

Gender Differences in Adolescents' Body Image in Indonesia's Island and Coastal Regions: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Background: Adolescents' body image perceptions are closely linked to their nutritional status and mental health. Gender has traditionally been viewed as a primary determinant of body image; however, recent empirical evidence—particularly from Indonesia's under-researched island and coastal regions—reveals inconsistent patterns, pointing to a clear gap regarding when and why gender differences in body image emerge or disappear across contexts. **Objective:** This narrative literature review aims to (1) map and synthesize existing evidence on gender differences in adolescents' body image perceptions across international and Indonesian contexts, and (2) identify contextual moderating factors—stage of puberty, geographic location, and sociocultural background—that explain the inconsistency of findings across studies, offering a novel comparative synthesis not addressed by prior reviews. **Methods:** The review was structured using the Population, Exposure, Outcome (PEO) framework, with a literature search conducted across PubMed/MEDLINE, Scopus, Google Scholar, and Garuda, yielding 14 key studies published between 2002 and 2025. **Results:** Most studies (12 out of 14) reported gender differences in body image, generally showing that females are more prone to body dissatisfaction. In contrast, two recent studies in Indonesia (Surabaya and Pekanbaru) found no significant differences, and evidence from the Sangihe Islands showed that girls remain more vulnerable to nutritional problems linked to negative body image. **Conclusions and recommendations:** Gender is not a single or universal determinant of adolescent body image. Future research and health promotion programs need to consider local sociocultural norms, stages of puberty, and geographic context, particularly for adolescents in Indonesia's island, coastal, and border regions.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a crucial transitional period marked by rapid physical, psychological, and social changes, including the development of perceptions regarding body shape and size, or body image (Tort-Nasarre et al., 2023). These perceptions have tangible consequences for adolescents' eating behaviors, nutritional status, and mental health (Bodega et al., 2023). In Indonesia, this issue is further complicated by the fact that adolescents face the dual burden of malnutrition—that is, conditions of both undernutrition and overnutrition occurring simultaneously within the same population (Maehara et al., 2019). The discrepancy between body image perceptions and actual nutritional status can drive unhealthy eating behaviors, whether through excessive dietary restriction or uncontrolled eating patterns (Ndagire et al., 2025).

Gender has traditionally been viewed as one of the strongest determinants of adolescents' body image perceptions (Avci & Akliman, 2018). A classic study of rural adolescents in the United States reported that adolescent girls tended to desire a thinner body and reported higher levels of body dissatisfaction than boys (Jones et al., 2007). This assumption has been widely adopted in gender-based health promotion programs in various countries, including Indonesia.

However, recent empirical evidence suggests a far more diverse pattern. In Pekanbaru, a study of 340 adolescents found no significant association between gender and body image (Tasman et al., 2023), and similar findings were reported among early adolescents aged 12–14 (Gualdi-Russo et al., 2024; Nariswari & Satiningsih, 2022). In contrast, a study in Martapura found that gender was significantly associated with adolescents' nutritional status (Khofifah et al., 2025). This inconsistency is also reflected in a study in the coastal area of Tabukan Tengah Subdistrict, Sangihe Islands, which found that adolescent girls are more vulnerable to nutritional problems, partly due to a tendency toward negative body image perceptions (Gansalangi et al., 2025). This research indicates that the patterns of the relationship between gender and both body image and nutritional status can vary greatly even within similar geographical contexts.

Comprehensive efforts to map the literature on body image among children and adolescents have been conducted previously (Zanlorenci et al., 2024), but have not specifically synthesized patterns of when and why gender differences in body image emerge or disappear across various geographic and cultural contexts. Other studies have also shown that gender differences in adolescents' psychological distress may disappear after controlling for body image variables, indicating that body image may act as a mediator rather than merely being positively correlated with gender (Siegel, 2002).

This gap is particularly relevant given that most evidence on body image comes from urban populations or developed countries. Meanwhile, research on Indonesia's coastal, island, and border regions—which have distinct characteristics regarding access to information, local cultural norms, and patterns of social interaction—remains very limited. Taken together, these observations point to a clear research gap: to date, no narrative or systematic review has specifically synthesized when and why gender differences in adolescent body image appear consistently in some contexts yet disappear in others—particularly within Indonesia's underrepresented island, coastal, and border populations, where such patterns have never been the explicit focus of a dedicated literature synthesis.

