

FATPHOBIA AND THE POLEMIC “ROMANTICIZATION OF OBESITY” THROUGH THE EYES OF BRAZILIAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT: Prejudice against fat people, the so-called fatphobia, keeps affecting many people in schools. Body standardization has always been socially internalized but it is sad to know that cases of fatphobia keep taking place in schools and outside them. The fat are stereotyped as unable and are rarely chosen by their classmates to take part in collective activities. Besides, they are often embarrassed and offended. On the other hand, it is now more common to see people advocating obesity as a movement which makes people accept their own bodies in an attempt to end prejudice. As a current theme, the polemic romanticization of obesity is a risk when only the aesthetic appeal is considered. Above all, obesity is a disease that is associated with several comorbidities, such as diabetes, hepatic steatosis and arterial hypertension. Therefore, this study aimed at investigating how this issue is understood by High School students who attend the Instituto Federal do Triângulo Mineiro - *Campus* Uberlândia Centro, in Uberlândia, MG, Brazil, and how it affects their everyday lives. This basic, fundamental, qualitative and exploratory study collected data on “fatphobia versus romanticization of obesity” in High School. Highly connected students gave their opinions and showed how important and updated it is to address this topic in school since the social media and several people disagree regarding the dichotomy between “treating yourself” and “accepting yourself”.

KEYWORDS: Body standardization; High School; IFTM – *campus* UDICENTRO.

GORDOFOBIA E A POLÊMICA “ROMANTIZAÇÃO DA OBESIDADE” PELO OLHAR DE ESTUDANTES DO ENSINO MÉDIO

RESUMO: O preconceito contra pessoas gordas, chamado gordofobia, ainda acomete muitas pessoas que integram a comunidade escolar. A padronização corporal sempre foi internalizada socialmente e é triste saber que ainda encontramos casos de gordofobia no ambiente escolar e também fora dele. Gordos são estereotipados como incapazes e raramente escolhidos pelos colegas nas atividades coletivas, além de serem diariamente constrangidos e ofendidos. Por outro lado, é cada vez mais comum as pessoas levantarem a “bandeira” a favor da obesidade, defendendo que este é um movimento de aceitação do próprio corpo na tentativa de acabar com o preconceito. Como temática atual, essa polêmica “romantização da obesidade” é um risco quando apenas seu apelo estético é considerado. Obesidade é acima de tudo uma doença e traz consigo uma gama de outras comorbidades (diabetes, esteatose hepática, hipertensão arterial). Nesse contexto, o presente estudo objetivou investigar junto aos alunos do ensino médio do Instituto Federal do Triângulo Mineiro – *Campus* Uberlândia Centro, como a problemática é vista pelos alunos e como ela está inserida no cotidiano deles. Compilou-se de forma básica e fundamental, qualitativa e exploratória a “gordofobia *versus* a romantização da obesidade” no ensino médio. O olhar e as opiniões de alunos altamente conectados evidenciaram o quanto abordar esse assunto na escola ainda é importante e atual, uma vez que as mídias sociais e diversas pessoas divergem do ponto de vista do “tratar-se *versus* aceitar-se”.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Padronização corporal; Ensino Médio; IFTM – *Campus* UDICENTRO.



1 INTRODUCTION

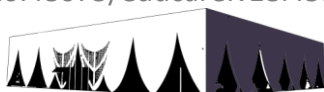
Bodies get a fundamental existential aspect because individuals use them to act in the world. Body care related to beauty, aesthetics and health are governed by a system of social rules which result from the relation among individuals, their bodies and society. Contemporary body standards recognize slim, well-shaped, aesthetic and eternally young bodies. In this scenario, obesity is a state that looks out of place amid normality standards in the culture, i. e., obese individuals are abnormal because they differ from the beauty ideal of slim or well-toned bodies created by society (WANDERLEY; FERREIRA, 2010).

