

# Relationship between Body Image Dissatisfaction and Psychological Well-Being: A Literature Review

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## Abstract

Body image dissatisfaction (BID) is a global psychological public mental health concern. This review examines the association between body image dissatisfaction and psychological well-being. Findings from the literature indicate that a higher level of BID is associated with reduced psychological well-being (PWB), and other mental health outcomes. The review synthesizes some mechanisms that link the pathways between BID and PWB. By integrating the evidence, this review outlines the implications for public mental health. By delving into the psychological implications of BID, the review highlights a need to further study the relationship of body image dissatisfaction and well-being having new mediators and moderators and also conducting longitudinal studies.

**Keywords:** Body image dissatisfaction, psychological well-being, self-efficacy, self-criticism, social support

## Introduction

Body image refers to an individual's perception, feelings and thoughts about their physical appearance and features (Heider, Spruyt and De Houwer, 2018; Yuan *et al.*, 2025). It is often considered a central component in the functioning of psychological well-being (Gorji Azandariyani *et al.*, 2025), people who experience disturbed body image, it can lead to BID (Nichols *et al.*, 2018). BID contributes to serious physical and psychological conditions (Fries *et al.*, 2026). BID has become an increasingly serious mental health concern, especially among young adults in this contemporary society (Yuan *et al.*, 2025). The more dissatisfied individuals feel about their body, the greater the risk of experiencing lower self-esteem, social anxiety, and poor quality of life. Social media platforms have impacted individuals with the intensified beauty standards and raised these concerns, particularly post COVID-19, which led to heightened anxiety, unhealthy eating practices and increased isolation. Varsha & Baishya (2025) stated that in this digital world, there is an emphasize on the growing policy discussions for public mental health related to body image concerns. It is recognized that social media and advertisements shape the perception of an individual about body and self-worth, whcih has become a concern that these are affecting people's overall well-being. Therefore, body image issues should be prioritized in public health policies (Rodgers *et al.*, 2023). In societies, where more value is given to specific body types, people who feel they do not fit in these types may experience increased psychological distress (Grogan, 2021).

Psychological Well-being (PWB) refers to an individual's perception of their emotional and mental health, which includes the satisfaction in life, happiness and a sense of purpose (Dhanabhakyaam and Sarath, 2023). This helps the person understand their overall functioning and quality of life, thus forming a thorough understanding of their psychological state. The relationship between BID and PWB is a serious issue within mental health problems. The stress of not meeting to the cultural norms can develop continuous emotional distress, self-criticism and increased anxiety and depressive symptoms (Merino et al., 2024). There are several mediators and moderators which explain the relationship between body image dissatisfaction and psychological well-being such as:

Self-criticism is referred as the central cognitive risk connected with depression throughout the developmental stages. Individuals who show increased self-critical tendencies, are more likely to experience pathological symptoms (Gao et al., 2023). Research has shown that people who are dissatisfied with their own body image are likely to develop depressive symptoms, while self-criticism functions as a mediator of this relationship (Rodrigues da Silva and Mwangi, 2025).

Self-efficacy is one of the major concepts of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997). Research has demonstrated that appearance anxiety was a predictor of social anxiety in college-going students, and this relationship was mediated by self-efficacy, it has shown that appearance anxiety leads to low self-efficacy (Liao et al., 2023).

An important variable that plays a pivotal role in BID is social physique anxiety (SPA) (Rica et al., 2022). SPA refers to the negative belief about one's appearance in the presence of other people, where an individual think that others are evaluating their size and shape of the body (Jabeen et al., 2023).

People who experience dissatisfaction may require a support from their loved ones or their social networks to deal with this concern. Research has supported that social support from family and friends may act as a protective buffer against body image disturbances (Olabisi et al. 2024). Social support reduced the effect of psychological distress. Additionally, the absence of social support leads to exposure to body image issues (Ma and Zhang, 2023).

Previous research has also found the role of self-compassion in the relationship between body image satisfaction and PWB. Self-compassion supports a positive body image by refusing unrealistic standards of the media and accepting one's body. Moreover, it has been found that there is a strong correlation of self-compassion with psychological well-being, which is important among adolescents and young adults (Abbasi & Zubair, 2015).

As per the best knowledge of researchers, there are none studies to examine different psychological mechanisms together, thus this review synthesizes an integrative framework on the plausible pathway linking body image dissatisfaction and psychological well-being in the context of public mental health.

### Theoretical Framework

By integrating the following theories into research, a comprehensive approach can be developed to handle the issues related to body image (Merino et al., 2024).

