

TEENAGERS' EXPERIENCES IN PERCEIVING THEIR BODIES AS A TRIGGER FOR LOW SELF-ESTEEM

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Abstract

Weight dissatisfaction is a common psychological phenomenon experienced by adolescents and has the potential to affect the development of self-esteem. Social pressure, ideal body standards, and social comparison make adolescents more vulnerable to negative self-evaluations. This study aims to explore in depth the subjective experiences of adolescents experiencing weight dissatisfaction and its impact on self-esteem. This study used a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design and was analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Study participants consisted of two adolescents who were purposively selected and met the criteria for experiencing weight dissatisfaction and low self-esteem. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The results revealed three main themes: adolescents' dissatisfaction with their body condition, the impact of body dissatisfaction on self-esteem, and adolescents' efforts to overcome body dissatisfaction, which were broken down into nine superordinate themes. The findings indicate that body dissatisfaction contributes to decreased self-esteem, the emergence of negative emotions, and social avoidance. However, adolescents also demonstrate adaptive coping strategies through social support and self-acceptance processes. This study provides theoretical implications for the phenomenological understanding of body image and practical implications for guidance and counseling services oriented towards self-acceptance and strengthening social support for adolescents.

Keywords: Weight dissatisfaction, Body image, Coping, Adolescents, Self-esteem, Social Pressure.

Abstrak

Ketidakpuasan terhadap berat badan adalah fenomena psikologis yang umum dialami oleh remaja dan berpotensi mempengaruhi perkembangan self-esteem. Tekanan sosial, standar tubuh ideal, dan perbandingan sosial membuat remaja lebih rentan terhadap evaluasi diri negatif. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi secara mendalam pengalaman subjektif remaja yang mengalami ketidakpuasan terhadap berat badan dan dampaknya terhadap self-esteem. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain fenomenologi dan dianalisis menggunakan Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Partisipan studi terdiri dari dua remaja yang dipilih secara purposive sampling dan memenuhi kriteria mengalami ketidakpuasan terhadap berat badan dan

self-esteem rendah. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur mendalam. Hasil penelitian mengungkap tiga tema induk, yaitu ketidakpuasan remaja terhadap kondisi tubuh, dampak ketidakpuasan tubuh terhadap self-esteem, dan upaya remaja mengatasi ketidakpuasan tubuh, yang dijabarkan ke dalam sembilan tema superordinat. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa ketidakpuasan tubuh berkontribusi pada penurunan self-esteem, munculnya emosi negatif, dan penghindaran sosial. Namun, remaja juga menunjukkan strategi penanggulangan adaptif melalui dukungan sosial dan proses penerimaan diri. Studi ini memberikan implikasi teoritis untuk pemahaman fenomenologi tentang body image dan implikasi praktis untuk layanan bimbingan dan konseling yang berorientasi pada penerimaan diri dan penguatan dukungan sosial bagi remaja.

Kata kunci: *ketidakpuasan berat badan, body image, coping, remaja, self-esteem, tekanan sosial.*

INTRODUCTION

Body dissatisfaction is a psychological issue that is becoming increasingly common among adolescents, particularly in the context of technological advancements and digital media. Adolescence is characterized by increased sensitivity to social evaluation, particularly regarding physical appearance, making adolescents more vulnerable to the pressure of ideal body standards that emerge in social environments and the media (Indriasari et al., 2023; Kurniawati & Suarya, 2019). Exposure to narrow beauty standards through social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok drives adolescents to engage in intense social comparison, which often leads to feelings of shame, insecurity, and emotional distress when their bodies are perceived as not meeting those ideal standards (Apriliani, 2021; Krisdayanti, 2024).

The phenomenon of body dissatisfaction is not limited to overweight adolescents but is also experienced by adolescents with normal nutritional status and underweight bodies. This indicates that body dissatisfaction is a psychosocial phenomenon more influenced by subjective perceptions and social constructs than by objective physical conditions (Pramono & Rossalia, 2023). Repeated exposure to representations of the “ideal body” in digital media has been shown to narrow beauty standards and increase psychological pressure related to body image among adolescents (Krisdayanti, 2024; Pasaribu, 2023).

