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ADOLESCENT BODY DISSATISFACTION: A NARRATIVE REVIEW OF CONCEPTS AND ASSOCIATED FACTORS

INSATISFAÇÃO CORPORAL DE ADOLESCENTES: UMA REVISÃO NARRATIVA DE CONCEITOS E FATORES ASSOCIADOS

INSATISFACCIÓN CORPORAL EN ADOLESCENTES: UNA REVISIÓN NARRATIVA DE CONCEPTOS Y FACTORES ASOCIADOS

Júlio Rafael Assunção de Faria
Graduação em Educação Física
Instituição Federal Goiano Campus Urutaí, Brasil.
E-mail: julio.rafael@estudante.ifgoiano.edu.br

Bruna Priscila Colombo
Mestranda em Saúde da Família
Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ)
E-mail: dra.brunacolombo@gmail.com
LATTES: http://lattes.cnpq.br/2612052702993701

Bruno Pereira de Moura
Doutor em Ciências Médicas
Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ)
Avenida Marechal Rondon, 381, São Francisco Xavier, Rio de Janeiro – RJ, CEP: 20950-000
E-mail: brunoefi@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8439-4523
LATTES: http://lattes.cnpq.br/0084002564378122

Natiele Resende Bedim
Professora de Educação Física-mestra em Educação Física
Instituição: Universidade Federal de Viçosa, Brasil.
E-mail: bedimnatiele@gmail.com

Naruna Pereira Rocha
Doutora em Ciência da Nutrição
Instituição: Empresa Brasileira de Serviços Hospitalares, Unidade de Gestão de Graduação, Ensino Técnico e Extensão (UGETE), Hospital de Clínicas da Universidade Federal de Uberlândia (EBSERH – HC-UFU), Brasil.
E-mail: naruna.rocha@ebserh.gov.br

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Maria Elisa Caputo Ferreira
Doutora e Pós-doutora em Educação/Educação Especial pela Universidade de São Paulo
Instituição: Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora, Brasil.
E-mail: caputoferreira@yahoo.com.br

Vinícius Ramos Rezende
Doutor em Ciências da saúde pela Faculdade de Medicina UFG
Instituição: Instituto Federal de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia Goiano, Campus Urutaí, Brasil.
E-mail: vinicius.rezende@ifgoiano.edu.br

Valter Paulo Neves Miranda*
Doutor em Ciência da Nutrição / Pós-doutorado em Saúde Coletiva
Instituição: Instituto Federal de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia Goiano, Campus Urutaí, Brasil.
E-mail: valter.miranda@ifgoiano.edu.br
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2037-0573
LATTES: https://lattes.cnpq.br/2507870178829886

Abstract

Objective: To analyze concepts and factors associated with body dissatisfaction in adolescents. **Material and Methods:** This narrative literature review synthesizes definitions of body image and evidence on sociocultural determinants and related outcomes, including assessment instruments reported in studies with adolescent populations. **Results:** Body image is a complex, multidimensional construct comprising perceptual and attitudinal components, and body dissatisfaction is emphasized as part of the attitudinal dimension, expressed as discomfort and negative feelings about one's appearance. Media, family, and peers contribute to the internalization of socially prescribed beauty ideals, increasing vulnerability during adolescence. Negative body evaluation is associated with disordered eating behaviors and may contribute to outcomes such as eating disorders, depressive symptoms, and social withdrawal. **Conclusion:** Body dissatisfaction in adolescence is prevalent and multifactorial; broader use of validated assessment protocols and measures for the Brazilian population is needed to support effective preventive strategies and early interventions.

Keywords: Body Image; Adolescent; Social Influence; Eating Disorders.