The theory of social comparison (Festinger, 1954) provides a comprehensive understanding of how individuals evaluate their self-worth, compare themselves with others and identify their achievements in relation to other people. They often compare their opinions to those of others. People make social comparisons with those who are similar to them. Social comparison occurs in two dimensions: Downward comparison (comparison with the one who is worse than us) enhances well-being, and Upward Comparison (comparison with the person who seems to be better than our dimension of interest) is

believed to reduce well-being. Social comparison tends to be upward, instead of downward, in terms of physical appearance (Wheeler and Miyake, 1992)

According to objectification theory, the experience of objectifying action, such as comments related to sexual harassment, body talk, etc., together with repeated exposure to attractive images, leads women to be evaluated and look at themselves as objects (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This internalization promotes constant body surveillance, which has been associated with negative psychological consequences, involving body shame, anxiety, reduced self-worth and so on (varsha & Baishya, 2025). Most recent expansions of objectification theory, have placed that self-objectification, body image concerns and eating disorder risks happen due to social media use (Bonfanti et al., 2025). This results in individuals perceiving themselves as objects based on the looks they have encountered on social media, resulting in increased body image disturbances and unhealthy behaviour to meet the unattainable standards (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997)..

Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987) is particularly important in the study of body image, mentioning that according to the internalized standards, discrepancies between our actual body (what we think we are) and our ideal body (what we think we should look like) leads to psychological discomfort (Szymanski & Cash, 1995). This gap is not just related to aesthetic beauty norms, they constitute deeper psychological processes that impact a person's self-esteem and mental health.

## **Mediating Mechanisms**

### ***Self-criticism as mediator between BID and PWB***

Self-criticism is described as the process of evaluating oneself harshly, which focuses on individuals own mistakes, flaws and perceived inadequacies (Warren, Smeets and Neff, 2016). It can be seen as it increases the risk of anxiety, depressive symptoms, etc. (Joeng & Turner, 2015). Studies have found that lower body image and self-criticism, in turn, lead to psychological distress (Tiggemann, 2011). Research in self-criticism has been negatively associated with quality of life and positively associated with depression, anxiety and stress (Zhang *et al.*, 2019). Michaeli et al., (2022) in their study found that psychological well-being is influenced by self-criticism among individuals. Similarly, research has demonstrated the relationship between higher self-criticism and higher levels of depressive symptoms in chronic illness patients (Luyten et al., 2011). Lower levels of body satisfaction were related to higher self-criticism, thus, resulting in greater psychopathology (Levy et al., 2025).

### ***Self-efficacy as a mediator between BID and PWB***

Self-efficacy refers to the faith individuals have in their ability to handle any event and functioning that affects their life (Bandura, 1977). According to Bandura's self-efficacy theory, people with adequate capabilities can control and handle their emotions more effectively. Social cognitive theory states that opinions about a person's own efficacy can affect health behaviours directly and also through facilitators or obstacles to goals, outcome expectations and perceptions (Bandura, 2004). This study suggested that appearance anxiety due to lower BID may lead to lower self-efficacy. It was found that when people evaluate their body image, the anxiety rises from that self-image leads to reduced self-efficacy which in turn further reduces psychological well-being (Liao *et al.*, 2023).

### ***Social physique anxiety as a mediator between BID and PWB***

Social physique anxiety is described as the experience of negative evaluation from others about one's physical appearance. Young adults are experiencing heightened SPA due to the increased concerns over body image. Studies found that people who are dissatisfied with their physical appearance can have a

significant impact on their social interactions and social anxiety (Sedova, Kalina and Gardanova, 2021). The more individuals conform to prescribed physical beauty ideals, the more they are likely to develop SPA (Czepiel & Koopman, 2023). People develop a feeling of helplessness by overrating others appearance, when they assess their physical self negatively as compared to other people, they experience a sense of dissatisfaction with their own body image. BID is believed to have a negative association with SPA and happiness in young adults (Jabeen et al., 2023).

## **Moderating Mechanisms**

### ***Social support as moderator between BID and PWB***

Social support refers to the informational, emotional and material guidance received by an individual from one's social network (Kaur et al., 2013). It is a reflection of reciprocity and protection in a relationship, which includes connection with family, friends and other individuals (Yan *et al.*, 2025). When people face various circumstances in life, such as stress caused by a disturbed body image, they need social support to cope with those situations (Davis et al., 2020). Previous research has supported that social support acts as a buffer against the negative impact of stress for public health, and also enhances the self-efficacy of an individual. Empirical studies suggest that people with good social support are better at navigating the difficulties that are associated with BID, as they indulge in positive health behaviours and are likely to develop less psychological well-being (Yuan et al., 2025).

