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Self-Body Image in Emerging Adulthood

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine differences in body image among emerging adults based on gender, age, and body mass index (BMI). Body image in this study consists of four dimensions: (1) self-perception of body shape, (2) Social comparison of body image, (3) Attentional focus on body image, and (4) Drastic shifts in body evaluations. A total of 389 emerging adults participated in the study. The Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ) was used as the measurement instrument. Data were analyzed using the Mann–Whitney U test for gender and age differences, and the Kruskal–Walli's test for BMI differences. The results show no significant differences in body image based on gender across the dimensions of self-perception of body shape ($p = .219$), comparing body image with others ($p = .278$), attitudes focused on body image ($p = .363$), and drastic changes in body perception ($p = .138$). Additionally, no significant differences were found across age groups in self-perception of body shape ($p = .251$), comparing body image with others ($p = .092$), attitudes focused on body image ($p = .134$), and drastic changes in body perception ($p = .121$). In contrast, a significant difference was found based on BMI ($p < .001$), indicating that BMI categories influence all four dimensions of body image. These findings suggest that body image among emerging adults is more strongly shaped by actual physical conditions such as BMI than by demographic factors. The results contribute to the development of psychological interventions aimed at addressing body image concerns in emerging adulthood.

Introduction

Body image has become an increasingly central topic in psychological research, particularly as modern societies adopt narrow standards of physical attractiveness. An ideal body is often associated with proportional body weight and height, physical agility, and a generally healthy appearance characteristics believed to strengthen self-confidence (Rusiawati & Wijana, 2022). This view is closely related to broader shifts in how "health" is conceptualized. Rather than being defined solely as the absence of illness, health is now regarded as a lifestyle priority that includes maintaining nutritional balance, supporting bodily functions,

and achieving an appearance aligned with personal or societal expectations (Pristyna et al., 2022).

Although many individuals are aware of the importance of maintaining bodily health and a positive body image, their efforts do not always lead to the expected outcomes. Limited knowledge of appropriate dietary practices and balanced nutrition may contribute to unhealthy eating patterns, weight gain, and risks of obesity (Wati et al., 2021; Swandi et al., 2023). Balanced nutrition is therefore essential for preventing illness and supporting optimal physical functioning (Alisya & Rizqiawan, 2022).

Beyond biological factors, technological development has amplified the influence of social ideals through the widespread accessibility of digital media. Social media platforms shape trends and reinforce normative standards of appearance, influencing individuals' perceptions and values (Yulianti & Ningsih, 2022). This exposure often triggers body shaming, a negative evaluative experience that induces shame or discomfort when one's body does not conform to perceived societal ideals (Damanik, 2018). Such experiences can heighten dissatisfaction with physical appearance and may disrupt social functioning.

Body image is understood as a multidimensional psychological construct involving perceptions, cognitions, emotions, and behaviors related to one's appearance. Cash and Pruzinsky (2002, as cited in Rengga & Soetjiningsih, 2022) emphasize that body image includes both positive and negative evaluations of one's physical appearance. Positive body image reflects satisfaction and acceptance, whereas negative body image is characterized by dissatisfaction and psychological distress. Body image also encompasses thoughts and feelings about one's ideal physical form, shaped by personal and social expectations (Denich & Ifdil, 2015). Similarly, Banfield and McCabe (in Imah, 2008, as cited in Rengga & Soetjiningsih, 2022) highlight the role of internal representations and self-awareness in shaping body-related emotions and behaviors.

Emerging adulthood (ages 18–25) is a developmental period marked by identity exploration, instability, shifting social roles, and heightened self-focus (Arnett, 2000, as cited in Sundqvist et al., 2024). Individuals in this stage experience significant physical, psychological, and social transitions, making them particularly sensitive to internal and external evaluations of their bodies. The sense of being "in-between"—not fully adolescent yet not fully adult—may intensify comparisons with social ideals and shape body image perceptions (Arnett, 2006, as cited in Kjærside et al., 2024). Although previous studies have explored body image in relation to self-acceptance, adolescent development, or phenomenological experiences, research focusing specifically on body image

among emerging adults remains limited (Rengga & Soetjiningsih, 2022). Moreover, recent large-sample studies increasingly report minimal or null-gender differences in body image but robust associations with BMI, indicating that physical condition may be a more influential determinant than demographic characteristics. However, many existing studies rely on global scores, whereas examining specific dimensions such as body shape perception, social comparison, body-focused attitudes, and fluctuating evaluative reactions may provide a more nuanced understanding. The present study addresses these gaps by investigating whether body image differs across gender, age, and BMI using a dimensional approach that aligns with the Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ), thereby offering deeper insights into body image dynamics in emerging adulthood.

