



Trajectories of body dissatisfaction among South Korean youth: Findings from a nationally representative sample



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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to identify qualitatively different classes of growth trajectories of body dissatisfaction and to investigate the antecedents associated with the classes. The survey included a nationally representative sample of 2844 Korean children who started Grade 4 (younger cohort) and 3449 adolescents who began Grade 8 (older cohort) at baseline. Participants completed self-report surveys across five or six measurement periods separated by 1 year each. General growth mixture modeling was used and results revealed several distinct longitudinal patterns. Findings from this study clearly suggest the importance of early intervention efforts. Interventions aimed at boosting autonomy may be valuable in reducing body dissatisfaction among children. The findings also highlight the critical importance of parent–child connectedness and friendship closeness in the success of the intervention.

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Introduction

Body dissatisfaction, the negative subjective evaluations of one's physical or outward appearance (Presnell, Bearman, & Stice, 2004; Stice & Shaw, 2002), is widespread among children and adolescents (Presnell et al., 2004; Markey & Markey, 2012). Prospective, longitudinal studies provide compelling evidence that body dissatisfaction can lead to the onset of eating problems (Attie & Brooks-Gunn, 1989; Beato-Fernández, Rodríguez-Cano, Belmonte-Llario, & Martínez-Delgado, 2004; Johnson & Wardle, 2005), unhealthy weight-related behaviors (Johnson & Wardle, 2005; Neumark-Sztainer, Paxton, Hannan, Haines, & Story, 2006), depressive moods (Holsen, Kraft, & Røysamb, 2001; Johnson & Wardle, 2005; Paxton, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Eisenberg, 2006), diminished self-esteem (Barker & Bornstein, 2010; Johnson & Wardle, 2005; Paxton, Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2006; Tiggemann, 2005), and suicidality (Kim & Kim, 2009; Rodríguez-Cano, Beato-Fernández, & Llario, 2006). Given the multiple deleterious effects of body dissatisfaction, it is imperative that risk and protective factors associated with body dissatisfaction are explored.

Developmental Course of Body Dissatisfaction

Several researchers convincingly suggest that children's body dissatisfaction, particularly girls', can emerge as young as 5 or 6 years of age and it tends to increase with age (Davison, Markey, & Birch, 2000; Lowes & Tiggemann, 2003; O'Dea & Caputi, 2001). Although girls report greater body dissatisfaction than boys in general (Barker & Bornstein, 2010; Bearman, Presnell, Martinez, & Stice, 2006; Crespo, Kielpikowski, Jose, & Pryor, 2010; O'Dea & Caputi, 2001; Rosenblum & Lewis, 1999; von Soest & Wichstrøm, 2009), boys also report body dissatisfaction (Markey & Markey, 2012). Theoretical underpinning to explain why body dissatisfaction increases during adolescence includes heightened self-consciousness and social comparisons (Markey & Markey, 2012). In addition, it is theorized that early adolescence is recognized as being the most challenging developmental stage for girls, as it is associated with weight gain and body shape changes due to puberty (Holsen et al., 2001; O'Dea & Caputi, 2001; Tiggemann, 2005). Cultural appearance ideals also become more salient for youth (Markey & Markey, 2012). Overall, the findings are often mixed and do not provide a clear picture of the trajectory of body dissatisfaction during childhood and adolescence. For example, findings range from an increase in bodily dissatisfaction during adolescence (Bucchianeri, Arikian, Hannan, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2013; Crespo et al., 2010; Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Paxton, 2006) to an improvement in body satisfaction (Holsen, Jones, & Birkeland, 2012), while von Soest and Wichstrøm (2009) suggested a stable level of body dissatisfaction during adolescence.

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There are also more subtle gender differences in developmental trajectories in body dissatisfaction from childhood through adolescence. [Rosenblum and Lewis \(1999\)](#) suggested that girls' body dissatisfaction increases, whereas boys' body dissatisfaction appears more consistent across adolescence. [Bearman et al. \(2006\)](#) somewhat similarly suggested that girls show an increase in dissatisfaction with their bodies, while boys show the reverse pattern during early adolescence. [Jones \(2004\)](#) also reported that boys' body dissatisfaction tends to decline, but girls' body dissatisfaction remains relatively stable across time. Overall, there is a paucity of research on the developmental trajectory of boys' body dissatisfaction over the course of childhood and adolescence.

