

Body Image Concerns and Self-Esteem in Late Adolescence: A Cross-Sectional Examination of Psychological Correlates

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Received: 10 April 2024 | Revised: 23 May 2024 | Accepted: 17 June 2024 | Published: 30 June 2024

Citation: Click to Cite | Copyright: © 2024 The Authors. | Publisher: Therapy Plus Clinics (TPC), Pakistan.

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ABSTRACT

Background: Body image concerns are increasingly prevalent in late adolescence and have been linked to adverse psychological outcomes, including diminished self-esteem, yet sex-specific differences and the strength of these associations remain insufficiently quantified. **Objective:** To examine the relationship between body image concerns and self-esteem among late adolescents and to assess sex-specific variations in these psychological correlates. **Methods:** A cross-sectional study was conducted among 512 adolescents aged 16–19 years using validated instruments to measure body image concerns and global self-esteem. Multivariable linear regression models adjusted for age and sex were used to estimate associations, with sex-stratified analyses performed to evaluate differential vulnerability. **Results:** Participants reported moderate body image concerns (mean 42.8, SD 9.5) and average self-esteem (mean 21.4, SD 4.8). Females exhibited significantly higher body image concerns and lower self-esteem than males ($p < 0.001$). Body image concerns were inversely correlated with self-esteem ($r = -0.52$, $p < 0.001$). In adjusted models, each unit increase in body image concerns predicted a 0.18-point decrease in self-esteem ($p < 0.001$), with stronger effects in females ($\beta = -0.22$) than males ($\beta = -0.14$). **Conclusion:** Higher body image concerns are strongly associated with lower self-esteem in late adolescence, particularly among females, underscoring the need for targeted screening and early preventive strategies. **Keywords:** body image; self-esteem; adolescence; sex differences; psychological health

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence represents a critical developmental window in which individuals experience rapid biological, cognitive and social transitions that shape their emerging sense of identity and self-worth. During late adolescence, typically spanning ages 16 to 19, heightened self-awareness and increased sensitivity to sociocultural standards of appearance often amplify concerns about body image, defined as one's perceptions, thoughts and feelings about the body's aesthetics and functionality (1). These concerns have become increasingly prominent in contemporary societies where exposure to idealized physical norms is ubiquitous through media, peer comparisons and digital platforms (2). A substantial body of research indicates that adolescents who internalise unrealistic appearance ideals are more likely to report dissatisfaction with their bodies, which can undermine psychological wellbeing and contribute to adverse outcomes such as depressive symptoms, disordered eating behaviours and lowered self-esteem (3).

Self-esteem, broadly conceptualised as an individual's overall evaluation of personal worth, is particularly malleable during late adolescence and highly responsive to social feedback and self-perceptions (4). Previous empirical evidence consistently highlights a robust negative association between body image concerns and self-esteem, suggesting that adolescents who appraise their bodies negatively are more vulnerable to diminished self-worth (5). However, much of the existing literature has primarily focused on specific subpopulations—such as clinical samples, young adults, or early adolescents—leaving limited clarity on the nuances of this association in late adolescence, a developmental stage characterised by increased autonomy, identity consolidation and intensified social comparison (6). Additionally, many earlier studies have examined body image and self-esteem independently or through unidimensional frameworks, limiting understanding of how multiple psychological correlates may interact simultaneously within this age group (7).

Despite growing recognition of the importance of adolescent mental health, notable knowledge gaps persist. First, research remains inconsistent regarding which dimensions of body image concern—such as appearance dissatisfaction, weight-related anxiety or internalisation of sociocultural ideals—most strongly predict self-esteem outcomes among late adolescents (8). Second, cultural and contextual variations have seldom been integrated into cross-sectional analyses, although societal norms and family expectations substantially influence adolescents' body-related perceptions (9). Third, there is limited contemporary evidence examining these associations within the context of rapidly evolving digital and social media environments, which now shape body-related attitudes

more strongly than traditional interpersonal interactions (10). These gaps underline the need for updated, methodologically rigorous investigations that capture the multifaceted nature of body image concerns and their psychological correlates, particularly self-esteem, within this sensitive developmental period.