Resumo

Objetivo: Analisar conceitos e fatores associados à insatisfação corporal em adolescentes. **Material e Métodos:** Revisão narrativa da literatura, com síntese de definições de imagem corporal e de evidências sobre determinantes socioculturais e implicações, incluindo instrumentos de avaliação

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reportados em estudos com adolescentes. **Resultados:** A imagem corporal é um construto multidimensional (dimensões perceptiva e atitudinal), e a insatisfação corporal integra a dimensão atitudinal, expressa por desconforto e sentimentos negativos em relação à aparência. Mídia, família e pares favorecem a internalização de ideais estéticos, aumentando a vulnerabilidade na adolescência. A avaliação negativa do corpo associa-se a comportamentos alimentares de risco e a desfechos como transtornos alimentares, sintomas depressivos e retraimento social. **Conclusão:** A insatisfação corporal é frequente e multifatorial; recomenda-se ampliar o uso de protocolos e medidas validadas para a população brasileira, a fim de subsidiar ações preventivas e intervenções precoces.

Palavras-chave: Imagem Corporal; Adolescente; Influência Social; Transtornos Alimentares.

Resumen

Este artículo es una revisión narrativa cuyo objetivo fue analizar los conceptos y factores asociados a la insatisfacción corporal en adolescentes. La insatisfacción con la imagen corporal es un fenómeno que comienza a una edad temprana y está fuertemente influenciado por aspectos socioculturales, como los medios de comunicación, la familia y el grupo de amigos. La imagen corporal es un constructo complejo y multidimensional, apoyado por las dimensiones perceptiva y actitudinal. El estudio se centra en la insatisfacción corporal como un aspecto de la dimensión actitudinal, refiriéndose a la incomodidad y el sentimiento negativo hacia la propia apariencia física. La búsqueda incesante de un ideal de belleza, a menudo impuesto por la sociedad y los medios, hace que los adolescentes sean vulnerables. La evaluación negativa de la forma física es un factor determinante para la alta incidencia de conductas alimentarias de riesgo y puede ser un elemento necesario para el desarrollo de trastornos alimentarios, depresión y aislamiento social. Por último, la revisión enfatiza la importancia de protocolos de evaluación validados para la población brasileña con el fin de asegurar intervenciones preventivas efectivas.

Palabras clave: Insatisfacción Corporal, Adolescencia, Imagen Corporal, Factores Socioculturales, Trastornos Alimentarios.

1. Introduction

Body image has been the subject of extensive scientific investigation. Over the past three decades, research efforts have intensified, largely driven by evidence indicating that body dissatisfaction emerges at increasingly younger ages and is strongly influenced by sociocultural factors (Smolak; Stein, 2006). Studies conducted in different regions of Brazil have reported a high prevalence of body

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dissatisfaction among children and adolescents (Conti; Frutuoso; Gambardella, 2005a).

Physical and psychological changes occurring during adolescence make young individuals more susceptible and vulnerable to issues related to body image, particularly when their physical appearance does not align with their self-imposed expectations (Agyapong-Opoku *et al*., 2025). Chronologically, this stage of life can be divided into distinct periods to allow for a systematic analysis of the changes that occur throughout human development (WHO, 2005).

Sociocultural factors such as media exposure, the nature of family relationships, and peer influence play a significant role in shaping adolescents' perceptions and attitudes toward their body image (Cafri *et. al*., 2005). The media, through various communication channels, undeniably contributes to shaping behavioral patterns and processes of self-construction (Jerónimo; Carraça, 2022). Já a família funciona como a intermediadora entre o jovem e a sociedade (Höld *et al*., 2025).

The incidence of eating disorders among adolescents ranges from 0.5% to 5%, representing significant public health concern. Approximately 90% to 95% of cases occur in females, particularly between 15 and 25 years of age, in Western countries (APA, 2014). Current evidence estimates the prevalence of eating disorders at approximately 1.2% among male adolescents and 5.7% among female adolescents (López-Gil *et al*., 2023). Eating disorders represent a significant public health concern, with prevalence estimates ranging from approximately 1% to 6% among adolescents, and substantially higher rates reported among females (Faria et al., 2026). Recent evidence also indicates that these disorders are increasing globally, particularly during adolescence and early adulthood (López-Gil *et al*., 2023; Faria *et al*., 2026)

Excessive body dissatisfaction is considered a key risk factor for the development of eating disorders (Miranda et al., 2021; Rodgers; Paoli, 2023). Thus, this study aimed to provide a narrative review of the concepts and factors associated with the assessment of body dissatisfaction in adolescents.

