated with the body considered deviant are those of maladjustment, guilt, and sadness. We should observe that many participants reported feeling discriminated against at certain points in their life, experiencing negative feelings and that they ended up dealing with them alone, without a support network. In this regard, it is necessary to invest in prevention, breaking the patterns of a thin and universal aesthetic, as well as in providing support and care in mental health.

Regarding the sexuality of fat people, most participants judged their sexual experiences as unpleasant or complicated, highlighting the complexity of expressing sexuality when one has a body stigmatized by aesthetic "differences". The contradictions about the difficulties (or lack thereof) in sexual and romantic experiences reveal how there were pleasurable moments, but also prejudice, discrimination, and insecurity with their partner. Once again, the lack of a support base to deal with sexual difficulties also highlights an external unpreparedness (of family and school, for

example) to address the doubts and anxieties of these adolescents. This is because most participants consider sexual and romantic initiation unpleasant, potentially leading to feelings of displacement and non-belonging.

It is also worth highlighting that the accounts reveal a perception of a problem experienced personally. However, we believe that this issue goes beyond the individual experience, as it reflects on what society as a whole does in the face of a body considered "deviant", associating it with an aesthetic standard of beauty and health, imposing this vision in a hegemonic way, in opposition to an inclusive society.

In general, it is concluded that the data obtained highlight the important role of the social dimension in the construction of a self-image, which can have subjective consequences and can persist throughout life, even with experiences that are given new meaning. It is important to emphasize that the study has limitations in its sample, as it involves young college students, mostly with white skin complexion, literate, middle-class, cisgender, among other factors considered "positive" by society. Furthermore, it is suggested that the subject be explored in more in-depth interviews and in other studies that consider other dimensions, aiming, for example, in a structural sense, at the principle of intersectionality. Along these lines, more than the sum of the characteristics of excluded bodies, intersectionality is understood as a structuring axis that, according to Akotirene (2020), goes beyond hierarchizing or adding identities, but reorients the subjective meanings of these bodies because they are experiences shaped by repeated oppressive structures.

It is further emphasized that future research can delve the analysis of gender, race, and class issues, as well as other variables that could help elucidate the narrative presented and contribute to proposals for intervention in Sexual Education, public policies, or other services for this population. It is hoped that the release of these data will contribute to the discussion about the social mechanisms that reproduce aesthetic standards, enhancing the thin body as "normal", causing differences, as well as emotional and sexual suffering.

In short, public policies and continuous interventions are necessary to legitimize the diversity of people in a critical way, not only for the biological aspects but also for the social ones. Therefore, preventive action in systematized Sexual Education actions in schools, to confront fatphobia and other forms of exclusion, are fundamental practices in combating the problem presented.

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