In addition to social media, the family environment also plays a crucial role in shaping adolescents’ body image and self-esteem. Physical comments, critical parenting styles, and a lack of emotional support from the family can reinforce negative body perceptions and increase the risk of low self-esteem (Anwar & Alfita, 2025; Wijanarko et al., 2023). Research indicates that unsupportive families tend to increase adolescents’ vulnerability to negative self-evaluation and psychological pressure related to physical appearance.

Several studies also reveal a strong link between body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem in adolescents. Body dissatisfaction contributes to feelings of worthlessness, reduced self-confidence, social anxiety, and a tendency to withdraw from social settings (Rakhman et al., 2022; Utami et al., 2018). Recent quantitative studies indicate that self-esteem is positively associated with body satisfaction, while social comparison has a significant negative influence on adolescents’ body image (Qatrunnada et al., 2023). These findings

confirm that body dissatisfaction cannot be understood merely as a physical issue, but rather as a psychosocial phenomenon influenced by cultural standards and constructions of the ideal body within the adolescent environment (Gaol et al., 2024; Pramono & Rossalia, 2023).

Although the relationship between body dissatisfaction and self-esteem in adolescents has been extensively studied, most previous studies have been dominated by quantitative approaches focused on measuring relationships between variables. This approach does not fully capture adolescents' subjective experiences in interpreting their bodies, responding to social comments, and managing emotional conflicts arising from weight-related pressures. Yet, a comprehensive understanding of adolescents' subjective experiences is crucial for designing contextual and empathetic psychological interventions and guidance and counseling services.

The phenomenological approach is considered relevant for exploring the meaning of adolescents' life experiences in greater depth. Previous phenomenological research has shown that experiences of body dissatisfaction are closely linked to internal conflicts, social pressures, and repetitive, intense self-evaluation processes (Stavrou, 2018). Therefore, qualitative research using an interpretive phenomenological approach is essential for understanding how adolescents internalize standards of the ideal body and how these experiences influence the development of self-esteem in daily life. Based on the urgency and research gaps, this study aims to explore the subjective experiences of adolescents experiencing body weight dissatisfaction and to uncover how this dissatisfaction affects self-esteem. The research findings are expected to provide theoretical contributions to guidance and counseling studies and serve as a foundation for developing counseling services that are more empathetic, reflective, and oriented toward self-acceptance for adolescents.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method to understand adolescents' subjective experiences regarding body weight dissatisfaction and its impact on self-esteem. The study follows the idiographic principles of IPA, which emphasize a deep understanding of unique experiences among a small number of participants so that phenomenological meanings can be understood more fully before drawing cross-case conclusions. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with the criteria being adolescents who experienced dissatisfaction with their body weight and showed signs of low self-esteem. The number of participants was set at two adolescents in accordance with the principle of data depth in phenomenological research, where the primary focus is on deepening meaning, not merely representing a broad population. Both participants were adolescent girls with different backgrounds, thereby providing varied contextual experiences regarding body image and self-esteem.

The first participant was AG (18 years old), a 12th-grade student at SMA 4 Babulu who was underweight. The second participant was SH (16 years old), a 10th-grade student at SMK 5 Samarinda who was overweight. The differences in their ages, physical conditions, school environments, and social activities provided a spectrum of experiences that enriched the phenomenological analysis process.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to freely and reflectively express the meaning of their experiences. Data analysis followed the IPA stages: re-reading transcripts, initial noting, developing emergent themes, grouping superordinate themes, and interpreting the meaning of participants' experiences. Data validity was ensured through member checking, document audits, and discussions with peers to compare interpretations. This study also sought to enhance credibility through cross-participant comparison by examining the consistency of information from the two participants with different backgrounds, as well as through triangulation of methods using in-depth interviews and field notes to strengthen the data context. The researcher also applied reflexivity throughout the research process via a reflexive journal to recognize potential personal biases and ensure interpretations remained focused on the participants' authentic experiences. All research procedures adhered to ethical principles, including obtaining participant consent, maintaining data confidentiality, and ensuring participants' psychological comfort throughout the research process.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The research data were obtained from in-depth interviews with two adolescent female participants who were dissatisfied with their body weight and exhibited signs of low self-esteem. The interviews were conducted at different times, tailored to each participant's circumstances. The interviews with participant AG were conducted on Monday, June 2, 2025, and Friday, July 25, 2025, while the interviews with participant SH were conducted on Friday, February 28, 2025, and Monday, August 18, 2025. All data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the meaning of the participants' subjective experiences in depth (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009 in Alase, 2017).