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2. Methods

This study is a narrative literature review with an analytical approach, conducted with the aim of synthesizing concepts and evidence related to body dissatisfaction in adolescents. The identification of studies was carried out through a search strategy guided by thematic relevance and the theoretical representativeness of the publications. The databases PubMed, Scopus, and SciELO were consulted, complemented by a manual search of the reference lists of the selected articles.

Studies published between 2000 and 2025 were considered, including original articles, reviews, and theoretical contributions relevant to understanding body image and its determinants during adolescence. The selection of publications was guided by criteria of thematic relevance, prioritizing both seminal studies and contemporary evidence addressing conceptual aspects, associated factors, and health implications.

The analysis of the material was conducted through thematic synthesis, allowing for the organization and integration of findings into analytical domains, encompassing conceptual dimensions of body image, individual factors, and sociocultural influences associated with body dissatisfaction.

3. Literature Review

Adolescence

Adolescence is a term derived from the Latin word *adolescere*, meaning “to grow (WHO, 2005).” According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF, 2026), adolescents are defined as individuals aged 10 to 19 years, representing a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood. There are 1.3 billion adolescents in the world today, more than ever before, making up 16 per cent of the world’s population (UNICEF, 2026).

Although multiple interpretative perspectives exist to define adolescence, there is consensus among scholars that this period represents a transition to adulthood, characterized by significant changes and adjustments in individuals’ productive and reproductive capacities (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025).

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Adolescence is characterized by profound biological, psychological, and social transformations, largely driven by hormonal changes associated with puberty, which lead to significant alterations in body composition, physical appearance, and sexual maturation (Papalia, 2013). Concurrently, cognitive development progresses, characterized by advances in abstract, reflective, and hypothetical thinking, which enhance body awareness and increase social comparison among peers (Blakemore; Mills, 2020).

In addition to physical and cognitive changes, adolescence is widely recognized as a critical period for identity formation, encompassing aspects related to self-image, self-esteem, and sexuality. In this context, a progressive integration of multiple domains of human development occurs, in which individual and sociocultural factors interact in the consolidation of adolescent identity (Ross *et al*., 2020).

The onset of adolescence represents a transitional period from childhood to adulthood, characterized by multiple opportunities for growth across physical, cognitive, and social domains. However, this process also renders adolescents particularly vulnerable to the internalization of socially constructed beauty standards and often unattainable body ideals. Exposure to such ideals may negatively affect individuals' relationship with their own bodies, thereby impacting self-esteem and psychological well-being (Dion *et al*., 2023).

In this context, the way adolescents perceive and evaluate their bodies is closely linked to contemporary sociocultural pressures, particularly within a landscape marked by intensified social and media interactions. Therefore, understanding adolescence as a multifaceted developmental period is essential for analyzing the emergence of body dissatisfaction and its implications for health (Rodgers; Paoli, 2023).

Adolescence and Body Image

Adolescence is widely recognized as a critical period for the consolidation of body image, as it involves profound biological, cognitive, and psychosocial transformations. In this context, Conti (2008) highlights that this stage of human

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development is particularly significant for the structuring of body image. Puberty-related bodily changes, such as the development of secondary sexual characteristics, promote a reorganization of body perception, often accompanied by instability in previously established identity (Sawyer *et al*., 2018).