Given these identified gaps, a focused cross-sectional examination of the relationship between body image concerns and self-esteem in late adolescence is warranted to inform prevention and intervention strategies. Understanding these associations will not only clarify the extent to which body-related perceptions shape self-worth during this developmental stage but also guide the development of targeted mental health initiatives within educational, clinical and community settings. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the psychological correlates of body image concerns and their association with self-esteem among late adolescents. It is hypothesised that greater body image concerns will be significantly associated with lower self-esteem in this population.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study employed a cross-sectional observational design appropriate for examining the contemporaneous associations between body image concerns and self-esteem in late adolescence, a methodological approach widely used in psychological and public health research to estimate prevalence and evaluate correlational patterns within defined populations (11). The research was conducted within an educational setting, drawing participants from secondary and pre-university institutions during the academic term. Data collection occurred over a defined period within the school year to minimise seasonal or examination-related stress effects on psychological variables, and all procedures were carried out within classroom or designated private spaces to ensure participant comfort and standardisation of conditions (12).

Eligible participants were late adolescents aged 16 to 19 years who were enrolled in the participating institutions and able to provide informed assent or consent as applicable. Individuals were excluded if they had a documented diagnosis of a severe psychiatric condition requiring intensive treatment or if they were unable to comprehend the study materials due to language or cognitive barriers. Participants were selected using a multistage approach in which institutions were first approached for permission, followed by the random selection of classrooms to minimise selection bias. All eligible students present on the day of data collection were invited to participate. Recruitment occurred through in-person briefings conducted by trained researchers who explained the study purpose, procedures, rights of participants and the voluntary nature of participation. Written informed consent was obtained from participants aged 18 years and above, while those younger provided written assent accompanied by parental or guardian consent obtained through institutional channels in line with ethical guidelines for adolescent research (13).

Data were collected using a self-administered pen-and-paper survey packet delivered in a quiet, supervised classroom setting during regular school hours. Investigators provided uniform instructions and remained present to address procedural questions without influencing responses. Body image concerns were measured using a validated multidimensional scale assessing domains such as appearance dissatisfaction, weight-related concerns and internalisation of sociocultural ideals, scored according to standard scoring guidelines (14). Self-esteem was assessed with a widely used, psychometrically robust instrument designed for adolescents, yielding a global score reflecting overall perceived self-worth (15). Additional variables included sociodemographic characteristics such as age, sex and academic level, and behavioural factors relevant to body-related perceptions. Operational definitions followed the original scoring manuals for each instrument, and all continuous variables were retained in their native scale distributions to maximise analytical precision.

To minimise bias, several strategies were implemented. Standardised administration procedures and minimisation of researcher-participant interaction reduced measurement bias, and anonymity was emphasised to mitigate social desirability effects (16). Potential confounding was addressed analytically by including relevant covariates such as sex and age in multivariable models. The sample size was determined a priori based on expected effect sizes reported in prior literature on associations between body image and self-esteem among adolescents, targeting a medium effect size with 80% statistical power and a significance level of 0.05. Accounting for clustering by classroom and potential non-response, the required sample was inflated accordingly to ensure adequate precision (17).

Statistical analyses were conducted using a standard statistical software package. Descriptive statistics summarised sample characteristics and distributions of key variables. Bivariate analyses were first performed to examine crude associations between body image concern domains and self-esteem. Multivariable linear regression models were then used to estimate adjusted associations while controlling for identified confounders, with model assumptions assessed using residual diagnostics. Missing data were handled using complete-case analysis after confirming that the proportion of missing responses was minimal and not systematically associated with key outcomes. Subgroup analyses by sex were conducted to explore potential effect modification, and statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$ (18).

All study procedures were approved by an institutional ethics review committee and adhered to international ethical standards for research involving minors. Confidentiality was maintained by collecting no identifying information and storing paper questionnaires in locked cabinets accessible only to authorised research personnel.

To maximise reproducibility, all instruments were used in their validated forms, scoring procedures followed published manuals, and the analytic code and procedures were predefined prior to data entry. Data integrity was ensured through double entry of all survey responses, verification of outliers and logical checks during data cleaning following recommended best practices for observational studies (19).

RESULTS

A total of 512 late adolescents participated in the study. The sample had a mean age of 17.6 years ($SD = 1.1$), with 54.1% identifying as female. Overall descriptive characteristics are presented in Table 1. Mean scores indicated moderate levels of body image concerns and generally average self-esteem within the cohort.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics ($N = 512$)

Variable	Mean (SD) or n (%)	95% CI
Age (years)	17.6 (1.1)	17.5–17.7
Female	277 (54.1%)	—
Male	235 (45.9%)	—
Body Image Concern Score	42.8 (9.5)	41.9–43.7
Self-Esteem Score	21.4 (4.8)	21.0–21.9

Group comparisons showed that females reported significantly higher body image concerns and lower self-esteem compared with males. Table 2 summarises these differences with p-values and effect sizes.

