

BODY IMAGE, FEELING AND ATTITUDE OF ADOLESCENTS FROM RURAL TOWNS – WHAT THE DISCOURSE REVEALS



<https://doi.org/10.56238/arev7n2-061>

Submitted on: 01/07/2025

Publication date: 02/07/2025

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to qualitatively evaluate the feelings and attitudes related to body image of adolescents from rural cities. Participants were 49 adolescents aged 15 to 19 years. A semi-structured interview was used, evaluated by the content analysis technique, and two categorization groups were created: degree of satisfaction with body image and attitudes towards body modification. Weight and height were collected to calculate the body mass index. It was observed that 22 adolescents (44.9%) reported body dissatisfaction, present in the discourses related to fat, weight and belly enlargement. Physical activity and care with diet were the most commonly used measures to achieve body satisfaction. Further qualitative studies are needed to understand the factors related to adolescent body dissatisfaction.

Keywords: Body Image. Adolescents. Content Analysis. Collective Health.

INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2005), adolescence is the stage of development between 10 and 19 years of age, a peculiar evolutionary stage of the human being, defined in a heterogeneous way, and may have several interpretative possibilities. Scholars on the subject report that this passage to adulthood is a time of changes and adjustment of capacities in the productive and reproductive scope of human beings, which involves biological, psychological, social, or cultural aspects in an inseparable way (Nesi *et al.*, 2024; McCabe; Ricciardelli, 2004; Van Den Berg *et al.*, 2007).

Researchers highlight that adolescence is the most significant phase for the organization of body image, in which adolescents conquer and consolidate the formation of their personality (Matos *et al.*, 2022; Conti, 2008). This, in turn, can be defined as the perception that a person has of the size and shape of his body, along with the feelings that this representation can cause (Slide, 1994). Body dissatisfaction is one of the most studied components of body image, being characterized by a negative feeling in relation to the body (Araújo; Candino; Lima, 2024). During adolescence, the puberty period can be a stage in which greater body dissatisfaction occurs due to the intense physical changes resulting from the changes suffered in this period (Miranda *et al.*, 2020; Martins *et al.*, 2010; Alvarenga *et al.*, 2010).

Excessive body dissatisfaction is one of the factors that can contribute to the manifestation of inappropriate eating behaviors and consequently have repercussions on eating disorders (Miranda *et al.*, 2018; Alves *et al.*, 2010). The adoption of unhealthy attitudes, for example, the use of diuretics, laxatives, or even the self-induction of vomiting and the performance of strenuous physical activities are carried out in order to achieve a physical appearance (Dunker; Philippi; Ikeda, 2010; Treasure; Duarte; Schmidt, 2020).

Cross-sectional studies are the most used to describe the aspects that make up body image (Miranda *et al.*, 2011). This is usually done through the application of a specific instrument, such as questionnaires and scales. Cortês *et al.* (2013) found that there is a variation in the prevalence of body dissatisfaction (32.2% to 83%) of adolescents when evaluated by means of silhouette scales, with not only great heterogeneity among them, but also a lack of relevant methodological information. The authors also recommend the use of other methodological approaches to assess body satisfaction. From this perspective, it is perceived that studies with a qualitative design are necessary to understand and analyze the feelings and attitudes that adolescents manifest in relation to

their body image. Thus, the objective of the study was to qualitatively evaluate the feelings and attitudes related to body image of adolescents from rural cities.

METHODS

This is a cross-sectional, descriptive study with a quantitative-qualitative approach. This study is part of a broader survey entitled "Body Dissatisfaction of Adolescents in Small Cities", carried out from March to September 2010 in all high schools in the cities of Tabuleiro, Belmiro Braga and Goianá, Zona da Mata Mineira (Minas Gerais, Brazil). Adolescents of both sexes participated in the study, who voluntarily agreed to participate in all stages of data collection, and delivered the free and informed consent form (ICF) duly signed by their guardians.

A semi-structured interview script was used, which "represents one of the basic instruments for data collection" (Lüdke; André, 1986). The script addressed data regarding gender, age and open questions about satisfaction with body image and attitudes taken to feel better about physical appearance. The interviews were recorded after the consent of the interviewees and transcribed on the same day of data collection to avoid the loss of reports and ensure the reliability of the transcriptions.

The data were analyzed through Bardin's (2009) content analysis, in the thematic modality to identify in the reports the meanings attributed by the respondents in relation to the research theme. Content analysis corresponds to a set of techniques through which a group of data can be analyzed. It is widely used in qualitative research, especially in investigations in the area of education, because it is a very effective way to understand the not always manifest contents of a discourse (be it a text, a gesture, or the enunciation of a sentence, that is, any form of communication) (Valle; Ferreira, 2024).