From the biological perspective, the concept of obesity is understood as accumulation of adipose tissue – localized or systemic – which may be caused by genetic diseases – endocrine or metabolic – that produce excessive energy storage as fat, leading to increase in the amount of body fat. In Brazil, 52.5% of the population is overweight while 17.9% is obese. These numbers show that overweight and obesity are public health issues (RIBEIRO; TRIANI, 2016).

Studies of occurrence of obesity in childhood and adolescence have stood out in the last decades because it is a severe disease in adulthood that contributes to increase in morbimortality. In adolescence, it is especially important due to fast physical and psychosocial changes that lead to the development of risk factors. In this phase, individuals incorporate eating habits and physical practices while inappropriate behavior leads to obesity or aggravates it (PETRIBÚ, *et al.*, 2011).

The current discussion about “romanticization of obesity” is polemic since people disagree about the topic. This fact made it difficult to find studies of the issue in the literature. On the other hand, shortage of information instigated the authors of this study to reflect on romanticization of obesity with High School students and report their opinions scientifically for the first time.

To bring these themes to schools is relevant because youngsters are highly influenced by media images of either “perfect” bodies or obese bodies that



advertise health. Some people suffer because they cannot adapt to imposed standards of beauty as the result of lack of financial means or other conditions that do not allow them to reach such standards. There are many overweight and obese adolescents that struggle to be accepted, a fact that may lead to consequences regarding self-esteem, interpersonal relationship, exchange with classmates and school performance (CATANHEDE; MARIANO, 2020).

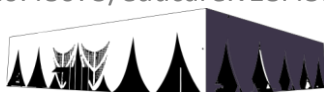
In schools, several situations affect children, adolescents and young adults' lives directly. When they cannot follow certain models, they get isolated and frustrated in their personal projects. It is the case of overweight and obese students. Even though schools are places where issues related to obesity are accentuated, they are privileged places to develop activities that improve students' quality of life, health and nutritional state. They are considered environments in which health is promoted, including programs that incentive healthy eating habits and physical activities (NASCIMENTO et al., 2020).

Based on it, this study aimed at investigating how High School students who attend technical courses at the Instituto Federal do Triângulo Mineiro (IFTM) - *Campus* Uberlândia Centro, in Uberlândia, MG, Brazil, understand the thin line between fighting prejudice and romanticizing obesity. Its findings were analyzed in the fields of Education and Development.

2 METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

The proposal to work with issues related to obesity in schools resulted from the authors' restlessness and the need to face this major social problem since some social media and digital influencers have tried to normalize the disease by advocating the motto "accept yourself the way you are". Since this study was carried out with human beings, the proposal was evaluated by the Research Ethics Committee (no. 23468.001297/2023-33).

This basic, fundamental, qualitative and exploratory study was conducted in the light of the critical-surpassing teaching methodology in social education

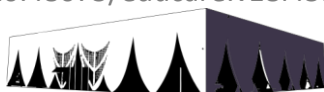


whose theoretical basis is Historical-critical Pedagogy. It aimed not only at collecting and discussing data but also at making students/participants reflect on obesity and its romanticization by means of educational intervention tasks. The critical-surpassing teaching methodology based on Historical-critical Pedagogy takes on the school conception which highlights the social role of High School. From this perspective, scientific knowledge should enable students to go beyond common sense and construct complex thoughts so that experiences and reflections produced by pedagogical praxis may be appropriate and objective (SILVA; PEREIRA; FRANCISCO, 2020).

The pedagogical praxis presupposes that the theme must make sense and have meaning to students so that they may understand relations established among different manifestations of body cultures intertwined with major issues that are produced historically, socially and culturally. Therefore, 420 16-18-year-old students who attend High School technical courses (Commerce, Digital Game Development and System Development) at the IFTM - *Campus* Uberlândia Centro, in Uberlândia, MG, Brazil, were invited to take part in this study by answering a questionnaire in Google Forms. Questionnaires were answered anonymously to protect students' identities.

Questionnaire:

- 1) Do you believe that the social network influences the way that you see your body?
- 2) Have you already seen any cyberbullying because of somebody's body?
- 3) Have you already been embarrassed by some mean comment about your body in school?
- 4) Have you already thought of changing your eating habits because of comments about your body?
- 5) Are you satisfied with your body nowadays?



