

# DEVELOPING A POSITIVE BODY IMAGE AMONG CHILDREN: A PROPOSAL FOR AN EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION

## SVILUPPO DI UN'IMMAGINE CORPOREA POSITIVA TRA I BAMBINI: PROPOSTA PER UN INTERVENTO EDUCATIVO

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### ABSTRACT

Social media impact body perception because it conveys unattainable appearance models vulnerable to developing body image dissatisfaction.

Based on a qualitative study carried out among 111 primary school students, the Authors will propose the framework for an educational intervention aimed to enhance some critical aspects of body image, such as self-awareness, emotional literacy, natural body-perceived body, dysmorphophobia, and gender.

I social media trasmettono modelli di apparenza irraggiungibili vulnerabili per lo sviluppo di insoddisfazione corporea.

Sulla base di uno studio qualitativo condotto su 111 studenti della scuola primaria, gli Autori proporranno il quadro per un intervento educativo volto a valorizzare alcuni aspetti critici dell'immagine corporea, come la consapevolezza di sé, l'alfabetizzazione emotiva, corpo reale-corpo percepito, dismorfofobia e genere.

### KEYWORDS

Body image, children, educational intervention, primary school  
Immagine corporea, bambini, intervento educativo, scuola primaria

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## Introduction

Body image is the mental representation of individuals of their bodies, irrespective of their appearance. Body image is a complex construct which includes cognitive, perceptual, affective, and behavioural dimensions; thus, it refers to thoughts, feelings, evaluations, and behaviours related to one's body. (Cash, 2012).

Furthermore, body image is defined by how people experience their embodiment, especially, but not exclusively, their physical appearance. The appearance-related experiences consist of a perceptual component that has to do with the accuracy with which a person can judge the dimensions of their physical appearance (mental representations of one's size, shape, and facial characteristics), and an attitudinal component which captures the feelings that a person has about their body size and shape. Thus, body image attitudes can be considered dispositional ways of thinking (cognitions), feeling (affect or emotions), and behaving about one's physical appearance (Cash, 2012; Irvine et al., 2019).

Disturbances in body image perception are one of the central aspects of one's mental health. Distortions in body perception are displeasing and can have tragic consequences. Poor body image can impact one's general well-being and it can exert a significant influence on self-esteem, mood, skills and social functioning (Hosseini & Padhy, 2022).

Body image is one of the multiple components of personal identity and can be considered a multidimensional concept. The intricacy of body image can be appreciated by carefully analysing its components. These components belong to everyone, regardless of the healthy or unhealthy perception of one's body, and include:

- Cognitive: thoughts and beliefs about own body
- Perceptual: perception of the size and shape of own body and body parts
- Affective: feelings about own body
- Behavioral: the actions that people perform to check on, tend to, alter, or conceal their body (Yamamotova et al., 2017).

Body image distortion is a multifaceted condition that includes different body image elements. This condition can involve the cognitive, perceptual, and affective components of body image. The cognitive component can be interpreted as the mental representation of the body and thoughts and beliefs about body shape and

appearance. The perceptive component includes identifying and estimating the body, and it evaluates how accurately people estimate their weight, size, and shape about their actual proportions. The affective component also involves how people feel about their bodies, including their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with them (Gaudio et al., 2014).

Body image disturbance can show up as a disturbance of percept (i.e., distortion) and concept (i.e., body dissatisfaction). The inaccuracy in estimating one's physical size is a sign of perceptual disturbance. Body dissatisfaction includes the attitudinal or affective perception of own body and negative feelings and cognitions. Body dissatisfaction is attributable to a discrepancy between the perception of body image and its idealized image. Body image disturbances also manifest themselves at the behavioural level, such as body avoidance, body checking, or diet (Lewer et al., 2017).

## **1. Body image development**

The development and maintenance of body image are influenced by intricate interactions among neurophysiological, sociocultural, and cognitive factors. A variety of elements such as gender, fashion, peer groups, educational and familial influences, evolving socialization, and physical changes (hair growth, acne, breast development, menstruation) make children vulnerable to the development of negative perceptions of their bodies (King, 2018).