Given this gap, this study aims to (1) map and synthesize existing evidence on gender differences in adolescents' body image perceptions across international and Indonesian contexts, and (2) identify the contextual moderating factors—namely stage of puberty, geographic location, and sociocultural background—that account for the inconsistency of these findings across studies.

The novelty of this review lies in its explicit, comparative focus on the inconsistency of gender differences in body image—a dimension that previous reviews have not directly addressed. Unlike the

broadier scoping review by Zanlorenci et al. (2024), which mapped body image literature across multiple dimensions (measurement instruments, interventions, social media influence, and sociodemographic factors) without isolating gender as a central axis of analysis, this review specifically interrogates why gender operates as a robust determinant in some settings but not in others, with particular attention to Indonesia's island and coastal adolescent populations—a context that remains virtually absent from the existing body image literature. In doing so, this review offers a novel contribution by proposing contextual moderation, rather than gender alone, as a more accurate framework for understanding adolescent body image, while also generating practical recommendations for gender-inclusive, context-sensitive health promotion strategies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article was written using a narrative literature review approach. This research method identifies, summarizes, and synthesizes findings from previous studies in a thematic narrative to build a comprehensive understanding of a topic (Sukhera, 2022).

Research Framework

This study was conducted using the Population, Exposure, Outcome (PEO) framework to guide the direction of literature search and synthesis. The target population consists of adolescents aged 10–19 years; the exposure of interest is gender (male vs. female), with puberty stage, geographic location (urban, rural, islands), and sociocultural background examined as moderator variables. At the same time, the outcome under study is body image perception or the level of body dissatisfaction.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted in the PubMed/MEDLINE, Scopus databases, supplemented by Google Scholar and Garuda to access Indonesian national literature. The keywords used included combinations of the terms “body image,” “body image perception,” or “body dissatisfaction”; “adolescent,” “teenager,” or “remaja”; as well as “gender,” “sex,” or “gender difference,” linked using the Boolean operators AND/OR (Carcassi & Sbardolini, 2023). The search focused on articles published between 2000 and 2025 to ensure the relevance of the findings to the context of today's adolescents, while still allowing for the inclusion of classic reference studies that remain conceptually relevant and are frequently cited.

Literature Selection Criteria

The literature selected for review consists of scientific articles published in peer-reviewed journals that discuss adolescents' body image perceptions, include comparisons or explicit discussions related to sex, and are relevant to contextual factors (puberty, geography, sociocultural factors) that influence variations in findings. Thematically irrelevant articles, for which the full text was unavailable, or that were non-scientific publications (opinion pieces, popular news articles, blogs) were not included in this

review. The final selection of literature was based on a qualitative assessment of each article's relevance and contribution to the study's research questions, rather than on quantifying the number of articles screened at each stage, as is commonly done in narrative literature reviews (King et al., 2020).

Literature Analysis and Synthesis

The selected articles were reviewed and synthesized thematically, grouped based on patterns of findings (consistently showing gender differences vs. not showing gender differences) as well as research context (geographic, developmental stage, and cultural background). Synthesis in a narrative literature review is used to construct a narrative that explains patterns of inconsistency in findings across studies and to identify relevant contextual moderating factors (Ahmad, 2025).

RESULTS

The literature review and synthesis identified 14 key studies relevant to gender differences in adolescents' body image perceptions, spanning 2002 to 2025 and across various geographic contexts (the United States, Europe, South America, Africa, and Indonesia). A chronological summary of the studies is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Chronological Summary of Studies on Gender Differences in Adolescent Body Image

Author, Year	Context/Location	Population and Design	Key Findings Related to Gender
Siegel (2002)	Los Angeles, AS	675 adolescents; 13-month longitudinal study	Women are less satisfied with their bodies; changes in body image have a stronger impact on symptoms of depression in women.
Jones et al. (2007)	Virginia, AS (rural)	384 adolescents; cross-sectional	Women want a smaller body and are more dissatisfied; men tend to want a larger, more muscular body.
(Avci & Akliman, 2018)	Bey pazari, Ankara, Turkey	710 high school students; scan design	Women's body image is far more negative; men report higher levels of satisfaction with nearly all parts of their bodies.
(Maehara et al., 2019)	Klaten and West Lombok, Indonesia	2,160 adolescents; household survey	Being female is associated with a 58% lower risk of thinness compared to males.
Soares Filho et al. (2021)	São Luís, Maranhão, Brasil	2,162 adolescents; cross-sectional	Dissatisfaction due to being overweight is more common among women (66.54%); dissatisfaction due to being underweight is higher among men (59.76%).
Nariswari & Satiningsih (2022)	Surabaya, Indonesia	168 early adolescents (ages 12–14)	There was no significant difference in body image between genders during early adolescence ($p=0.078$).
Tasman et al. (2023)	Pekanbaru, Indonesia	340 high school students; descriptive correlation	There was no significant association between gender and body image ($p=0.119$).
Bodega et al. (2023)	International	Adolescents aged 10–18; a systematic review of 30 articles	Women tend to overestimate their weight (they want to be thin); men tend to underestimate it (they want to be muscular).