From a contemporary perspective, these changes do not occur in isolation but interact with sociocultural factors that directly influence how adolescents perceive and evaluate their bodies. Emerging evidence suggests that increased body awareness, coupled with intensified social comparison and the internalization of appearance ideals, contributes to heightened vulnerability to body dissatisfaction during adolescence (Blakemore; Mills, 2020; Rodgers; Paoli, 2023).

Moreover, contemporary adolescent lifestyles, particularly in urban settings, have been characterized by greater exposure to sedentary behaviors, unhealthy dietary patterns, and changes in nutritional profiles, factors that may impact both body composition and the perception of one's own body image (Dion *et al*., 2023). These factors increase the risk of distortions in body self-evaluation and reinforce the internalization of often unattainable body ideals.

From a contemporary perspective, body image in adolescence is influenced by multiple interrelated factors, including social context, school environment, physical activity, and media exposure. Recent evidence suggests that adolescents' body perception is strongly shaped by social and cultural interactions, as well as by individual characteristics such as sex and socioeconomic status (ZANLORENCI *et al*., 2024).

Furthermore, exposure to appearance-related content on digital media has been associated with increased body dissatisfaction, particularly through mechanisms such as social comparison and the internalization of appearance ideals (VUONG *et al*., 2023). These findings reinforce that the development of body image during adolescence occurs within a multifactorial and dynamic context, thereby increasing vulnerability to adverse mental and behavioral health outcomes (KRVADOVA *et al*., 2025).

Body Image: Concepts and Definitions

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The preferential use of the term “body image,” despite certain ambiguities, has come to represent an integrative perspective of self-knowledge. Schilder (1999) conceptualized body image as comprising three interrelated structures: physiological, libidinal, and sociological. This framework shifted the traditional focus, mitigated the limitations of centralist hypotheses, and emphasized the role of environmental factors in the continuous transformation of postural representations.

Body image is a complex and multifaceted construct that encompasses the physiological, subjective, and social aspects of individuals’ bodily experiences (Cash; Smolak, 2011). Therefore, it is evident that conceptualizing body image is not a simple task, given its dynamic and multidisciplinary nature. Moreover, there is no clear consensus among scholars regarding its definition; however, leading researchers agree in treating body image as a multidimensional construct, supported by two main dimensions: the perceptual and the attitudinal (Cash; Smolak, 2011).

Body image is currently conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing perceptions, thoughts, and attitudes toward one’s own body, and is strongly influenced by contextual and interactional factors (Demaria *et al*., 2024). Recent evidence suggests that body image development during adolescence emerges from the interaction between social environments, cultural practices, and individual experiences, with particular emphasis on the role of peers, school, and media in shaping these perceptions (Tekola *et al*., 2024). Moreover, the contemporary digital landscape has intensified exposure to idealized appearance standards, amplifying cognitive processes such as social comparison and the internalization of these ideals, thereby directly influencing how adolescents perceive their bodies.

In this context, body dissatisfaction is characterized as a negative component of the attitudinal dimension of body image, defined by persistent unfavorable evaluations of one’s appearance. This phenomenon is associated with multiple determinants, including weight perception, sociocultural influences, and exposure to media content, and is more prevalent among adolescents who perceive themselves as deviating from socially valued body standards (Miranda *et al*., 2021).

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Furthermore, body dissatisfaction has been linked to adverse health outcomes, such as unhealthy eating behaviors and psychological distress, reinforcing its relevance as an indicator of vulnerability during adolescence.

Body Image Dimensions: Subjective Body Dissatisfaction

Following this conceptual analysis, the perceptual and attitudinal dimensions are understood to provide the theoretical foundation for the various constructs related to body image, including general subjective body dissatisfaction. The perceptual dimension refers to the accuracy with which individuals estimate their body size, shape, and weight relative to their actual proportions (Dion *et al*., 2023). Research on perceptual body image seeks to assess the accuracy of body size estimation, both for specific body parts and for the body as a whole. However, body perception can also be considered subjective, as it is influenced by environmental factors, including the norms, ideals, and values of the dominant culture (Rodgers; Paoli, 2023).