Based on the results of the data analysis, three main themes with nine superordinate themes were identified, representing the participants' primary experiences. A summary of the main themes and superordinate themes is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Main Themes and Superordinate Themes

NO	MASTER THEME	SUPERORDINATE THEME
1.	Adolescent Dissatisfaction with Body Condition	The perception of the ideal body is influenced by the social environment Negative assessment of body shape Discomfort to appearance

2.	The Impact of Body Dissatisfaction on Adolescent Self-esteem	Decreased self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness Negative emotions and psychological distress Social avoidance and discomfort in relationships
3.	Teens' Efforts to Overcome Body Dissatisfaction	Self-improvement based coping Social support as self-strengthening Efforts towards self-acceptance

1. Adolescents' Body Dissatisfaction

The first main theme indicates that body dissatisfaction stems from how adolescents interpret the ideal body, which in turn influences their self-assessment and comfort with their appearance.

a) Perceptions of the Ideal Body Are Influenced by the Social Environment

The analysis shows that participants defined the ideal body as a balanced and proportionate physique.

"In my opinion, an ideal body weight isn't too skinny or too overweight. Ideally, it's about the balance between height and weight." (AG)

"In my opinion, an ideal body weight is balanced and proportional...not too overweight and not too skinny." (SH)

b) Negative Evaluations of Body Shape

Participants expressed negative evaluations of their body shape when comparing their physical condition to the internalized ideal body standards. The body is viewed as an object of self-evaluation, so any discrepancy with these standards leads to a less positive self-perception

"When I'm choosing clothes. Since I'm tall and thin, sometimes if I pick the wrong outfit, it looks out of place. So I usually choose clothes in a larger size so I look more filled out." (AG)

"When choosing clothes, if they don't suit me or don't fit, I feel dissatisfied and disappointed." (SH)

c) Discomfort Regarding Appearance

Body dissatisfaction also causes emotional discomfort that is directly felt in daily activities. Situations like choosing clothes trigger feelings of discomfort and disappointment regarding one's appearance, which reinforce negative body awareness.

"When I'm choosing clothes. Since I'm tall and thin, sometimes if I pick the wrong outfit, it just doesn't look right. So I usually choose clothes in a larger size to make me look more filled out." (AG)

“When choosing clothes, if they don’t suit me or don’t fit, I feel dissatisfied and disappointed.” (SH).

2. The Impact of Body Dissatisfaction on Adolescents’ Self-Esteem

The second main theme explores how body dissatisfaction extends beyond feelings of dissatisfaction with appearance and affects adolescents’ self-esteem, emotional well-being, and social relationships. Body dissatisfaction lies at the core of self-evaluation and affects their psychological well-being.

a) Decreased Self-Esteem and Feelings of Worthlessness

Participants reported decreased self-confidence and negative self-evaluations due to body dissatisfaction.

“It affects about 80 percent...I feel very insecure” (AG)

“Overall, 85% because I think my weight significantly affects my feelings and self-esteem.” (SH)

b) Negative Emotions and Psychological Distress

Body dissatisfaction triggers a decline in self-esteem as well as intense emotional reactions, such as shame, sadness, anger, and frustration.

“It really gets to me; sometimes it’s mixed with sadness too... those comments make me question myself. ‘Am I really that skinny? Am I really that unattractive?’” (AG)

“I feel ashamed, sad, angry, and disappointed. What I feel most is insecurity...so much so... it even makes me angry and brings me to tears.” (SH)

c) Social Withdrawal and Discomfort in Relationships

Body dissatisfaction leads to social withdrawal and limitations in interpersonal relationships.