Tort-Nasarre et al. (2023)	Catalonia, Spain	9 teenagers + teachers/parents; qualitative	Women are more obsessed with their appearance; overweight men feel very embarrassed.
Gualdi-Russo et al. (2024)	Ferrara, North Italian	209 early adolescents; 3-year longitudinal study	Body dissatisfaction is similar in both genders, but women prefer a slender figure, while men increasingly prefer a muscular figure as they get older.
Zanlorenci et al. (2024)	International	Scoping review: 41 reviews	Gender is an important variable; being female is consistently associated with higher levels of body image dissatisfaction.
Khofifah et al. (2025)	Martapura, South Kalimantan	103 adolescents; cross-sectional	A significant association between gender and nutritional status: men are at greater risk of obesity.
Ndagire et al. (2025)	Kampala, Uganda	1,043 children and adolescents (ages 8–19)	Dissatisfaction was highest among women (15.29% desired a slimmer body vs. 8.06% of men).
Gansalangi et al. (2025)	Central Tabukan Coast, Sangihe Islands, Indonesia	127 adolescents (ages 10–18); cross-sectional	Women are more vulnerable to nutritional problems, partly because they tend to have a negative body image.

Based on a thematic synthesis of these 14 studies, the following three main patterns were identified.

Dominant Pattern: Consistently Significant Gender Differences

Nine of the 14 studies reviewed consistently reported significant gender differences in body image perceptions, with a uniform trend: adolescent girls generally reported higher levels of body dissatisfaction than boys. This pattern was found across continents and decades, ranging from a longitudinal study in Los Angeles (Siegel, 2002) and a rural study in Virginia (Jones et al., 2007), to recent studies in Turkey (Avci & Akliman, 2018), Brazil (Soares Filho et al., 2021), and Uganda (Ndagire et al., 2025). A large-scale synthesis further confirms the consistency of this pattern through a scoping review of 41 systematic reviews (Zanlorenci et al., 2024).

A Minor but Consistent Pattern: No Significant Gender Differences in Recent Indonesian Studies

In contrast to the dominant pattern described above, two studies conducted in Indonesia between 2022 and 2023 found no significant gender differences in body image perceptions (Nariswari & Satiningsih, 2022; Tasman et al., 2023)—the former among early adolescents in urban Surabaya and the latter among high school students in Pekanbaru. Although conducted in different urban contexts, both studies reached the same conclusion.

Nuances in the Direction of Dissatisfaction: Not Merely the Presence or Absence of Differences

Several studies indicate that gender differences in body image are not always a matter of “yes” or “no” differences, but rather differ in the direction of dissatisfaction. Soares Filho et al. (2021) found that women more commonly experience dissatisfaction due to being overweight, while dissatisfaction due to being underweight is actually higher among men. A similar pattern was found in a systematic review by Bodega et al. (2023), in which women tended to want to be thinner while men tended to want to be more muscular. Gualdi-Russo et al. (2024) even found that levels of body dissatisfaction were actually

similar across both genders, but preferences for desired body shapes differed in direction. These nuances are also relevant to the Indonesian context, where a study in the coastal region of the Sangihe Islands found that women are more vulnerable to nutritional problems related to a tendency to have negative body image perceptions (Gansalangi et al., 2025), underscoring that the patterns of gender relations and body image in Indonesia's island regions still require more in-depth study.

DISCUSSION

A synthesis of the 14 studies reviewed indicates that the relationship between gender and adolescents' body image perceptions is far more complex than the simplistic assumption that girls are always more vulnerable to body dissatisfaction. The three patterns identified in the Research Findings section will be discussed in depth, in relation to relevant theoretical frameworks and their implications for research and practice in Indonesia.