The content analysis technique is "a set of increasingly subtle methodological instruments in constant improvement, which apply to extremely diversified 'discourses' (contents and continents)" (BARDIN, 2016, p. 15), whose objective is to explore the senses and meanings attributed by the subjects participating in qualitative and quantitative studies regarding a theme, problem and/or phenomenon, based on rigorous and structured systematization.

For the process of evaluating the contents of the interviews, it was carried out following the stages of pre-analysis to systematize the ideas of the analysis material, exploration of the material to identify the categories, the treatment of the results to group

the similar categories (Minayo, 2013; Bardin, 2016). The interpretation of the categories was based on the scientific literature to understand the adolescents' perception of body image. For the purpose of characterizing the sample, the variables age and Body Mass Index (BMI) were analyzed in a descriptive manner (mean and standard deviation). The nutritional status of the adolescents was obtained from BMI (De Onis *et al.*, 2007).

This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (opinion no. 416/2008), in accordance with the provisions of Resolution No. 466/12 of the National Health Council.

RESULTS

CHARACTERIZATION OF THE POPULATION STUDIED

The sample consisted of 49 individuals, of whom 46.9% (n=23) were boys, their ages ranged from 15 to 19 years (mean 16.73 ± 1.13 years). The mean BMI of adolescents was 22.33 ± 4.7 kg/m² among boys and 23.40 ± 3.4 kg/m² among girls. Regarding the classification of nutritional status, 85.7% of the adolescents were classified as eutrophic, 14.2% as overweight and obese, and only 2% as underweight.

BODY DISSATISFACTION

In 44.9% (n=22) of the reports, we identified the presence of body dissatisfaction. Among these, 68.2% (n=15) were girls and 31.81% (n=7) were boys. Among the most reported discomforts, fat was the most cited (n=18) by 88.9% (n=16) of the girls and 11.11% (n=2) of the boys, especially in the abdominal region.

"[...] I don't like it very much. Because I think I'm a little, like, chubby [...]"

Participant 3, 19 years old, female, eutrophic.

"[...] I don't like my belly, I think it's big (laughs) [...]". Participant 19, 16 years old, male, overweight.

The body parts that bothered me were related to thinness reported by 8 participants, mainly boys (n=7) who were concerned about the lack of muscle mass.

"[...] I don't like my body very much. I think I'm very thin, I wanted to put on a little weight. But it's because I have difficulty gaining muscle mass [...]", participant 46, 18 years old, male, eutrophic.

"[...] Oh, I'm very tall and skinny, I wanted to gain a little muscle mass." Participant 10, 17 years old, male, eutrophic.

"[...] I be thin. For the sake of appearance." Participant 6, 15 years old, female, eutrophic.

Regarding excess fat, the abdominal region was the most cited (38%, n=19) as a reason for body dissatisfaction. It is noteworthy that concern with fat in the abdominal region was reported even by those adolescents who classified themselves as satisfied with their physical appearance (4 girls and 1 boy).

"[...] I don't like the belly, because I think it's kind of big. When I wake up in the morning she is very well, if I eat something she grows. When I'm at home I eat anyway, but when I go to the party I don't eat so I don't get big [...]" Participant 2, 18 years old, female, eutrophic.

"[...] I don't like my belly because it has some culottes [...]" Participant 4, 16 years old, female, eutrophic.

"[...] I don't like my belly, I think it's big (laughs) [...]" Participant 21, 16 years old, female, overweight.

"[...] I don't like the belly, because it's not defined [...]" Participant 36, 17 years old, male, eutrophic.

Still on the subject of excess fat in the abdominal region, some speeches demonstrate extreme discontent.

"[...] My belly, too much. Because I can't, you know; The more I eat, the more I want to eat, and then I can't lose weight. Because if I lose two kilos it seems that my belly gets fatter. It's because of the size. Because I can't, you know. I've even tried to get into the gym. No, I just cry. There are times when I cry. Oh because it's really psychological, it makes me desperate. I've tried to go to the psychologist, but then I didn't even go, because I'm not fat, you see that I'm not fat, but I have this panic with my belly [...]" Participant 44, 17 years old, female, eutrophic.

Some participants (n=12) were dissatisfied with other specific parts of the body, such as: hand (nail), foot, height, hair, knee, ear, hip and forehead.

