



ROLE OF SOCIAL PEER REJECTION BETWEEN BODY IMAGE AND MENTAL WELLBEING AMONG ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to examine the role of social peer rejection between body image and mental wellbeing. Sample consisted of adolescents from Sargodha Divisions in Punjab, Pakistan ($N = 250$). A cross-sectional research design and purposive sampling technique was used to collect data. The adolescent body image scale by Leone et al. (2014), Social peer rejection scale by Lev-Wiesel et al. (2006) and the Warwick-Edinburgh mental well-being scale by Warwick-Edinburgh (2006) were used.

The finding indicated that all variables were correlated in the expected directions and all social peer rejection moderates the relation of body image dissatisfaction and mental wellbeing. This investigation focused exclusively on adolescents. Creating spaces that value autonomy, respect, and diversity, we can leverage peer influence to drive beneficial outcomes. Ultimately, this empowers individuals to make informed decisions which reflect their values and goals. Future studies should incorporate a sample with more diverse characteristics and also need to develop intervention programs that will help adolescents to feel confident on their body image to avoid the feeling of rejection and improve mental wellbeing.

Key Words: Social peer rejection, body image dissatisfaction, mental wellbeing

Introduction

The purpose of the present study was to examine the role of social peer rejection between body image and mental wellbeing. Sample consisted of adolescents from Sargodha Divisions in Punjab, Pakistan ($N = 250$). A cross-sectional research design and purposive sampling technique was used to collect data. The adolescent body image scale by Leone et al. (2014), Social peer rejection scale by Lev-Wiesel et al. (2006) and the Warwick-Edinburgh mental well-being scale by Warwick-Edinburgh (2006) were used. The finding indicated that all variables were correlated in the expected directions and all social peer rejection moderates the relation of body image dissatisfaction and mental wellbeing. This investigation focused exclusively on adolescents. Creating spaces that value autonomy, respect, and diversity, we can leverage peer influence to drive beneficial outcomes. Ultimately, this empowers individuals to make informed decisions which reflect their values and goals. Future studies should incorporate a sample with more diverse characteristics and also need to develop intervention programs that will help adolescents to feel confident on their body image to avoid the feeling of rejection and improve mental wellbeing.

Adolescence presents unique prospects and challenges particularly in terms of body image and mental health. Adolescents are greatly shaped by their peers and social surroundings. Moreover, in a world that is dominated by technology and social media, they spend more time with peers than their families. They also form connections across various cultures and backgrounds (Javat Point, 2024). In this scenario body image concerns and peer rejection is becoming increasingly common. These factors significantly affect their mental wellbeing. This study found the impact of peer rejection on the relationship of body image and mental wellbeing. The term 'body image' refers to our thoughts and feelings about our physical selves. Many individuals face negative feelings about their bodies at some stage. When these feelings persist for a long time, they can lead to eating disorders and anxiety (Mental Health UK, n.d.). Stanborough (2020) described body image as a complex idea which goes beyond simply liking or disliking one's body. According to her, it includes various components: Self-Perception (how you view your body and how you think others perceive it), Physical Capabilities (your understanding of what your body can achieve), Spatial Awareness (your recognition of how your limbs move in space), Body Part Evaluation (how you assess specific parts of your body), Emotional Response (how you feel about your body and its parts), Size Estimation (your judgment of your body's size), Cultural Influence (the beliefs shaped by societal standards regarding body appearance), and Self-Assessment Behaviors (the actions you take to evaluate your body). In this regard, negative body image perceptions may begin at an early age. Many children in first and second grade express unhappiness with their bodies. This unhappiness shows their dissatisfaction and it often intensifies during puberty due to bodily changes (Hosseini & Padhy, 2023). Similarly, Stanborough (2020) highlighted that, strained relationships between parents and children can exacerbate body dissatisfaction. Besides, cultural influences play key role in shaping body image. Moreover, society's views impact a person's feelings about their body. For instance, the views of society on gender, age, abilities, size, skin color, illness, hair, modesty, and clothing. Likewise, educational experiences, family values, faith traditions, and peer influences, all contribute to body image formation. Moreover, with the complexity of body image and the societal pressures it is common for people to struggle with their perception of their bodies (Stanborough, 2020). While talking about mental wellbeing, it is often referred to as subjective wellbeing (Nortje, 2021). It can be defined as our personal perception and evaluation of our life (Keyes, 2006). Subjective wellbeing has two key aspects: hedonia and eudaimonia. Hedonia is linked with the idea of 'hedonism'. It focuses on seeking pleasure and happiness. Thus, it is related to the feeling of satisfaction with life and enjoying joyful experiences. However, eudaimonia is a more complex idea. It focuses on living a meaningful life and reaching one's potential. This aspect of wellbeing involves having a purpose, fulfilling the aims, helping others, accepting challenges, and finding direction. Both these aspects form a full understanding of mental wellbeing (Nortje, 2021). Nowadays, peer rejection during early adolescence is common. This experience can trigger aggressive actions which can result in further rejection from peers (Favre et al., 2024). Peer rejection is a broad concept which includes various behaviors that children use to exclude and harm