Children in the early years become aware of their gender. Once children become conscious of their body appearance, they try to manipulate their parents to receive admiration and assent. This need for assent grows when starting school, exhibiting a need for social approval. Cash assumes body image as a learned behaviour (*Body image*, 2011). During growth and socialization, children begin to compare themselves with others, especially regarding appearance. By the age of 6, body shape becomes downright important (especially muscle and weight) (King, 2018). Adolescence represents the transition from childhood to adulthood and is associated with physical and social changes, so it is a critical period in body image development. Parents exert a significant impact on their children's body image if they send sociocultural or critical messages about body appearance ideals to them; therefore, they have a considerable influence on the potential beginning of body dissatisfaction in their children. Although in younger children, the predominance of families on body image development is more relevant than friends, the role of

parents decreases as children get older and peer responses become more important than families (Bearman et al., 2006).

## **2. Factors Affecting Body Image and Body Image Disorders**

To date, various factors that influence body image have been identified such as BMI, family, peers, society, media and social media, culture, self-esteem, psychopathology, gender, age, education level, physical activity, and weight control behaviour (Hosseini & Padhy, 2022). In according to one social influence model from the name "Tripartite Influence Model" they have been highlighted three social influences (peers, parents, and media) have a direct impact on body dissatisfaction as well as an indirect impact through two variables: internalization of the social ideal body type and appearance comparison. Among these, social media assumes a critical role in body image disorders (J. K. Thompson et al., 1999).

- Family

Family plays a fundamental role in the development of children's body image, body size attitudes and food intake patterns. Family exerts a prominent and continuing influence, as children develop a need for their parents' admiration and assent. Parents can increase or decrease the risk of body image development and food intake issues in their children, directly or indirectly. Parents who pay particular attention to weight control behaviours have a significant prevalence in children's body satisfaction. Direct reactions from parents can include commenting on a child's weight or appearance, joking about a child's weight, pressuring a child to lose weight, or encouraging a child to diet. Indirect parental behaviours are activities or reactions that are not precisely planned to influence the child, including parental negative comments about their bodies and parental involvement in excessive exercise or diet. These behaviours have the potential to model self-criticism and inspire children to judge themselves or others based on appearance and stress the value of adhering to social and cultural ideals of body size. Several other relative properties can also help body satisfaction, such as the socioeconomic status of the family nucleus and living in giant cities (Damiano et al., 2015; Shoraka et al., 2019).

- Social Pressures

Although body image is a mental concept, it is observable as a social phenomenon. Both women and men attempt to present and maintain themselves in socially

desirable body shapes. Social assent is a critical component of the lifecycle and is essential to well-being. In response to the need for social acceptance, people develop behavioural responses that enhance their social desirability. Through the social learning process, individuals observe, imitate, and reinforce their behaviour to increase the possibility of social acceptance; this is particularly important in adolescents for attaining acceptance in peer groups (Jang et al., 2018; Shoraka et al., 2019). Weight-related bullying throughout youth significantly contributes to the development of negative body perceptions and body dissatisfaction. The pressure to lose weight or gain muscle that pre-adolescents and adolescents experience from the social environment in which they are placed is linked to body dissatisfaction (Xu et al., 2010).

Given the growing influence of social media use on body image and body image disorders, this issue will be discussed in detail in the next paragraph.

### **3. Social media influence on Body Image and Body Image Disorders**

Social media is mainly described as those forms of electronic communication through which users create personal profiles wherewith they can share information, ideas, personal messages, opinions, and other content such as pictures or videos (*Social media Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster, s.d.*); viewing others' profiles people can give or receive different sorts of feedback (e.g., likes or comments) (Perloff, 2014).

Although social media use has several benefits as well as optimizing communication, maintaining existing relationships, and preserving updated information (Horzum, 2016), a minority of its users seem to be unable to control themselves and inappropriate use of social networks entails a variety of mental health problems, such as body image disorders. In support of this it can be stated that social media has become increasingly popular worldwide, and nowadays, messages regarding appearance ideals are delivered through it. Due to its continuous availability (e.g., on smartphones), the influences of social media on body perception may be more potent than traditional forms of media. Several studies have suggested that active social media engagement may negatively influence body image and appears to be linked with body dissatisfaction and eating disorders (Griffiths et al., 2018). On social media, users post their photographs and view photos of others; physical appearance is an important factor in these activities.