The attitudinal dimension of body image encompasses the feelings and evaluations individuals hold regarding their bodies. This relatively stable mental disposition enables individuals to respond to objects not as they objectively are, but as they are subjectively perceived. Attitudes are not directly observable but are inferred from the consistency of behavioral and cognitive responses. Within the context of body image, the attitudinal dimension reflects attitudes toward body weight and size, specific body parts, and overall physical appearance (Cash; Smolak, 2011; McCabe *et al*., 2006).

In principle, this dimension can be understood as comprising three components: affective, cognitive, and behavioral. The affective component refers to individuals' feelings toward their appearance and body. The cognitive component encompasses thoughts and beliefs related to physical appearance. The behavioral component involves actions adopted to cope with or compensate for negative evaluations of the body.

Subsequently, general subjective dissatisfaction with physical appearance came to be considered an integral component of this dimension. This definition

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aligns with the conceptual model predominantly adopted by contemporary scholars in the field of body image (Cash; Smolak, 2011). Accordingly, the present study is grounded in this theoretical framework.

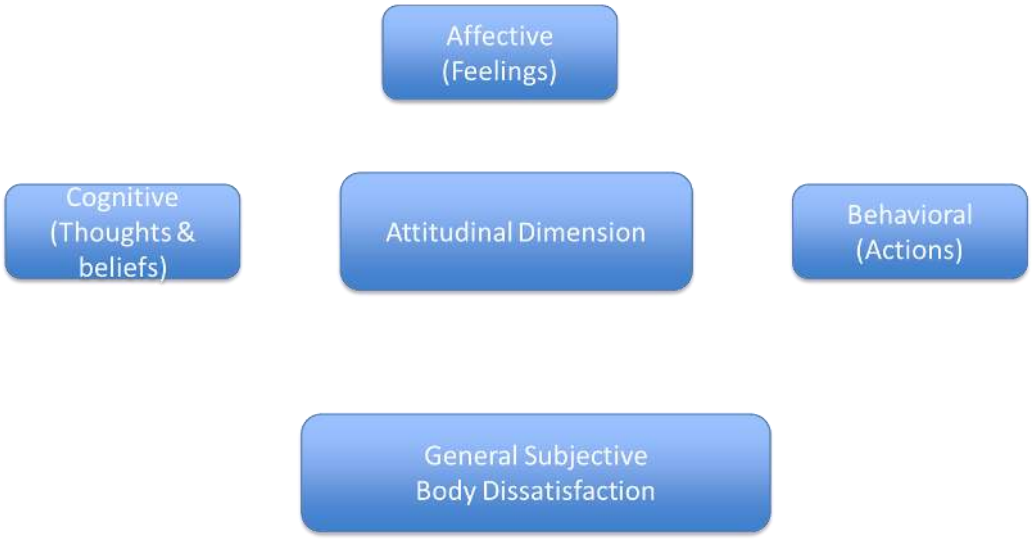


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the attitudinal dimension of body image and its components

Body dissatisfaction is positioned at the interface between the evaluative and affective components of attitudes. In its simplest form, it can be defined as the discrepancy between one's perceived current body size and one's ideal body size. (Ladwing *et al*., 2024).

The assessment of body dissatisfaction in adolescents has been carried out using a range of instruments that vary in terms of the dimensions assessed, methodological approaches, and cultural sensitivity. Among the most used are psychometric questionnaires, such as the BSQ, and silhouette-based methods, which are widely employed to estimate discrepancies between perceived body size and ideal body size (Miranda et al., 2021).

However, recent evidence suggests that these instruments present important limitations, particularly concerning cross-cultural validity, the influence of social norms, and their ability to capture the multidimensional complexity of body image (Convertino *et al*., 2022). Furthermore, many of these instruments were originally developed in Western contexts, which may limit their applicability in diverse populations, such as Brazilian adolescents.