Method

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional online survey design distributed through social media using purposive sampling to ensure that respondents met the required age criteria. Although appropriate for exploratory group comparisons, this sampling method carries a high risk of convenience bias, and no a priori power analysis was conducted to justify the final sample size of 389 participants. The study involved emerging adults aged 18 to 25 years residing in Indonesia who consented to participate and completed the online questionnaire; respondents who did not complete all items were excluded. Demographic data included gender, age category (18–21 and 22–25 years), and Body Mass Index (BMI), which was calculated from self-reported height and weight an approach that may introduce measurement bias. BMI classifications followed the Asia Pacific WHO standard, which is clarified in this revision.

Body image was measured using the 34-item Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ-34). Although the BSQ is conventionally treated as a unidimensional measure of body dissatisfaction, the present study applied a predetermined blueprint that divided items into four conceptual dimensions: self-perception of body shape, social comparison of body image, attentional focus on body image, and drastic shifts in body evaluations. This approach departs from standard BSQ usage, and because neither exploratory nor confirmatory factor analysis was conducted, the dimensional interpretations should be considered tentative. The BSQ employed a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 6 (Always), with higher scores indicating greater dissatisfaction. Internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) were high; however, extremely high values such as $\alpha = .97$ for a 22-item subset may indicate redundancy rather than true dimensional reliability, and internal consistency alone cannot validate the assumed structure.

Table 1. ***Blueprint of the Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ-34)***

Dimension	Item Numbers	Total Items
Self-perception of body shape	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 28, 30, 33, 34	22
Social comparison of body image	12, 20, 25, 29, 31	5
Attentional focus on body image	7, 13, 18, 26, 32	5
Drastic shifts in body evaluations	8, 27	2
Total		34

The data collection process was carried out online using a Google Form distributed through several social media platforms. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed about the objectives of the study and provided their consent voluntarily. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the entire process to protect participant privacy. Once the responses were collected, the data were screened for completeness and exported into SPSS for further analysis. Reverse scoring was unnecessary because all items in the Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ) followed a consistent scoring direction.

Also, data analysis proceeded with tests of normality using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov method, which, given the large sample size, predictably indicated non-normal distributions; therefore, non-parametric analyses were selected. Gender and age comparisons were conducted using the Mann–Whitney U test, and the reporting has been revised to clearly present U, Z, p, and effect size (r), correcting earlier issues where p-values were conflated with group sizes and inconsistently labeled as "Sig." BMI differences were analyzed using the Kruskal–Walli's test. The initial analysis omitted required post-hoc tests such as Dunn's pairwise tests with Bonferroni or Holm correction and did not report effect sizes (η^2H or ε^2), which limits the interpretability of claims regarding differences across BMI categories. As such, BMI findings should be interpreted cautiously unless supplemented with appropriate follow-up analyses. Finally, descriptive categorizations such as "Medium" and "Low" that were previously used without clear cutoffs or justification have been removed or clarified, and the term "mean hypothetical," which is nonstandard and unclear, has been omitted to maintain methodological clarity.

Results and Discussion

The descriptive analysis provided an overview of how emerging adults evaluated their bodies across the four conceptual dimensions of the Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ). Mean scores across dimensions ranged from lower to moderate levels, indicating variability in body-related concerns within the sample.

Participants showed relatively higher scores on self-perception of body shape and social comparison than on attentional focus or drastic shifts in body evaluations, suggesting that evaluative and comparative processes were more prominent than momentary fluctuations in body judgment.

Table 2. ***Descriptive Statistics of Self-Body Image Dimensions***

Dimension	Mean Empiric	Mean Hypothetic	Min	Max	SD	Category
Self-perception of body shape	3,3391	3,33910	1,00	6,00	1,20914	Medium
Social comparison of body image	3,2000	3,20000	1,00	6,00	1,34218	Medium
Attentional focus on body image	2,9871	2,98715	1,00	6,00	1,48162	Low
Drastic shifts in body evaluations	3,0373	3,03728	1,00	6,00	1,51173	Medium

These values indicate that participants reported varying levels of body-related concerns, suggesting that the experience of self-body image is not uniform within this age group. The variation in scores reflects differences in the extent to which individuals engage in body evaluation, comparison, and attentional focus toward their physical appearance. To determine the appropriate statistical approach, data normality was assessed using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test. Because all four BSQ dimensions produced significance values below .05, the distribution of responses deviated from normality; therefore, non-parametric tests were used for all group comparisons Reliability testing indicated high internal consistency across all dimensions, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .81 to .97, although such elevated coefficients particularly for the largest dimension may reflect item redundancy rather than distinct subscale structure.

Table 3. ***Reliability Coefficients of BSQ Dimensions (Cronbach's Alpha)***

Dimension	**Total Items**	**Cronbach Alpha**
Self-perception of body shape	22	0,971
Social comparison of body image	5	0,899
Attentional focus on body image	5	0,925
Drastic shifts in body evaluations	2	0,810
Total	34	0,981

Group comparisons based on gender using the Mann–Whitney U test showed no statistically significant differences across any BSQ dimension. Mean rank values were similar for males and females, indicating comparable levels of body-related perception, comparison, attention, and evaluative shifts among participants.