### ***Self-compassion as moderator between BID and PWB***

Self-compassion is described as the act of treating yourself with the same kindness, care and understanding, you would offer to help other people, especially in difficult situations (Neff, 2003). Recent studies on public health suggested that self-compassion is a protective factor for body image issues (Deveci et.al, 2025). Research also suggested that self-compassion is connected to optimism, wisdom, happiness and positive emotions (Khan et al., 2024). Higher self-compassion is associated with a higher level of satisfaction with life, positive emotions as well as a healthier way of dealing with stress and depression (Fan et al., 2023). Furthermore, self-compassion works as a successful intervention among individuals to promote positive body image (Abbasi & Zubair, 2015). Self-compassion is positively linked with reduced body obsession and less concern about body weight, size and shape. It is also positively linked with psychological well-being (Wasylikiw et al., 2012).

## **Discussion**

This review aimed to synthesize the relationship between body image dissatisfaction and psychological well-being, with the mediating effects of self-criticism, self-efficacy and social physique anxiety. It also shows that self-compassion and social support strengthen the relationship between BID and PWB. Body image is one of the most important predictors of physical and psychological well-being. A lower level of body image dissatisfaction in individuals also reduces PWB (Eva et al., 2022). Individuals who are more dissatisfied with their body images, criticise themselves, which in turn leads to psychological distress. Our findings of association between BID and PWB align with the previous studies. When people are self-focused, they experience a feeling of negative evaluation from others, which constructs physique anxiety and negative emotions (Liao et al., 2023). Previous studies found that self-criticism has been negatively associated with poor quality of life and positively linked with anxiety, depression and perceived psychological stress (Kausar et al., 2022). Research shows that there is a high risk of developing body dysmorphism, depression and anxiety disorders among individuals, who experience a higher level of SPA,

all of which result in lower self-esteem (Jaapar, Ma'rof and Abdullah, 2024). Self-efficacy influences people indulging in coping behaviour, regulate emotions and interpret their challenges. Several previous studies have shown a negative association between emotional self-efficacy and depressive symptoms (K. Dou et al., 2016). People with low self-efficacy develop negative insights about their social behaviour, believing that they are lacking in their performance, thus avoiding social interaction. Furthermore, research has shown that self-efficacy mediates between dissatisfied physical appearance and anxiety (Liao et al., 2023). People who witness self-compassion, tend to have positive body image. The existing literature suggested that mindfulness and self-compassion-based interventions are helpful in promoting positive body image, reducing self-criticism and increasing well-being. Self-compassion has been shown as a protective buffer against the occurrence of anxiety, depression and psychological distress, and to prevent the risk associated with BID and eating disorders (Fan et al., 2023). Evidence from previous studies suggests that family-based support was important in coping with challenges of body image and improving the quality of life, and psychological stress is relieved by effective social support (Yan et al., 2025). These findings provide a deep understanding for health practice and policy, encouraging that public health policies and interventions need to be refined to address the issues of body image effectively (Merino et al., 2024).

### **Implications**

The findings of this review indicate that BID is closely associated with reduced PWB, which includes higher level of depression, anxiety, low quality of life, social withdrawal and problems related to eating behaviour. This review extends the literature by studying integrative plausible pathways in the association between BID and PWB. These findings suggest the need for early psychological intervention and awareness initiatives in counselling sessions for promoting positive body image and self-acceptance. The review also highlights that BID is shaped by sociocultural and media-related pressures, suggesting that families, schools, universities, healthcare professionals and media platforms should work equally and collaboratively to encourage more healthier and inclusive beauty standards (Merino *et al.*, 2024). From a Public Health perspective, BID should be considered as an important mental health issue, requiring preventive strategies, public awareness campaigns, digital media literacy programs and early screening to prevent distress and enhance psychological well-being among individuals. Supporting this change through health policies can have a significant impact on mental health and well-being of today's youth. Policies should support specialized training that include a holistic approach to health, prioritizing one's health and functioning over appearance.

### **Conclusion**

The current study reviewed the psychological mechanisms in the association between BID and PWB. Specifically, the mediating role of self-criticism, self-efficacy and SPA and the moderating role of social support and self-compassion within the association are highlighted. It synthesizes findings from a range of studies to explore how body image dissatisfaction leads to psychological well-being. Future studies may focus on developing body image-focused interventions for improving mental health problems. Future research may prioritize longitudinal studies, include understudied samples (e.g. males), explore the role of more mediators such as fear of negative evaluation and self-esteem and moderators such as social comparison and examine the impact of social media behaviour on individuals in relation to body image dissatisfaction.

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