- 6) Do you know any public figure that has been targeted with comments because of his/her body? If so, who?
- 7) Do you know the term *midsized*?
- 8) In your opinion, what is obesity?
- 9) In your opinion, can an obese person be healthy?
- 10) Do you know the term *fatphobia*?
- 11) Have you already seen any case of fatphobia in your routine?
- 12) Do you know the term *romanticization of obesity*?
- 13) Does the term *romanticization of obesity* sound inappropriate or derogatory to you? Why? Why not?
- 14) In your opinion, do social media and digital influencers incentive people to accept themselves as obese or to search for treatment?
- 15) Are *fatphobia* and *romanticization of obesity* relevant themes that should be addressed with High School students in schools? Why? Why not?

These questions made students reflect on some broad issues, such as bodies that teach, fatphobia, Education and Humanities. The richness of social contents found in their answers is described in Results and Discussion.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Many people may still think that talking about obesity is a stigma. The theme goes beyond it and its consequences affect both mental and physical health. A study shows that many obese people are blamed for their weight and often derided since they are considered slovenly (PUHL; HEUER 2010). This study and information collected by the forms reinforce that obesity is a public health problem all over the world.

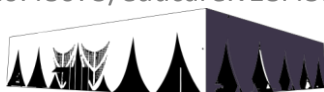
When High School students were asked whether the social network influenced the way they saw their bodies, 94.4% answered positively while a small percentage answered negatively. The high percentage of students who answered



positively was expected since everyone knows the reach of the social network which awakens narcissism and standards of beauty that do not belong to most youngsters' realities. It should be highlighted that this generation was born and has lived in the digital era. Thus, they look for answers to everyday issues and to their dissatisfaction in the media. If images of “perfect” bodies are often shown and seen, they believe that it is a version of reality that must be reached; otherwise, it brings frustration and dissatisfaction (LIRA et al., 2017).

In the digital era, adolescents know the term cyberbullying well. In Question 2, 80.9% of students answered that they have already seen aggressive practices, such as intimidation and persecution in the virtual environment while 19.1% answered negatively. Cyberbullying is a new type of systematic violence that has become a “social problem” and, thus, concern for several fields. Aggression is perpetuated by electronic means, such as written messages, photos, audios and videos, either in the social network or in network games – shared in cellular phones, tablets and computers – whose objective is to harm people repeatedly and harshly (FERREIRA; DESLANDES 2018). A recent and exploratory study of adolescents showed that many aggressions in the virtual environment result from something that has been rooted in the culture and is often expressed as “obese because s/he eats a lot”. Derogatory sentences full of prejudice which are used daily become part of school violence and produce victims exposed to intimidation, cruel nicknames, embarrassment, unfair accusation, hostility and physical, psychical and behavioral damage, which may lead to exclusion (CABRAL, *et al.*, 2021).

Question 3 asked students whether they had already felt embarrassed as the result of some comment about their bodies in school: 59.6% answered positively while 40.4% responded negatively. Question 4 showed that 76.4% of students that were targets of embarrassment tried to change their habits somehow to reach the “ideal body”. However, 23.6% of students stated that they do not mind the comments and have never thought about changing habits to please certain



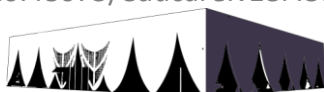
people. Question 5 addressed a sensitive, sad and worrisome issue since 62.9% of students wrote that they were not satisfied with their bodies, i. e., they are not satisfied with what they see in the mirror. On the other hand, 37.1% of students are satisfied with their bodies.

Self-perception raised by Questions 3, 4 and 5 affects students' school reality and, as a result, educational scientists have stated that schools need to qualify their professionals to observe, identify, diagnose, intervene and act properly. The issue that is addressed by this study should be discussed in schools and preventive strategies should be designed to mitigate, decrease or eliminate cases of fatphobia in schools (ARCIE, *et al.*, 2016).