The appearance models conveyed by social networks are difficult to achieve (McLean et al., 2019) because the contents posted online are often carefully selected or modified using beauty filters to maximize attractive self-presentations (Yau & Reich, 2019). A beauty filter is a photo-editing tool that allows users to smooth out their skin, enhance their lips and eyes, contour their nose, and alter their jawline and cheekbones; therefore, it has considered normal, and it is usual for people to use beauty filters to alter their appearance and hide their imperfections. Besides receiving messages and comments about their bodies on social media, users see carefully modified and selected social media imagery including depictions of thin bodies (thinspiration) or lean and muscular bodies (fitspiration). Users might frequently compare themselves with appearance ideals conveyed to them through social media and internalize these ideals as the standards for their bodies. When their physical appearance is not on par with the internalized expectations, this may result in body dissatisfaction. This concept is particularly important in adolescents who spend more time and receive more feedback about their appearance on social media. Given the growing use of the internet and social media by pre-adolescents, this phenomenon can be considered anticipated in childhood (de Vries et al., 2019).

#### **4. Critical aspects for the development of a positive body image**

Based on a qualitative study carried out among 111 primary school students, recruited in a primary school in Cassino (Italy), the Authors will propose the framework for an educational intervention aimed to enable the development and maintenance of a positive body image among children. For achieving this goal some critical influencing factors which can be enhanced have been highlighted. Among these, they may be mentioned the following: self-awareness, emotional literacy, the relationship between the natural body and the perceived body, dysmorphophobia, and gender.

These elements will be explained in detail individually below.

- Self-awareness

Self-awareness can be conceptualized as involving expert knowledge of oneself as a defined entity, without independence from other individuals, unified, consistent, and stable over time and space. Self-awareness further enables one to be the

subject of one's attention (Legrain et al., 2011). Moreover, self-awareness refers to the ability to become consciously aware of one's own bodily and mental states (e.g., perceptions, attitudes, opinions, intentions for actions, emotions) as belonging to the self (Geangu, 2008).

The "body awareness" construct has been described as "an innate tendency of our organism to self-organize and to feel the unity with oneself" (Mehling et al., 2012). Body awareness is more than the simple focus on one's own body as it needs to recognize the interaction between body states and the cognitive appraisal of those body states. Therefore, it can be defined as the subjective perception of one's own body and the ability to accurately identify the internal body states (Farb et al., 2015).

Body awareness is a key factor for affect regulation and for the sense of self and it is strictly dependent on mental processes, including attitudes, affects, beliefs, memories, and cultural imprints (Damasio, 2003). It seems that those mental processes have the possibility of modifying the subjective experience of body parts and the body in general. It can be ensured that body awareness has a decisive influence on body image as it involves cognitive, emotional, and cultural aspects (Boldi & Rapp, 2022).

- Gender

There exist differences between men and women regarding developing a positive body image and concerns about body satisfaction. It has been argued that mass media is a key factor in the development of body image dissatisfaction as it represents the main tool containing idealistic representations of the body ideals with which men and women are constantly confronted (Brennan et al., 2010). Thus, awareness and internalization of society's appearance models may contribute to body image dissatisfaction. Several studies highlight that a perceived lack of muscle represents a central factor in male body image dissatisfaction whereas women's determining element is perceived excess weight (Brennan et al., 2010). These findings are consistent with media messages that emphasize a thin ideal for women (Morrison et al., 2003) while promoting a V-shaped figure for men, with emphasis on having a larger, more muscular upper body (Furnham et al., 2002). Differences between men and women continue to be evident regarding concerns about weight regulation and dieting practices. Men are more likely to increase physical activity as their method of dieting, whereas women dieters are more likely to restrict food

intake. These differing weight loss practices suggest that when men diet, they often intend to enhance their body build by becoming more muscular, rather than thinner as women dieters aim to do (Pingitore et al., 1997).

Nowadays, body image disturbance and poor self-esteem appear to develop concurrently and precociously in young boys and girls. Compared to boys, girls are more concerned about their body weight and are more likely to be influenced by peers, mass media, parents, and other sociocultural factors that promote thinness ideal models, even if they are of normal weight. This may be the reason for girls' higher prevalence of body dissatisfaction (Ren et al., 2018). Although there are differences in male and female body ideals, excessive preoccupation with and internalization of stereotypical appearance models leads both genders to body dissatisfaction. Lastly, not only does body image dissatisfaction affect one's behaviours, but it also affects how one feels about oneself. It is associated with other mental problems such as depression, low self-esteem, feelings of shame, body surveillance, diminished quality of life, anxious self-focus and avoidance of body exposure (Brennan et al., 2010).