Explaining Dominant Patterns through a Sociocultural Perspective

The consistent finding that females are more vulnerable to body dissatisfaction across nine of the 14 studies—spanning continents and two decades (Avci & Akliman, 2018; Jones et al., 2007; Ndagire et al., 2025; Siegel, 2002; Soares Filho et al., 2021), aligns with the sociocultural perspective that positions the pressure of beauty standards based on a thin ideal as a social pressure historically experienced more dominantly by women through the media, family, and peer groups (Roberts et al., 2022). Zanolenci et al. (2024), through a synthesis of 41 systematic reviews, confirmed that this pattern is highly robust globally.

Why Is This Pattern Inconsistent in Indonesia?

The “non-significant” findings in two recent Indonesian studies (Nariswari & Satiningsih, 2022; Tasman et al., 2023) raise an important question: why isn't the dominant global pattern fully replicated in the Indonesian context? One possible explanation is local sociocultural norms that differ from dominant Western body standards. In communities with low socioeconomic status or limited access to media, fuller bodies have historically been associated with fertility and well-being (Boothroyd et al., 2016). In contrast, more Westernized contexts tend to idealize thin bodies (Swami et al., 2010). Cross-cultural evidence even suggests that differences in body ideals are now determined more by socioeconomic status than by the Western-non-Western dichotomy alone (Swami, 2015). Another relevant explanation is the lower level of social media exposure among non-urban populations, given that exposure to media promoting the thin body ideal has been shown to correlate with body dissatisfaction and the internalization of the thin ideal among women (Grabe et al., 2008; Mingoia et al., 2017). However, findings from the coastal region of the Sangihe Islands (Gansalangi et al., 2025) — which, in fact, show that women are more vulnerable to nutritional problems related to negative body image perceptions—indicate that this “insignificant” pattern is not universally applicable even within

the context of non-urban Indonesia; thus, the sociocultural interpretation above remains a hypothesis requiring further empirical testing, not a definitive conclusion.

The Direction of Body Dissatisfaction as an Overlooked Dimension

Findings from Bodega et al. (2023); Gualdi-Russo et al. (2024); Soares Filho et al. (2021) reveal a dimension often overlooked in simple statistical significance analyses: the direction of body dissatisfaction differs between genders, even though the levels may be similar—women tend to desire a thinner body, while men tend to desire a more muscular body (Perrett et al., 2024). Studies that merely test for the general presence or absence of gender differences risk missing these nuances—which are particularly relevant in the Indonesian context, where the country faces the double burden of malnutrition, and where adolescent boys and girls may experience body image distortions in different directions yet are equally at risk for unhealthy eating behaviors (Rachmi et al., 2021; Roshita et al., 2021).

Study Limitations

This review has limitations: as a narrative literature review, the selection of studies did not fully follow a systematic search protocol, potentially introducing selection bias (Brignardello-Petersen et al., 2025); heterogeneity in the body image measurement instruments across studies limits direct comparisons (Kling et al., 2019); and most studies are cross-sectional, so they cannot explain causal relationships between gender, developmental stage, and body image perceptions (Mahdifar et al., 2024).

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this review indicate that body image health promotion programs in Indonesia, particularly in island and non-urban areas, need to consider a gender-inclusive approach rather than the gender-specific approaches commonly adopted from Western models. Future research is recommended to: (1) include an analysis of the direction of body dissatisfaction, rather than focusing solely on statistical significance; (2) consider geographic scale as an explicit methodological variable in studies of heterogeneous island regions; and (3) conduct longitudinal studies to understand the role of the stage of puberty as a potential moderator that is stronger than gender itself.

CONCLUSION

A literature review of 14 international and national studies indicates that the relationship between gender and adolescents' body image perceptions is complex and inconsistent. The majority of the global literature consistently finds that females are more prone to body dissatisfaction; however, this pattern is not fully replicated in recent studies in Indonesia, which instead show no significant gender differences. This review also reveals that gender differences in body image are not always reflected solely by the presence or absence of statistical significance; rather, they can manifest through different directions of body dissatisfaction between males and females. Furthermore, findings from the coastal regions of the

Sangihe Islands indicate that women may still be more vulnerable to nutrition-related issues stemming from negative body-image perceptions, underscoring that the archipelagic context in Indonesia cannot be generalized into a single, uniform pattern.

Based on these findings, gender cannot be treated as a singular or universal determinant in understanding adolescents' body image perceptions, particularly within the Indonesian context. Contextual factors such as local sociocultural norms, the geographic scale of the research, and the potential role of the developmental stage of puberty need to be taken into account when designing future research and health promotion programs on adolescent body image in Indonesia, particularly for populations in island and non-urban areas that have been under-researched.

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