each other. These behaviors can range from direct forms of control and exclusion to more covert methods. For example, gossiping and rumor-spreading (Carey et al., 2009). A study showed that even the media doesn't exert the same level of influence on shaping negative body image as peer rejection does (Shen et al., 2022). Although many believe that media sets unrealistic ideals (Franchina & Coco, 2018; Watson, 2022), peer rejection plays a far more significant and impactful role in shaping negative body image (Shen et al., 2022). Moreover, sensitivity to social rejection is strongly connected with mental health issues. Depression, anxiety, loneliness, borderline personality disorder, and body dysmorphic disorder all have a meaningful connection with rejection sensitivity. It was highlighted by the researchers that individuals who are more sensitive to rejection can be more vulnerable to develop such disorders. They further noted that these associations were consistent across both the clinical and non-clinical populations. It suggested that rejection sensitivity impacts mental wellbeing in a broad range of individuals (Gao et al., 2017).

This study has explored peer rejection as a mediator and examined its influence on the relationship between body image and mental wellbeing among adolescents. It's empirically supported that peer rejection can intensify the negative impact of body dissatisfaction, further weakening the mental wellbeing (Jones et al., 2004). Therefore, this investigation added details by studying the relationship between body image and mental wellbeing. The identification of this mediation revealed the contribution of peer aspects to the development and persistence of mental health issues related to body image. These insights are valuable for creating effective interventions and support systems that address both body image concerns and the social factors which contribute to them. Present study used 'self enhancement theory' as a supporting theory. The formulation of self-enhancement theory is attributed to Arthur Aron and Elaine Aron (1986). This theory explains the universal motivation to maintain a positive self-image and how individuals seek favorable perceptions from others. In context of current study on peer rejection, body image, and mental wellbeing among adolescents, this theory explained why negative body image and peer rejection are particularly impactful. According to it, teens are likely to be deeply affected by peer feedback because they are motivated by a need to be positively perceived. Therefore, it makes peer rejection a critical factor in the link between body image and mental wellbeing (Jackson & Hogg, 2024). So, self-enhancement theory supports considering the emotional and psychological effects of peer rejection on body image and mental wellbeing.

Hypotheses

- H1. There will be significant negative relationship between body image dissatisfaction and mental wellbeing among adolescence
- H2. There will be significant negative relationship between social peer rejection and mental wellbeing among adolescence
- H3. Social peer rejection will mediate the relationship between body image dissatisfaction and mental wellbeing among adolescences.

Conceptual Framework

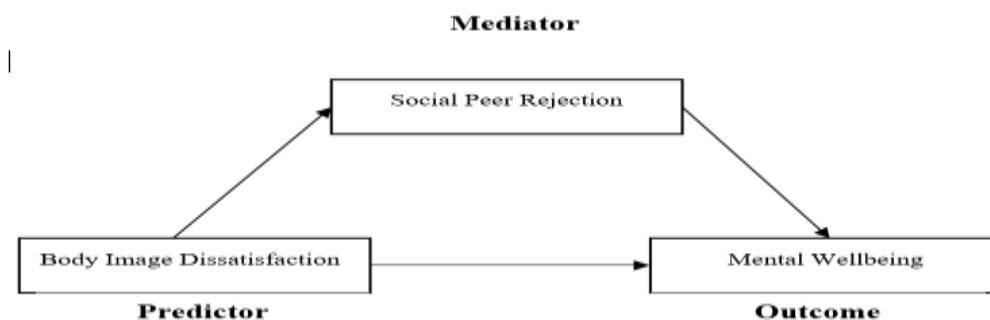


Figure: Conceptual framework illustrating the role of peer rejection in relationship of body image and mental wellbeing among adolescents

Methodology of the study

Nature of the Study

This study is based on descriptive quantitative approach. Co relational and Cross-sectional survey research design was used to collect the information to examine the role of peer social rejection in the relationship between body image and mental well-being.

Sample and Sampling Technique

Sample of the present study were consisted of adolescents from Sargodha Division Punjab, Pakistan (N = 250). Purposive sampling technique was used to collect the information. The sample included those who were adolescents, can read and understand English language, were not facing any serious psychological or physical health issues, and were willing to participate in the study. Informed consent was obtained from the participants before administering the questionnaires.