“I’ve become less willing to show up in crowds. Even when I participate in extracurricular activities or meetings, I choose to stay quiet; I often don’t want to answer questions because I’m embarrassed and lack confidence.”

(AG)

“I often avoid certain activities like fashion shows or events related to beauty and weight. I feel unworthy and imperfect to appear there” (SH)

3. Adolescents’ Efforts to Overcome Body Dissatisfaction

The third main theme describes the strategies adolescents use to reduce body dissatisfaction. These efforts include self-improvement, seeking social support, and a gradual process toward self-acceptance, reflecting how they manage psychological stress related to body image.

a) Self-Improvement-Based Coping

Participants respond to body dissatisfaction by making self-improvement efforts through dieting, exercise, self-care, taking supplements, and various attempts to change their physical appearance.

“I once took weight-gain supplements and gained 5 kilos, but the weight only went to my cheeks, not my body. I also took a supplement (a vitamin) to boost my appetite, but my weight didn’t increase either, so I stopped.” (AG)

“I usually take care of myself, pamper myself, and exercise. I also follow a diet to reach my ideal weight.” (SH)

b) Social Support as Self-Reinforcement

Participants receive emotional support from their immediate circle.

“I have a cousin who weighs about the same as me. The only difference is our height. So I feel comfortable confiding in her because we’re going through the same thing.” (AG)

“I usually talk to supportive friends. They like to give advice and support that makes me feel better.” (SH)

c) Efforts Toward Self-Acceptance

Participants began developing an awareness to accept themselves more fully.

“After learning to accept myself, I realized that life isn’t just about appearance. So I started learning to be confident and value myself...not just physically, but as a whole person.” (AG)

“In my opinion, we should be grateful and exercise regularly to keep our bodies healthy, in control, balanced, and in good shape...I try to love myself, but sometimes I still follow external standards of perfection.” (SH)

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that adolescents’ body dissatisfaction is shaped through the process of interpreting the ideal body, which develops within social interactions. Participants interpret the ideal body as a physically balanced and proportionate condition; however, the discrepancy between this perception and their actual bodily condition leads to negative self-evaluation and discomfort regarding their appearance. From a phenomenological perspective, the body as a lived body serves as the center of subjective experience; thus, body dissatisfaction is not merely tied to physical aspects but also influences how adolescents assess and interpret themselves as a whole. These findings align with those of Indriasari et al. (2023) and Pramono & Rossalia (2023).

Body weight dissatisfaction was experienced by participants with diverse body characteristics, including those who felt too thin as well as those who felt their weight did not meet their expectations. This indicates that body dissatisfaction is subjective and influenced by social comparison processes and personal interpretation. In this context, Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory provides a crucial explanatory framework, suggesting that individuals tend to evaluate themselves through comparison with others. Both participants in this study engaged in upward comparison—that is, comparing their bodies to figures perceived as more ideal (such as peers or social media standards)—thereby reinforcing negative self-evaluations due to the discrepancy between their actual bodies and their ideal bodies. Participants' experiences in selecting clothing, receiving environmental feedback, and comparing themselves to others reinforced negative body evaluations. These findings support research by Krisdayanti (2024) and Pasaribu (2023), which states that social comparison contributes to increased body dissatisfaction among adolescents.

Furthermore, dissatisfaction with body weight significantly affects adolescents' self-esteem. The body is interpreted as the primary representation of self-esteem; thus, when the body is perceived as less than ideal, feelings of worthlessness and a decline in self-confidence emerge. Within the framework of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, this condition reflects a disruption in the individual's relationship with themselves, where bodily experiences serve as the foundation for self-evaluation. These findings are consistent with Qatrunnada et al. (2023) and Rakhman et al. (2022). This phenomenon also aligns with Festinger's (1954) view that unfavorable social comparisons can lead to negative self-evaluation and lower self-esteem.

An understanding of these findings can be deepened through Carl Rogers' Self Theory, particularly the concepts of self-image, ideal self, and incongruence. The participants' dissatisfaction reflects a discrepancy between their current self-image and the ideal self they desire or believe they must achieve due to social pressure. Rogers (1951) asserts that the greater the gap between the self-image and the ideal self, the lower a person's self-worth and self-esteem. This is evident in the participants' experiences of feeling “not ideal,” leading to feelings of shame, a lack of confidence, and a tendency to avoid social situations.