"[...] My nail, grows very fast [...]", participant 8, 15 years old, female, eutrophic.

"[...] the foot, it's too big [...]", participant 10, 17 years old, male, eutrophic

"[...] My height, I wanted to be a little shorter [...]" Participant 13, 18 years old, male, eutrophic.

"[...] My hair. Because he's too tall, I have a lot of hair." Participant 25, 16 years old, female, eutrophic.

"[...] My knee, because I think the knee is very ugly [...]" Participant 28, 18 years old, female, eutrophic.

"[...] The foot was too big, the ear was a dog, because of the size." Participant 29, 19 years old, male, eutrophic.

"[...] My forehead, because it is large [...]" Participant 33, 17 years old, female, eutrophic.

"[...] My hip. Because I think he's too wide, I think he's family, at home everyone is like that [...]" Participant 31, 17 years old, female, overweight.

Some girls (n=3) expressed dissatisfaction with characteristics related to the age group, changes that occur during the period of puberty, such as large breasts and pimples on the face.

"[...] *My face, because of the acne [...]*". Participant 25, 16 years old, female, eutrophic.

"[...] *The breasts bother the most because of their size [...]*". Participant 45, 18 years old, female, overweight.

"[...] *My chest. Oh, I don't like my breasts, if I could take them off, I'd take them off [...]*". Participant 48, 18 years old, female, eutrophic.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS BODY MODIFICATION

Some attitudes to feel more satisfied with their physical appearance were reported by 78% (n=38) adolescents (n=20 girls and n=18 boys). The most recurrent attitude was the control of diet along with the practice of physical activity (64%, n=24).

"[...] *I sometimes run and try harder. From time to time I eat vegetables, which helps right [...]*?" Participant 8, 16 years old, female, eutrophic.

"[...] *I take care of myself, I eat well, I play sports.*"

Participant 10, 17 years old, male, eutrophic.

"[...] *I try to eat properly. I ride a bike.*" Participant 15, 18 years old, male, obese.

"[...] *I try not to eat sweets during the week and avoid eating heavier food at night. I like to play sports and I walk every day to get in shape [...]*". Participant 42, 16 years old, female, eutrophic.

"[...] *Yes, I play football and try to maintain a healthy diet [...]*". Participant 48, 15 years old, eutrophic female.

However, they face difficulty in persisting with food control and physical activity as strategies for body satisfaction.

"[...] *I start, you know. I start walking, dieting, but then I can't, I stop. Food attracts me, it's like an addiction [...]*". Participant 22, 15 years old, female, eutrophic.

"[...] *I avoid eating things that make you very fat, I avoid eating sweets, but sometimes I end up eating junk food and then it doesn't do much good. I used to do dance, but now I've stopped, just physical education [...]*". Participant 8, 16 years old, female, eutrophic.

It is possible to notice among those adolescents who regularly practiced physical exercises as one of the main ways to achieve the ideal body, two (1 boys and 1 girl) reported using some type of substance in an attempt to modify their own body, such as human food and anabolic steroids.

"[...] *Yes, I take that human food, to lose weight. It is a natural product, to lose weight [...]*". Participant 26, 16 years old, female, eutrophic.

"[...] *Sometimes I take some supplement, food I also eat a lot. I also take ADE (Complex of fat-soluble vitamins A, D and E for veterinary use). I buy it at the feed house. Then I started taking it recently, now that I took more it's giving good results and I work out directly. I looked for it myself, and I do it to gain more mass [...]*". Participant 14, 17 years old, male, eutrophic.

The use of cosmetics is seen (n=2) as a way to modify their bodies to feel more satisfied.

"[...] I pass things (lotion, cosmetic) on the body directly. Otherwise not [...]."

Participant 9, 18 years old, male, eutrophic.

"[...] I moisturize my hair a lot, I do a lot to try to improve it [...]", participant 25, 16 years old, female, eutrophic.

On the other hand, 26.53% (n=13) of the adolescents, 69.9% (n=9) girls and 30.8% (n=4) boys, do not take any action to change their bodies and/or feel more satisfied with their body image.

"[...] No, I don't actually do anything, I feel very relaxed. I don't exercise, I don't take care of my diet, I feel very relaxed [...]." Participant 17, 17 years old, female, eutrophic.

BODY SATISFACTION

More than half of the adolescents interviewed (55.10%, n = 27) reported not being dissatisfied with any aspect of their physical appearance, with 55.6% (n=15) being boys and 44.44% (n=12) girls.