- Emotional literacy

As mentioned earlier, many critical elements play a key role in the onset of body image disturbances. Two factors known to be of importance for mental health, but which have received little attention about body image are emotional intelligence and emotion regulation. Emotion regulation (ER) refers to the processes by which emotional experiences are evaluated, monitored, maintained, and modified (R. A. Thompson, 1994). Therefore, the construct of emotion regulation includes the ability to adaptively recognize and cope with negative emotions. Emotional intelligence (EI) is considered as: "the ability to perceive accurately, appraise and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth" (Mayer, s.d.).

Higher levels of EI are associated with more positive attitudes, more successful relationships, greater adaptability, higher orientation towards positive values as well as fewer difficulties in expressing, evaluating, and regulating emotions. Aspects of psychological well-being, such as life satisfaction and happiness, are related to



EI, as well as higher levels of subjective physical health (Akerjordet & Severinsson, 2007).

Low levels of EI predicted body dissatisfaction as well as eating disorder symptoms in preadolescents and adolescents. At the same time, deficits in various aspects of emotional intelligence are positively associated with binge eating, body weight, and body shape problems. Hence, this suggests an indirect interaction between emotion processing and body perception/image (Cuesta-Zamora et al., 2018). What has just been highlighted shows the correlation between emotional intelligence and body image.

- **Dysmorphophobia**

Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) is a chronic mental condition characterized by a preoccupation with perceived defects or flaws in physical appearance that are unobservable or appear insignificant to others. The most affected body parts of concern are the skin, hair, or nose, but any part of the body may be involved and often the preoccupation interests several body parts. This preoccupation entails significant distress and dysfunction, time-consuming repetitive behaviours (i.e., mirror checking, camouflaging), and a high degree of avoidance. Distressing, recurrent, and intrusive thoughts related to appearance are reported to be common in BDD as well as feelings of shame, anxiety, hopelessness, anger, and guilt. BDD is typically a disorder of adolescence, prepubertal onset is also possible; this disorder is a serious psychiatric condition causing a severe impact on global functioning and it appears to be connected to past or current self-harm, suicide attempts, current desire for cosmetic procedures and complete school dropout (Rautio et al., 2022).

- **Relation between the natural body and perceived body**

The continuous use of social media and the dissemination of altered virtual body images by pre-adolescents and adolescents highlights a new form of dualism between the virtual and the real body. The appearance comparison processes that take place via social media and the constant engagement and exposure to content promoting specific societal appearance standards induce preadolescents to have an excessive investment in their virtual body and social reputation so much so that they cannot differentiate the “real body” from the “virtual body”. Virtual reality is

completely merged with real life; therefore, the virtual body is considered part of its existence. Individuals who strongly invest in their appearance and their social reputation, tend to engage in appearance-related comparison. Social media use facilitates comparisons and is likely to promote the internalization of idealized body image, leading to less body satisfaction over time (Digennaro, 2022).

## **Conclusions**

Body image is the mental representation of individuals of their bodies, irrespective of their appearance. Body image is a complex construct which includes cognitive, perceptual, affective, and behavioural dimensions; thus, it refers to thoughts, feelings, evaluations, and behaviours related to one's body (Cash, 2012). Disturbances in body image perception are one of the central aspects of one's mental health. This condition can involve the cognitive, perceptive, and affective components of body image (Gaudio et al., 2014).

According to the "Tripartite Influence Model," they have been highlighted three social influences (peers, parents, and media) have a direct impact on body dissatisfaction as well as an indirect impact through two variables: internalization of the social ideal body type and appearance comparison. Among these, social media assumes a critical role in body image disorders (J. K. Thompson et al., 1999). Social media represents a key influencing factor in the development of a positive body image because it conveys appearance ideals that are internalized as a standard for users' bodies. When an individual physical appearance is not on par with the internalized expectations, this may result in body dissatisfaction. This concept is particularly important in adolescents who spend more time and receive more feedback about their appearance on social media. Given the growing use of the internet and social media by pre-adolescents, this phenomenon can be considered anticipated in childhood (de Vries et al., 2019).

Based on a qualitative study carried out among 111 primary school students, recruited in a primary school in Cassino (Italy), the Authors will propose the framework for an educational intervention aimed to enable the development and maintenance of a positive body image among children. For achieving this goal some critical influencing factors which can be enhanced have been highlighted. Among these, they may be mentioned the following: self-awareness, emotional literacy, the relationship between the natural body and the perceived body, dysmorphophobia, and gender. Based on this, an educational intervention will be

hypothesized which will involve the single aspects previously mentioned to allow the development of a positive body image in children.

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