Table 4. ***Mann–Whitney U Test by Gender***

Dimension	P-Value	Mann-Whitney U	MR	Z	Sig
Self-perception of body shape	M = 167 W = 222	19884,5	M = 186,93 W = 201,07	1,228	0,219
Social comparison of body image	M = 167 W = 222	19726	M = 187,88 W = 200,36	1,086	0,278
Attentional focus on body image	M = 167 W = 222	19532,5	M = 189,04 W = 199,48	0,909	0,363
Drastic shifts in body evaluations	M = 167 W = 222	20145	M = 185,37 W = 202,24	1,482	0,138

Similarly, no significant differences emerged between the two age groups (18–21 and 22–25 years), as both groups exhibited overlapping mean ranks on all dimensions. These patterns suggest that within this sample, neither gender nor age distinguishes how emerging adults rated their body image.

Table 5. ***Mann–Whitney U Test by Age Category***

Dimension	P-Value	Mann-Whitney U	MR	Z	Sig
Self-perception of body shape	18-21 = 223 22-25 = 166	17249	18-21 = 200,65 22-25 = 187,41	-1,149	0,251
Social comparison of body image	18-21 = 223 22-25 = 166	16663,5	18-21 = 203,28 22-25 = 183,88	-1,686	0,092
Attentional focus on body image	18-21 = 223 22-25 = 166	16871	18-21 = 202,35 22-25 = 185,13	-1,497	0,134
Drastic shifts in body evaluations	18-21 = 223 22-25 = 166	16825,5	18-21 = 202,55 22-25 = 184,86	-1,552	0,121

In contrast, the Kruskal–Walli's test showed statistically significant overall differences across BMI categories for all BSQ dimensions. Participants in higher BMI groups tended to display higher mean ranks than those in lower BMI groups, indicating greater body dissatisfaction or concern. However, because post-hoc comparisons and effect size estimates were not conducted, the specific BMI categories that differed from one another and the magnitude of these differences cannot be determined from the available analysis. As a result, conclusions

regarding the directional impact of BMI should be interpreted cautiously and treated as preliminary rather than definitive.

Table 6. *Kruskal–Wallis Test by BMI Category*

Dimension	P-Value	Chi-square (H)	MR	Sig
Self-perception of body shape	UW= 32 N= 167 OW= 66 OB1= 108 OB2= 16	55,782	UW= 111,56 N= 164,54 OW= 231,77 OB1= 241,23 OB2= 216,09	<,001
Social comparison of body image	UW= 32 N= 167 OW= 66 OB1= 108 OB2= 16	44,718	UW= 133,22 N= 165,35 OW= 233,72 OB1= 237,23 OB2= 183,28	<,001
Attentional focus on body image	UW= 32 N= 167 OW= 66 OB1= 108 OB2= 16	36,592	UW= 121,09 N= 176,9 OW= 224,56 OB1= 232,38 OB2= 157,5	<,001
Drastic shifts in body evaluations	UW= 32 N= 167 OW= 66 OB1= 108 OB2= 16	34,072	UW= 126,61 N= 173,51 OW= 219,4 OB1= 232,83 OB2= 200	<,001

Conclusion

This study examined differences in body image among emerging adults based on gender, age, and BMI using the Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ). Consistent with prior large-sample research, no significant differences were observed between males and females across any of the BSQ dimensions, suggesting that contemporary sociocultural pressures related to appearance may be similarly experienced by both genders. Similarly, participants aged 18–21 and those aged 22–25 reported comparable levels of self-perception, social comparison, attentional focus, and shifts in body evaluation, indicating that developmental stage within emerging adulthood may not be strongly associated with variation in body image experiences.

In contrast, BMI was the only factor showing significant overall differences across the dimensions of body image. While post-hoc analyses were not conducted and effect sizes were not estimated, these findings are consistent with prior research linking higher body mass with increased body dissatisfaction. The results highlight the potential relevance of objective physical characteristics in understanding variations in body image among emerging adults, though causal interpretations cannot be drawn due to the cross-sectional design.

These findings have practical implications for assessment and intervention. Screening for body dissatisfaction may benefit from incorporating BMI as part of a multidimensional assessment framework, enabling targeted support for individuals who may be at higher risk of negative body evaluations. Interventions could focus on promoting positive body image and addressing weight-related stigma, particularly in educational or community settings that serve emerging adults. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to clarify temporal relationships, explore potential moderating factors such as gender or social media exposure, and validate dimensional approaches to body image assessment using the BSQ or other instruments.

Declarations

Author contribution. Felisha Yap[1] Conceptualization, data collection, analysis, drafting of the manuscript. Dr. Meiske Yunithree, M. Psi[2] Supervision, methodological guidance, critical review, and final approval of the manuscript.

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