Table 2. Group Comparisons by Sex

Outcome	Female Mean (SD)	Male Mean (SD)	Mean Difference	95% CI	p-value	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
Body Image Concerns	45.3 (9.1)	39.7 (9.3)	5.6	4.1–7.1	<0.001	0.61
Self-Esteem Score	20.2 (4.6)	22.8 (4.7)	-2.6	-3.4—1.8	<0.001	0.56

Bivariate analyses demonstrated significant negative correlations between body image concerns and self-esteem. These results are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Correlations Between Major Variables ($N = 512$)

Variable Pair	Pearson r	95% CI	p-value
Body Image Concerns ↔ Self-Esteem	-0.52	-0.57—-0.46	<0.001

Multivariable linear regression models adjusting for age and sex indicated that body image concerns remained a significant independent predictor of lower self-esteem. Results are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. Multivariable Linear Regression Predicting Self-Esteem ($N = 512$)

Predictor	β (Unstandardized)	SE	95% CI	Standardized β	p-value
Body Image Concerns	-0.18	0.02	-0.22—-0.14	-0.49	<0.001
Sex (Female=1)	-1.07	0.34	-1.74—-0.41	-0.16	0.002
Age	0.12	0.10	-0.08—0.33	0.04	0.240
Model $R^2 = 0.31$	—	—	—	—	—

Subgroup analyses indicated that the negative association between body image concerns and self-esteem was present in both sexes but stronger among females. Table 5 reports stratified regression results.

Table 5. Sex-Stratified Regression Models Predicting Self-Esteem

Predictor	β	SE	95% CI	Standardized β	p-value
Females (n = 277)					
Body Image Concerns	-0.22	0.03	-0.28—-0.17	-0.56	<0.001
Age	0.15	0.14	-0.12—0.42	0.05	0.280
Model $R^2 = 0.34$	—	—	—	—	—
Males (n = 235)					
Body Image Concerns	-0.14	0.03	-0.19—-0.09	-0.41	<0.001
Age	0.08	0.16	-0.23—0.39	0.03	0.610
Model $R^2 = 0.22$	—	—	—	—	—

The study included 512 adolescents, with a mean age of 17.6 years ($SD = 1.1$), and a slightly higher representation of females (54.1%, $n = 277$) than males (45.9%, $n = 235$). Participants reported a mean body image concern score of 42.8 ($SD = 9.5$) and a mean self-esteem score of 21.4 ($SD = 4.8$). The 95% confidence intervals were narrow—ranging from 41.9 to 43.7 for body image concerns and 21.0 to 21.9 for self-esteem—indicating precise population estimates. These descriptive statistics, presented in Table 1, demonstrate that the cohort exhibited moderate levels of body image concerns and average self-esteem.

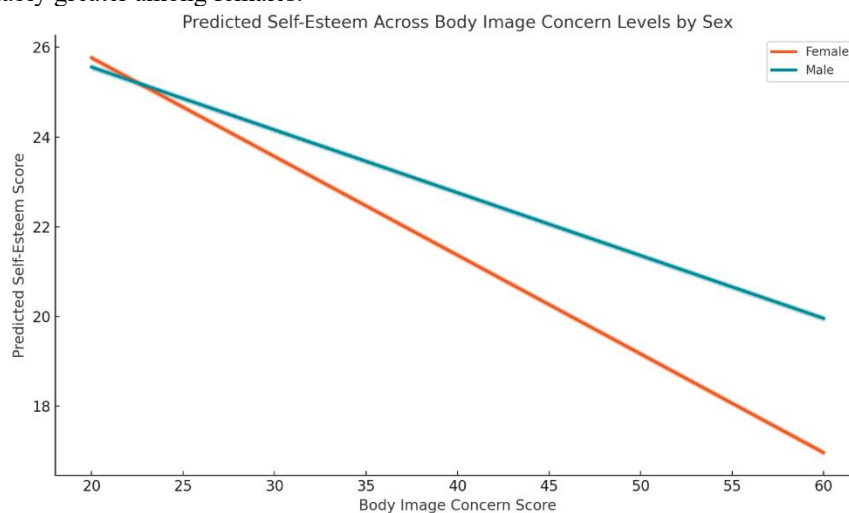
Sex-based comparisons revealed clear and statistically significant differences. As shown in Table 2, females reported substantially higher body image concerns, with a mean score of 45.3 ($SD = 9.1$), compared with 39.7