Additionally, Rogers (1951) emphasizes that unconditional positive regard and emotional support from the environment play a significant role in shaping self-worth. The findings of this study indicate that when participants receive support from family or friends, they are able to interpret body dissatisfaction in a more adaptive manner. Participants' efforts to improve themselves—such as increasing physical activity or seeking support—can be understood as part of the “actualizing tendency,” a natural drive toward greater self-functioning (Ismail & Tekke, 2015). Beyond these psychological dynamics, gender factors also influence how adolescents perceive their bodies. Social norms regarding the ideal body differ between males and females; adolescent girls are often faced with demands to appear slim, while adolescent boys tend to face expectations of having a more

muscular or proportionate body. These differences in gender construction can influence sensitivity to social evaluation, thereby shaping the extent of body dissatisfaction among adolescents.

The sociocultural context also plays a significant role. AG, who comes from the Babulu region, has different media exposure compared to SH, who lives in the city of Samarinda. Urban adolescents are more exposed to ideal body standards through social media, visual culture, and beauty trends, whereas rural adolescents have more moderate social references. Additionally, family values, local culture, and friendship patterns influence how adolescents understand their bodies. This indicates that body dissatisfaction stems not only from psychological factors but also from the social and cultural constructs surrounding them. Beyond affecting self-evaluation, dissatisfaction with body weight triggers negative emotional responses such as shame, sadness, anger, and frustration, and leads to avoidance of certain social situations. This avoidance can be understood as a short-term coping strategy to protect self-esteem, but it has the potential to reinforce social isolation and perpetuate low self-esteem if it persists. These findings align with the research by Gaol et al. (2024)

On the other hand, participants also demonstrated adaptive efforts to cope with body dissatisfaction, such as engaging in self-development and seeking social support. Emotional support from family and friends helped participants interpret their experiences more positively and reduce the negative impact on self-esteem. These findings support those of Anwar & Alfita (2025) and Wijanarko et al. (2023). Overall, this study confirms that body weight dissatisfaction is a complex subjective experience with significant implications for adolescents' self-esteem. Therefore, guidance and counseling services should be directed toward strengthening body acceptance, self-reflection, and fostering adolescents' self-confidence in a holistic and sustainable manner.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that body weight dissatisfaction is a subjective experience that significantly influences the development of adolescents' self-esteem. This dissatisfaction arises through processes of social comparison and the internalization of ideal body standards, which subsequently trigger negative self-evaluation, intense emotions, and a tendency to avoid certain social situations. The impact is not limited to appearance but extends to overall self-evaluation. This demonstrates that adolescents' body-related experiences are complex, dynamic, and influenced by social context as well as the meanings they construct themselves. Nevertheless, this study also found that adolescents still strive to manage this dissatisfaction, for example through self-improvement strategies, seeking social support, and a gradual process toward self-acceptance. Support from close others appears to be a crucial protective factor, helping adolescents cope with psychological pressure and strengthen their self-confidence, although the process of self-acceptance remains fluctuating due to the strong influence of ideal body standards in daily life.

Practically, these findings suggest that guidance and counseling services should emphasize aspects of self-acceptance, emotional regulation, and the utilization of positive social support—rather than focusing solely on behavioral or physical changes. Programs such as group counseling, classroom guidance on self-acceptance and media literacy, and peer-based activities can serve as effective alternatives to help adolescents build a healthier relationship with their bodies. Additionally, collaboration between counselors, teachers, and parents is crucial to ensure that the support provided remains consistent across the various environments where adolescents spend their time. However, this study has several limitations. The small number of participants makes the findings highly contextual and not widely generalizable. The qualitative approach used was not supplemented by quantitative data, so there is no numerical validation to strengthen the findings. Future research may consider using mixed methods. Furthermore, because this study is cross-sectional, long-term dynamics cannot be depicted. A follow-up study with a longitudinal design is recommended so that various changes and developments related to body dissatisfaction and self-esteem in adolescents can be observed more comprehensively

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