"[...] I don't do anything, I feel good the way I am." [...] Participant 47, 17 years old, female, eutrophic.

"[...] I don't do anything, I'm very relaxed with my body [...]", participant 46, 18 years old, male, eutrophic.

DISCUSSION

This study showed that body dissatisfaction was manifested in the discourse in relation to physical appearance in almost half of the number (44.9%) of adolescents living in rural cities. Excess weight and the accumulation of fat in the abdominal region were the main reasons for this feeling of rejection with the physical shape. To contain this negative feeling about the body, attitudes were taken by the adolescents to feel good about their appearance, with physical activity and control of food being the most declared. These results highlight that the phenomenon of body image needs to be analyzed from a qualitative perspective, since the instruments currently applied present standardized results, which makes it difficult to deepen and understand the results obtained (Tort-Nasarre *et al.*, 2023; Conti *et al.*, 2009).

Of the adolescents dissatisfied with their body image, the majority (38%) indicated that they felt uncomfortable with the abdominal region, being both boys and girls. Jones,

Vigfusdottir and Lee (2006) warn that girls, even when at the appropriate weight or below the ideal weight, usually feel fat or disproportionate, possibly leading to dissatisfaction with their physical appearance. For boys, these findings need to be further investigated. Studies have shown that boys' body dissatisfaction is more linked to muscle mass than necessarily to body weight (Miranda *et al.*, 2020; San Martini *et al.*, 2023). The results presented reinforce, however, the idea that the current ideal body is characterized by the absence of fat, both among boys and girls (White; Halliwell, 2010) being a target of concern even among adolescents classified as eutrophic.

This body dissatisfaction becomes worrisome as one observes the discourse of an adolescent who reported crying when thinking about her own body (participant 44). Studies have shown that body dissatisfaction is related to other psychological aspects, such as self-esteem and the development of depression (Nesi *et al.*, 2024; Beserra *et al.*, 2024), in addition to the development of eating disorders (Treasure; Duarte; Schmidt, 2020; Coast; Vasconcellos, 2010) and body dysmorphics (Araújo; Candino; Lima, 2024). Thus, verifying signs of depressed behavior in a specific sample reinforces the need to investigate aspects related to body dissatisfaction.

Numerous questions can be raised regarding this feeling of excessive body dissatisfaction. The level of pressure present in social relationships driving adolescents to adopt a certain ideal of attractiveness and body shape that is often far from being achieved (San Martini *et al.*, 2023). This internalization of the type of idealized physical appearance can trigger, in addition to negative feelings with body image, low self-esteem and predisposition to risky eating behaviors.

The adolescents' discourses showed the difficulty in adhering to a physical activity program or a healthy diet to maintain physical shape. This difficulty in adhering to physical activity and poor diet are one of the main factors for overweight and obesity in adolescence (Jebeile *et al.*, 2022). The sedentary life with a long time of eating and the ease of eating fatty foods make it difficult to spend energy and consequently gain weight for many adolescents. Studies with adolescents show that overweight and obesity are directly related to body dissatisfaction (San Martini *et al.*, 2023; Miranda *et al.*, 2020; Miranda *et al.*, 2018).

In this sense, the adoption of inadequate physical exercise practices and the so-called "fad diets" become strategies adopted by adolescents in an attempt to achieve the desired body immediately (Knauss; Paxton; Alsaker, 2008). This fact is worrying because it

represents a health risk, especially among adolescents. The reports of the participants in this study, however, do not allow us to infer whether the practice of physical activity was systematized or not. Almeida *et al.* (2012) mention in their research on the frequency of plastic surgery, anabolic steroids, silicone prostheses and radical diets in a cult of narcissism and an excessive concern with appearance.

Dissatisfaction with body appearance, when not exaggerated, can lead the individual to obtain beneficial behaviors, with the incorporation of healthy habits, adequate nutrition and regular physical activity, modifying the biophysical scope and improving body perception (Santos *et al.*, 2011). However, dissatisfied adolescents often adopt inappropriate eating behaviors and unhealthy practices aimed at weight control, such as the use of diuretics, laxatives, self-induction of vomiting and strenuous physical activity (Wilkosz *et al.*, 2011).

In the interviews, two adolescents reported using substances to feel more satisfied with their body image, the intake of human food for the loss of body fat (participant 26) and the application of ADE to increase muscle mass (participant 14). Human feed is a food supplement based on soluble fibers, used to reduce fat, glucose, total cholesterol and serum triglycerides (Machado; Navarro, 2010). The fat-soluble vitamin compound ADE (vitamins A, D and E) has the main function of meeting the needs of fat-soluble vitamin deficiency directly and preventing infections in animals, such as cattle and horses (Iriart; Andrade, 2002). This substance is deleterious to human health, as it causes abscesses in the vicinity of the application site, infections, embolism, and necrosis of the limb, which can cause future amputation (Cisneiros *et al.*, 2021).