Data Measuring Tools

Adolescent body image scale was developed by Leone e al. (2014). It is consisted of 16 items. Scale is based on negatively phrased items which are rated on a 4-point Likert type response pattern ranging from (*strongly disagree*) = 1 to (*strongly agree*) = 4. Individual can minimum obtain 16 scores on this scale whereas maximum scores cannot exceed than 64. Obtained scores on this scale were interpreted in terms of low and high scores rather than cut off scores.

Social peer rejection scale was developed by Lev-Wiesl et al. (2006). It is consisted of 21 items. Scale is based on negatively phrased items which are rated on a 5-point likert type response pattern ranging from (*never happened*) = 1 to (*happened all the time*) = 5. Individual can minimum obtain 21 scores on this scale whereas maximum scores cannot exceed than 105. Obtained scores on this scale were interpreted in terms of low and high scores rather than cut off scores. Social peer rejection scale was developed by Lev-Wiesl et al. (2006)

The Warwick-Edinburgh mental well-being scale was developed by Warwick-Edinburgh (2006). It is consisted of 14 items. Scale is based on positively phrased items which are rated on a 5-point likert type response pattern ranging from (*none of the time*) = 1 to (*all of the time*) = 5. Individual can minimum obtain 14 scores on this scale whereas maximum scores cannot exceed than 70. Obtained scores on this scale were interpreted in terms of low and high scores rather than cut off scores.

Analyses

Multiple statistical analyses were conducted on SPSS. Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarized key variables. Correlation analysis explored the relationships between variables. Moderation model run to check the role social peer rejection between body image and mental wellbeing.

Results

Table 1 Mean, Standard deviation and Pearson correlation of Body Image, Social Rejection and Mental Health

Variables	M	SD	a	1	2	3
Body image dissatisfaction	40.24	14.45	.72	---	.45***	-.50***
Social peer rejection	62.28	23.15	.83		---	-.63***
Mental wellbeing	42.97	16.78	.79			---
Skewness				-.35	-.34	-.26

N = 250

*P < .05, ** P < .01, *** P < .001

Table 5 shows psychometric properties and Pearson correlation among body image dissatisfaction, social peer rejection and mental wellbeing. The reliability analysis indicates that the reliability

coefficient of body image dissatisfaction .72, social peer rejection .83 and mental wellbeing .79 which indicates satisfactory internal consistency. The values of skewness indicated that univariate normality is not problematic. The findings indicate that body image dissatisfaction have significant positive correlation with social peer rejection ($r = .45, p < .001$), and significant negative with mental wellbeing ($r = -.50, p < .001$). The findings indicate that social peer rejection have significant negative correlation with mental wellbeing ($r = -.63, p < .001$).

Table 2 Direct and Indirect Effect of Body Image Dissatisfaction on Mental Wellbeing through Social Peer Rejection

Variable	B	95% CI	SE B	B	R ²	ΔR ²
Step 1					.25	.25***
Constant	66.23***	[60.85, 71.62]	2.73			
Body image dissatisfaction	-.57***	[-.70, -.45]	.06	-.49***		
Step 2					.46	.21***
Constant	78.64***	[73.42, 83.86]	2.65			
Body image dissatisfaction	-.31***	[-.43, -.19]	.06	-.26***		
Social peer rejection	-.37***	[-.45, -.30]	.04	-.51***		

Note: N = 250, CI = confidence interval.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Table shows the impact of body image dissatisfaction and social peer rejection on mental wellbeing. In step 1, the R² value of .25 revealed that body image dissatisfaction explained 25% variance on mental wellbeing with $F(1, 248) = 145.94, p < .001$. The finding revealed that body image dissatisfaction negatively predicted mental wellbeing ($\beta = -.49, p < .001$). In step 2, the R² value of .46 revealed that the body image dissatisfaction and social peer rejection explained 46% variance on mental wellbeing with $F(2, 247) = 147.28, p < .001$. The finding revealed that body image dissatisfaction ($\beta = -.26, p < .001$) and social peer rejection ($\beta = -.56, p < .001$) negatively predicted mental wellbeing. The ΔR² value of .21 revealed 21% change in the variance of model 1 and model 2 with $\Delta F(1, 247) = 93.93, p < .001$. The regression weights for body image dissatisfaction subsequently reduced from Model 1 to Model 2 (-.49 to -.26) but remain significant, which confirmed that the social peer rejection partially mediates between grief and psychological wellbeing.