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In this regard, contemporary studies have emphasized the need for more integrative and context-sensitive approaches that consider not only the perceptual dimension, but also the affective, cognitive, and behavioral components of body image. Recent literature also underscores the importance of using instruments validated for specific populations, as well as combining multiple assessment methods to reduce bias and enhance measurement accuracy (Höld *et al*., 2025; Carvalho *et al*., 2020).

Furthermore, advances in digital technologies have facilitated the development of novel assessment tools, such as interactive applications and image-based methods, which hold promises for capturing adolescents' body experiences in a more dynamic and ecologically valid manner, although they still require further validation.

4. DISCUSSION

The study highlights several factors associated with body dissatisfaction, including age, body composition, and media exposure. The literature suggests that age and maturational stage are key factors in understanding body dissatisfaction during adolescence and should be taken into account when interpreting findings related to body image.

Although classical approaches have traditionally defined adolescence based on chronological and biological criteria, particularly those related to physical growth and pubertal maturation (WHO, 2005), Although classical approaches have traditionally defined adolescence based on chronological and biological criteria, particularly those related to physical growth and pubertal maturation, accumulating evidence indicates that the bodily changes inherent to this period affect boys and girls differently. In particular, the progression of pubertal development in girls has been consistently associated with increased body dissatisfaction, possibly due to the greater discrepancy between natural bodily changes and socially valued aesthetic standards (CONTI; FRUTUOSO; GAMBARDELLA, 2005b).

In contrast, boys tend to exhibit a more stable pattern of body satisfaction across different maturational stages, suggesting the influence of distinct body

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evaluation standards between sexes (Napp, 2026). In this context, age should be understood not merely as a chronological marker, but as an indirect indicator of biopsychosocial transformations that shape adolescents' relationship with their own bodies.

Although girls consistently report higher levels of body dissatisfaction, emerging evidence indicates that similar concerns are also present among boys (Samari *et al*., 2025). Therefore, sex-based differences in body image remain a subject of ongoing debate.

Studies examining various dimensions of body image have commonly used BMI as an indicator of nutritional status, particularly in relation to determinants of weight-related behaviors (Miranda et al., 2018). BMI remains the most widely used measure in population-based studies for the primary classification of nutritional status (Miranda *et al*., 2021).

With respect to nutritional status, evidence suggests that among girls, higher body weight is associated with increased body dissatisfaction (Convertino *et al*., 2022), whereas among boys, this relationship appears to follow a quadratic pattern, such that both underweight and overweight individuals are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction (Presnell; Bearman; Stice, 2004). Moreover, heightened concern with physical appearance and increasing levels of body dissatisfaction have been widely documented in contemporary research (Campagna; Souza, 2006).

According to Miranda *et al*. (2018) the distribution of nutritional status among students in early adolescence was as follows: 71.4% had normal BMI; 19.8% were classified as overweight or obese (9.9% each); and 5.5% had low BMI. Among those in late adolescence, 75.6% had normal BMI; 2.4% had low BMI; 14.1% were overweight; and 7.8% were obese. These patterns were similar for both girls and boys when considering nutritional status across mid and late adolescence.

In Brazil, body dissatisfaction among children and adolescents ranges from 64% to 82% (Miranda *et al*., 2021). The literature also reports that, for both adolescents and adults, the prevalence of body dissatisfaction ranges between 50% and 70% of individuals (Miranda *et al*., 2021). An analysis of the BSQ suggests that this instrument primarily assesses concerns related to dissatisfaction with body

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shape and weight, particularly those associated with perceived disproportionate increases in body fat.

As discussed in the theoretical framework, the relationship between weight gain and body dissatisfaction has been widely documented in the literature as being influenced by media and communication channels. Accordingly, adolescents living in smaller cities may also be influenced to aspire to a thin, low-fat body ideal, particularly girls, as this pattern appears to persist regardless of geographic context (Ladwing *et al*., 2022).