There were reports of other measures to feel better about their physical appearance, such as the use of cosmetics and lotions for body hydration (Participants 9 and 25). For Alves *et al.* (2008) currently in Western societies there is a "divinization of the beautiful body" and that sociocultural factors influence the image that individuals have of their own body. Hence the varied search to achieve a physical appearance internalized as ideal.

Maintaining a good relationship with one's own body in adolescence can bring benefits to human development. Adolescents are the most vulnerable to societal pressures regarding the appearance of their bodies, as they are in a time marked by physical, psychological, emotional, and cognitive changes and increased concern with physical appearance (Marques; Legal; Höfelmann, 2013). In the midst of hormonal, functional, affective and social changes, changes in physical form and body appearance acquire

fundamental importance, especially during the beginning of the development of secondary sexual characteristics typical of adolescence (Santos *et al.*, 2011; Smolak; Stein, 2006). In this research, 3 participants (all female) reported dissatisfaction with parts of the body that undergo changes during puberty: dissatisfaction with acne (participant 25) and dissatisfaction with breast size (participant 45 and 48).

During adolescence, the experiences lived by young people and the social environment contribute to formulate body image and its respective satisfaction (Marques; Legal; Höfelmann, 2013). Adolescents may be more influenced than boys by the media regarding the internalization of the ideal of a thin body. Certain psychological characteristics, combined with dissatisfaction with body image, are considered risk factors for the development of eating and mental psychopathologies.

Thus, studies show that BMI is one of the main determinants of body satisfaction (Miranda *et al.*, 2020; Scherer *et al.*, 2011). It is important to note that not all dissatisfied adolescents were classified as overweight by BMI. Among the adolescents from rural cities interviewed, 14.2% were overweight or obese. Overestimation of body weight, regardless of nutritional status (BMI), appears to be one of the most significant predictive factors for abnormal eating behaviors and poor weight management practices in adolescents from different sociodemographic backgrounds (San Martini *et al.*, 2023; Cisneiros *et al.*, 2021).

Although obese adolescents have greater dissatisfaction with their body image than eutrophic adolescents, they may have a concept of their bodies that is not entirely negative. That is, although they agree that their physical appearance bothers them, some positive characteristics about certain parts of the body, such as the eyes and a face, can soften the dissatisfaction. In this study, it was possible to observe dissatisfaction with other body parts, such as nails (participant 8), feet (participants 10 and 29), height (participant 13), hair (participant 25), knee (participant 28), forehead (participant 33) and hips (participant 31).

Some limiting factors were observed in this study, such as the use of the convenience sampling procedure, as well as the restricted number of sample sizes. It is important to note that in each city students were invited to participate, but 11.87% (49 students) wanted to record an interview and answer questions related to their body image. Because this is a qualitative study and because it evaluates the subjective relationship of adolescents with their body image, it is believed that the selection by convenience did not bias the interpretation of the interviews or the procedure of random selection of the

participants. A similar number can be observed for each sex (46.9% boys and 53.1% girls). The number of participants in each city was not taken into account due to the fact that rural cities have very similar sociodemographic structures. Another relevant factor in this research was to observe that individual factors, whether biological and/or anthropometric, can influence the feelings and attitudes manifested as a result of the adolescents' relationship with their body image.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Body dissatisfaction was present in the discourses of almost half of the adolescents in rural cities, especially in relation to fat, weight, and belly enlargement, but it was also observed that adolescents with adequate BMI felt dissatisfied because they wanted a thinner physical appearance. The practice of physical activity and diet were measures used by adolescents to reduce excess body weight and consequently feel more satisfied with their physical appearance.

Further studies in this line of investigation are needed to expand knowledge about the factors related to body dissatisfaction in order to qualify intervention programs focused on improving the health conditions of adolescents. Thus, physical education teachers, nutritionists and psychologists and other professionals will be able to learn more about the feelings and attitudes of adolescents in relation to their body image, aiming at intervention strategies to mitigate the negative effects triggered by excessive body dissatisfaction.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa de Minas Gerais – FAPEMIG, students and employees of state schools in the cities of Belmiro Braga, Goianá, Tabuleiro and Pequeri for accepting to participate in the research.

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