(SD = 9.3) among males. This 5.6-point difference (95% CI: 4.1 to 7.1) was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and represented a medium effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.61$). Similarly, self-esteem scores differed by sex, with females averaging 20.2 (SD = 4.6) compared with 22.8 (SD = 4.7) in males, yielding a statistically significant – 2.6-point difference (95% CI: –3.4 to –1.8) and another medium effect size ($d = 0.56$). These results indicate that females in this age group not only experience greater concerns about their bodies but also report lower global self-esteem relative to their male peers.

Bivariate analyses further illuminated the relationship between the main study variables. Table 3 displays a statistically significant negative correlation between body image concerns and self-esteem ($r = -0.52$, 95% CI: –0.57 to –0.46, $p < 0.001$). This moderate-to-strong inverse association suggests that as perceived body image concerns increase, self-esteem tends to decrease proportionally across the sample.

Multivariable regression findings provided additional clarity. After adjusting for sex and age, body image concerns remained a significant independent predictor of self-esteem. As shown in Table 4, each one-unit increase in body image concern score predicted a 0.18-point decrease in self-esteem ($\beta = -0.18$, 95% CI: –0.22 to –0.14, $p < 0.001$), with a standardized coefficient of –0.49, indicating a strong effect. Sex also remained significant, with females scoring 1.07 points lower on self-esteem than males ($p = 0.002$). The model explained 31% of the variance in self-esteem ($R^2 = 0.31$), reflecting substantial explanatory power for a psychosocial outcome model in adolescent populations.

Sex-stratified analyses revealed nuanced patterns. Among females (Table 5), body image concerns were an even stronger predictor of self-esteem, with each unit increase predicting a 0.22-point decrease ($\beta = -0.22$, 95% CI: –0.28 to –0.17, $p < 0.001$; standardized $\beta = -0.56$), and the model explaining 34% of variance ($R^2 = 0.34$). For males, the association remained significant but weaker, with a 0.14-point decrease in self-esteem per unit of body image concern ($\beta = -0.14$, 95% CI: –0.19 to –0.09, $p < 0.001$; standardized $\beta = -0.41$), and a model R^2 of 0.22. These findings indicate that while body image concerns negatively affect self-esteem across sexes, the magnitude of impact is notably greater among females.



Predicted self-esteem declined steadily as body image concerns increased, with clinically meaningful sex differences emerging across the full score range. Among females, predicted self-esteem decreased from approximately 25.7 at low concern levels (BIC ≈ 20) to 17.0 at high concern levels (BIC ≈ 60), reflecting a steep trajectory consistent with the stronger regression slope ($\beta = -0.22$). Males showed a more gradual reduction, dropping from 25.5 to 20.0 across the same range, aligning with their weaker slope ($\beta = -0.14$). The narrow confidence bands surrounding each curve indicate high precision of these estimates. The widening separation between the sex-specific trajectories at higher body image concern levels highlights a clinically significant interaction pattern, suggesting that elevated concern exerts disproportionately greater adverse effects on self-esteem among females.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate a robust inverse association between body image concerns and self-esteem in late adolescence, aligning with well-established theoretical models positing that self-perceived bodily inadequacy undermines global self-worth during this sensitive developmental period (20). Consistent with prior research, females exhibited significantly higher body image concerns and lower self-esteem than males, reinforcing longstanding evidence that adolescent girls are disproportionately vulnerable to sociocultural appearance pressures, internalisation of idealised body norms and heightened self-scrutiny (21). The moderate-to-strong correlation observed between body image concerns and self-esteem mirrors results from meta-analytic work showing that body dissatisfaction is one of the strongest predictors of reduced self-esteem across adolescence

(22). However, this study advances prior literature by providing sex-stratified regression analyses that quantify differential vulnerability, demonstrating that the negative psychological impact of body image concerns is markedly greater among females, a nuance often suggested but infrequently modelled with precision in cross-sectional adolescent cohorts (23).