Dissatisfaction with physical appearance is a key aspect of the attitudinal dimension that requires systematic assessment, particularly among adolescents undergoing significant changes in their physical appearance. This does not imply neglecting the holistic nature of the phenomenon but rather acknowledging that the development and construction of body image is a continuous and dynamic process (Tekola *et al*., 2024).

From a sociocultural perspective, these differences can be understood considering the distinct cultural and social influences to which boys and girls are exposed, which directly shape individual values and behaviors (Convertino *et al*., 2022). Adolescents exhibit concerns related to body weight and physical appearance regardless of sex (McCabe *et al*., 2006). Contemporary culture, characterized by a strong emphasis on thinness and pervasive media pressure, transforms the body into an object of manipulation and a projection of desires aligned with prevailing beauty standards. Among adolescent girls, young adult women, and men, the most frequent and salient targets of body and appearance comparison include both close social contacts and media representations (Van den Berg *et al*., 2007).

Van den Berg et al. (2007) examined media-mediated body comparison, its associations with psychological factors, and sociocultural pressures for thinness in relation to body dissatisfaction among American adolescents of both sexes. Among boys, media-driven body comparison was not identified as a significant predictor of body dissatisfaction; however, the authors highlighted the need for further research on the sociocultural processes underlying body dissatisfaction in males.

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In recent decades, digital media have assumed a central role in the construction of body image during adolescence, emerging as a key vector of contemporary sociocultural influence (DiGennaro; Tescione, 2024). Unlike traditional media, platforms such as Instagram and TikTok intensify exposure to highly edited and idealized images, promoting body standards that are often unattainable. Emerging evidence suggests that this digital environment fosters social comparison processes and the internalization of appearance ideals (Vincente-Benito; Ramírez-Durán, 2023; Azevedo *et al*., 2024). Furthermore, the interactive nature of these platforms enhances appearance-based social validation, reinforcing cultural beauty norms and amplifying aesthetic pressure on adolescents.

In this context, specific digital phenomena, such as the "fitspiration" movement, have been widely investigated for their impact on body perception. Although often associated with the promotion of health and physical activity, emerging evidence suggests that exposure to such content is linked to increased body dissatisfaction, comparison with idealized standards, and negative mood states, particularly among younger populations (Ladwing *et al*., 2024; Jerónimo; Carraça, 2022). Furthermore, contemporary research indicates that the influence of digital media is not uniform, but rather moderated by individual factors (e.g., sex and self-esteem) and patterns of use (active versus passive), highlighting the complexity of this phenomenon (Agyapong-Opoku *et al*., 2025). Therefore, understanding digital media as a dynamic sociocultural agent is essential for analyzing body dissatisfaction during adolescence, particularly in a context marked by the increasing digitalization of social interactions.

The key points discussed highlight several limitations of the present study. First, the narrative design of the review does not adhere to a systematic protocol for the identification and selection of evidence. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of the instruments used across the included studies, as well as methodological differences among them, may limit the comparability of findings and the generalizability of the conclusions.

Despite these limitations, the findings reinforce the multifactorial nature of body dissatisfaction during adolescence and highlight the need for integrated

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approaches that simultaneously consider biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors, particularly considering the transformations imposed by the contemporary digital environment.

5. CONCLUSION

Body dissatisfaction among adolescents constitutes a frequent and multifactorial phenomenon, associated with sociocultural influences (media, family, and peers) as well as with individual variables such as sex and nutritional status, depending on the assessment instrument and the context investigated.

The findings also highlight its association with risky eating behaviors and significant psychosocial outcomes, reinforcing the need for prevention and early identification strategies, particularly in school settings and healthcare services. Furthermore, these results underscore the importance of expanding the use of validated instruments for the Brazilian population, as well as strengthening methodological designs and analytical approaches that enhance standardization and comparability across studies.

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