Discussion

Adolescence is a critical phase which is filled with major developmental shifts. In this phase of life, peer connections are heightened (Sawyer et al., 2018). During this stage, adolescents are highly influenced by their peers. Their experiences of being rejected can significantly impact their mental wellbeing (Maxwell, 2002; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2022). One of the primary challenges during adolescence is body satisfaction and self-acceptance. This phase is marked by adolescents' heightened desire for validation (Wichstrøm & Soest, 2016). Research shows that students having body image misperceptions or dissatisfaction with their weight are more likely to exhibit signs of common mental disorders (Moehlecke et al., 2020). A study found that having positive body attitudes and personality traits is connected with greater resilience. Whereas, negative body perceptions highlight that there is a need for specified interventions to support psychological wellbeing (Kumar et al., 2023). Similarly, an investigation emphasized the impact of appearance related conversations with friends. According to its findings, peer comments about appearance especially negative ones, can feel like rejection and contribute to body dissatisfaction. Such comments often involve comparisons and judgments which can lead to internalized appearance ideals and increased dissatisfaction. It happens especially when one feels they don't meet peer standards. The research study showed that peer conversation contributes to body dissatisfaction for both boys and girls (Jones et al., 2004).

Studies has demonstrated that negative body image can lead to different mental health issues, like anxiety, anorexia nervosa, binge eating disorder, bulimia nervosa, avoidant restrictive food intake disorder et cetera (Hosseini & Padhy, 2023). Sometimes, adolescents struggle with unrealistic standards of physical perfection. Eventually, their dissatisfaction leads them to mental health issues. A Nigerian study revealed that perceptions of physical appearance were crucial in shaping body image. The research study was aimed to assess body image perception and its link to mental health among secondary school students in Benin City. The findings indicated a notable association between body image perception and psychiatric morbidity (Otakpor & Ehimigbai, 2016). Studies confirm that adolescents with strong interpersonal skills may be less impacted by peer rejection. Similarly, teens who are socially adept tend to experience fewer negative mood changes if they face rejection. Hence, frequent peer rejection is often linked to inappropriate and maladaptive behaviors. Additionally, adolescents with good interpersonal skills typically enjoy better quality interactions and relationships with their peers. Thus, it suggests that adolescents with lower interpersonal skills can face more challenges in peer relationships (Masten et al., 2009). Conversely, some researchers also suggest that socially skilled adolescents are more aware of peer norms and influences because they have to maintain their popularity (Allen et al, 2005).

The results proved the hypotheses of the study as: there was a significant negative relationship between body image and mental wellbeing among adolescents, there was a significant positive relationship between body image and peer rejection among adolescents, and there was a significant negative relationship between peer rejection and mental wellbeing among adolescents. Similar to the current study's results, Abbasi and Zubair (2015) conducted a study on 'body image, self-compassion and psychological health', and found a positive relation between body image and mental wellbeing. The study found that students with a more positive body image also had higher levels of mental wellbeing. In addition, self-compassion was a key factor which mediated the relationship between body image and well-being. Thus, it means that students with higher self-compassion experienced better mental health outcomes related to their body image. Likewise, Ramos et al. (2019) examined the role of body image in mental health issues among Spanish adolescents. Their study found that 'body image satisfaction 'was the strongest predictor of internalizing mental health symptoms. In other words, adolescents who were less satisfied with their body image experienced more mental health problems.

People who experience rejection due to their physical appearance often have a lower body image (Vilhjalmsson et al., 2012). Correspondingly, exploration of the relationship between peer influences and body image dissatisfaction among adolescent girls found that peers and friends play a key role in shaping attitudes toward body image and weight loss behaviors (Paxton, 1996). Peer rejection in childhood has a lasting impact on mental wellbeing as children grow into adolescence (Coie et al., 1992). Besides, peer rejection in early childhood is linked to increased aggressive behavior and poorer psychological well-being. Especially it is involved in developing depressive symptoms in adolescence (Ialongo et al., 1998). In this way, adolescence is a critical part of life where peer rejection strongly affects mental wellbeing. Negative body image and peer rejection are closely linked, which can lead towards increased mental health issues. Therefore, developing strong interpersonal skills can help in reducing the impact of peer rejection on adolescents.

Conclusion

The current study was conducted to measure the role of social peer rejection between body image dissatisfaction and mental wellbeing. The mediation analysis and other analysis conducted through SPSS 23. Results suggested that high level of body image dissatisfaction and social peer rejection badly effect on mental wellbeing. Understanding the notions of rejection by peers and dissatisfaction with body is essential for identifying their influence on a person's psychological health and social cohesion. This insight would also help in encouraging positive peer connections and nurturing societies. Additionally, creating spaces that value autonomy, respect, and diversity, we can leverage peer influence to drive beneficial outcomes. Ultimately, this empowers individuals to make informed decisions which reflect their values and goals.

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