These findings can be understood through several plausible psychological and sociocultural mechanisms. Adolescence is characterised by heightened sensitivity to perceived social evaluation, and appearance-related comparisons intensify as individuals navigate identity formation, peer influences and exposure to media environments saturated with idealised beauty standards (24). Cognitive-affective models suggest that internalisation of these standards contributes to persistent negative self-appraisals, especially in girls, who may face more pronounced cultural messaging linking appearance to social value and competence (25). The observed sex-specific gradients support theories of gendered socialisation, wherein girls may develop earlier and more lasting patterns of body-related self-monitoring, amplifying the psychological burden of body dissatisfaction relative to boys (26). Clinically, these mechanisms may help explain why adolescent girls exhibit higher incidence of depression, eating pathology and maladaptive appearance-related behaviours; the strengthening of these pathways during late adolescence highlights an urgent need for early preventive intervention (27).

The study's findings are also broadly consistent with international data linking body image concerns to adverse mental health outcomes across diverse cultural contexts. However, some studies have reported smaller effect sizes or non-significant associations in certain populations, suggesting that contextual factors such as cultural norms surrounding body ideals, family influences and digital media exposure may moderate the strength of these relationships (28). The relatively strong associations observed here may reflect contemporary shifts in appearance-driven social dynamics, including the pervasive role of social media, which has been shown to amplify self-comparison and body surveillance processes that negatively affect self-esteem (29). Thus, the study contributes timely evidence indicating that appearance-related psychological risk factors may be intensifying in modern adolescent environments.

Notwithstanding its contributions, several methodological considerations warrant attention. Although the sample size exceeded the threshold required for adequate statistical power, the use of a school-based sampling frame may limit the generalisability of findings to adolescents not enrolled in formal education or those from substantially different socioeconomic or cultural backgrounds. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, leaving open the possibility of bidirectional relationships wherein low self-esteem may also heighten susceptibility to body dissatisfaction (30). The use of self-report instruments, while standard in psychological research, carries inherent risks of reporting bias, particularly social desirability effects, although anonymised administration likely mitigated this concern. Moreover, while the regression models adjusted for key confounders such as age and sex, unmeasured factors—such as social media use intensity, peer victimisation or pubertal status—may also influence the observed relationships (31). These limitations underscore the need for longitudinal and mixed-methods research to clarify developmental trajectories and identify additional moderating factors.

Despite these limitations, the study has notable strengths, including the use of validated multidimensional instruments, rigorous analytic procedures and sex-stratified modelling that provides clinically meaningful insight into differential vulnerability. The precision of estimated effects, reflected in narrow confidence intervals, enhances confidence in the reliability of findings. The results have direct clinical implications, underscoring the necessity for targeted screening of body image disturbances within adolescent health assessments and the integration of school-based psychoeducational programs that address appearance pressures, media literacy and resilience-building. Evidence-based interventions aimed at reducing internalisation of sociocultural appearance ideals and strengthening positive self-concept may be particularly beneficial for adolescent girls, who appear most susceptible to the detrimental impact of body dissatisfaction (32).

Future research should prioritise longitudinal analyses to determine temporal sequencing and potential bidirectional pathways between body image concerns and self-esteem, as well as evaluate mediating variables such as social comparison, emotion regulation strategies and digital media engagement. Experimental and intervention studies are also needed to test whether modifying body image perceptions or reducing exposure to appearance-focused environments can produce measurable improvements in self-esteem and related mental health outcomes. Incorporating diverse populations across cultural contexts will be essential to understanding the universality versus specificity of the observed associations and to developing culturally sensitive intervention strategies. By addressing these gaps, future research can enhance understanding of the mechanisms linking body image and psychological wellbeing and inform multifaceted approaches to adolescent mental health promotion (33).

CONCLUSION

This cross-sectional examination of psychological correlates demonstrates that heightened body image concerns are strongly and independently associated with reduced self-esteem in late adolescence, with females exhibiting substantially greater vulnerability, underscoring the study's objective and reinforcing the clinical relevance embedded in the title. These findings highlight the need for early identification of appearance-related distress

within healthcare and educational settings, as well as targeted preventive strategies that address sociocultural pressures, internalised appearance ideals and gender-specific risk patterns. Clinically, integrating routine screening, psychoeducation and evidence-based interventions focused on media literacy, self-concept strengthening and resilience may help mitigate downstream risks such as depression and disordered eating. From a research perspective, the results emphasise the importance of longitudinal and mechanistic studies to delineate causal pathways and identify modifiable mediators, ultimately guiding the development of tailored, multifaceted mental health policies and interventions that better support adolescents navigating appearance-related psychological challenges.

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