Several actors, actresses and digital influencers were mentioned in answers given to Question 6. Many are famous YouTubers who have been targets of fatphobia in the social network. On the other hand, famous figures in Internet have also used this medium to “help” people accept themselves as they are, i. e., obese people, with no concern for health. This case leads to the famous term “romanticization of obesity”.

Question 7 introduced the term midsize, which was considered news by 68.5% of students who did not know its meaning, i. e., neither slim enough to be considered standard nor fat enough to be considered plus size. After all, what is the person who is between both? This question led to the midsize movement. The term has been specifically used by people who were sizes from 10 to 14.

Regarding obesity, 98% of students answered that it is a disease while 2% described it as high percentage of body fat, weight above “standard or ideal”, evolution of overweight and intrinsic relation with emotional problems. A student's sentence showed his/her emotional state by writing: “it is one of the worst things in the world because I hate to be fat”. All students' ways of thinking were right since obesity was defined as a disease and a global epidemic which has increasingly affected children and adolescents in schools (YILDIRIM; USKUN, 2018).

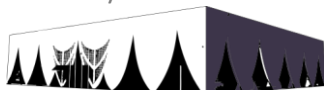


When students were questioned whether people could be obese and healthy, 50% answered positively and 50% answered negatively. Most of the former justified their answers by adding that, if obese people's blood exams are normal, they are healthy. Others stated that there are slim people who are not healthy (high cholesterol) and obese people whose blood indices are normal. Some mentioned that obese people can never be considered healthy due to their inflammatory condition and other diseases linked to obesity.

The previous question aimed at encouraging students to reflect on fatphobia and 100% answered that they knew the meaning of the term. Answers given to Question 11 showed that 69.7% of students have already gone through cases of fatphobia in their routine while 30.3% have not. Unfortunately, fatphobia keeps taking place in High Schools, a fact that was brought up by this study again. Fatphobia is repulsion against excess of weight and is closely interconnected to the context of social relations by means of representations that encompass the human body in contemporaneity. The body becomes a mechanism of social control and its appearance is constantly inspected (SOUZA; GONÇALVES, 2022).

Answers given to Question 12 showed that 76.7% of students knew the term “romanticization of obesity” while 23.3% did not know it. Many students considered Question 13 quite polemic and sensitive; thus, it caused some social discomfort. Students were free to write whether the term “romanticization of obesity” sounded inappropriate or derogatory. Several polite and civilized answers were given, such as (1) “No, since obesity is a condition that must be treated, rather than accepted by the individual”, (2) “No, to romanticize obesity is to keep eating badly”, (3) “No, this expression was created as the need to face reality”, (4) “Yes, we had better use normalization”, (5) “Yes, the most important is to be happy, being fat or not, and (6) “Yes, to fight against fatphobia is not to romanticize obesity”.

There was consensus among all answers given to Question 14. All adolescents agreed that 50% of social media and digital influencers incentive



people to be healthy by practicing physical activities and eating well. On the other hand, 50% of them encourage people to feel well regardless of their obesity.

To close this study, students were asked whether they thought it was relevant to discuss fatphobia and “romanticization of obesity” in High School. As expected, 100% of them answered positively because there is prejudice against obese people in Brazilian schools. A recent study confirmed that increase in the number of cases of obesity among young students is real in Brazilian schools, a fact that justifies the need to bring this discussion to schools (ASSIS, *et al.*, 2022).

4 CONCLUSION

This study showed that people must fight for public policies that not only promote intervention to highlight the multifactorial character of obesity but also focus on the deconstruction of often spread stereotypes of obese people, aiming at mitigating prejudice they face. Public policies must reach the media and be put in practice in the educational field. Besides, investigations into the most neglected causes of obesity and studies of aspects related to prejudice – deep rooted in society – must be encouraged in the area of Human Sciences.

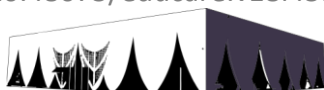
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