Predictors of Body Dissatisfaction

Increased knowledge about predictors of membership in body dissatisfaction trajectory classes will provide a useful set of implications for choosing intervention strategies. In general, supportive and loving relationships with parents are likely to protect children from negative self-evaluations, whereas distant and less supportive relationships with parents are likely to lead children to develop negative self-representations (e.g., [Bearman et al., 2006](#); [Yu & Gamble, 2009](#)). Although [Presnell et al. \(2004\)](#) have found no prospective relation between parental social support and body dissatisfaction among high school students, some evidence supports the claim that deficits in parental support are robustly predictive of later body dissatisfaction for girls ([Archibald, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 1999](#); [Boutelle, Eisenberg, Gregory, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2009](#)). [Bearman et al. \(2006\)](#) have extended findings to both girls and boys and contend that parental support exerts greater impact than peer support on subsequent body dissatisfaction in adolescents.

By broadening the conceptualization of social support, [Stice and Whitenton \(2002\)](#) have found that lack of both parental and peer support longitudinally predicts body dissatisfaction in adolescents. [Holsen et al. \(2012\)](#) have also documented that adolescents' positive relationships with parents and peers are both significantly predictive of body image satisfaction. Similarly, [Michael et al. \(2014\)](#) have reported that getting along with peers and parental nurturance are both positively associated with physical self-worth among children. From a somewhat different perspective, [Jones \(2004\)](#) has suggested that peer relationships can serve as a training ground for learning and internalizing appearance norms and ideals and may amplify appearance concerns. Indeed, adolescents' conversations about appearance with friends have been found to significantly contribute to increases in body dissatisfaction ([Jones, 2004](#)). Thus, unlike parental support, peer support may have both positive and negative impacts on adolescents' body dissatisfaction.

Psychological variables such as depressive symptoms and self-esteem have been theorized to affect changes in body dissatisfaction and are often supported by empirical research. [Paxton, Eisenberg, and Neumark-Sztainer \(2006\)](#) contend that a depressed mood is likely to lead to negative self-evaluations and increased attention to one's own displeasing physical appearance. They found that depression positively predicts subsequent body dissatisfaction in male adolescents. Similar findings were reported by [Quick, Eisenberg, Bucchianeri, and Neumark-Sztainer \(2013\)](#), who have shown that male adolescents with higher depressive symptoms are likely to report higher body dissatisfaction 10 years later regardless of body mass index, sociodemographic characteristics, parent communication, and peer weight teasing. While [Bearman et al. \(2006\)](#) have documented that elevated negative affect is predictive of greater body dissatisfaction for both male and female adolescents, [Presnell et al. \(2004\)](#) have reported that the predictive relation between those variables is observed among male, but not among female adolescents. In a somewhat similar fashion,

[Stice and Whitenton \(2002\)](#) have failed to find any significant longitudinal causal effect of depressive symptoms upon body dissatisfaction among a sample of adolescent girls. A further study showed no evidence for a prospective influence of depressed mood on body image in adolescents of both genders ([Holsen et al., 2001](#)) and thus the pattern of results remains somewhat inconsistent.

Some prospective research supports the idea that high self-esteem can act as a buffer against body dissatisfaction. As an example, the empirical evidence indicates that self-esteem is inversely predictive of body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls ([Quick et al., 2013](#)). Along a similar line, self-esteem has been found to be a protective factor for body dissatisfaction ([Beato-Fernández et al., 2004](#)) and a decline of self-esteem contributes to a negative body image among both male and female adolescents ([Murray, Rieger, & Byrne, 2013](#)). However, the prospective link between self-esteem and body dissatisfaction is less clear. Specifically, [Paxton, Eisenberg, et al. \(2006\)](#) have found that self-esteem negatively predicts later body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls but not in adolescent boys. Moreover, others have found no significant longitudinal prediction from self-esteem to body dissatisfaction in a sample of female adolescents ([Tiggemann, 2005](#)) or both male and female adolescents ([Barker & Bornstein, 2010](#)). Hence, we are still left with the question of whether self-esteem can protect adolescents from suffering from body dissatisfaction.

While there has been little research exploring possible impact of other psychological variables on body dissatisfaction, adolescents' growing sense of autonomy may exert a powerful influence on feelings of body dissatisfaction. This is because autonomous adolescents are likely to regulate their own behavior, emotion, and cognition properly, enabling them to effectively deal with stressful situations ([Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2003](#)). It would, therefore, be worthwhile to explore whether autonomy is predictive of a degree of body dissatisfaction in adolescents.

Body Dissatisfaction in the Korean Cultural Context

According to the [International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery statistics \(2011\)](#), South Korea is the country with the world's highest per capita rate of cosmetic surgery. Unrealistic standards of physical attractiveness and thinness prevail throughout Korean society and adolescents, particularly girls, are heavily burdened by the cultural expectations and pressures ([Cheah & Kim, 2014](#)). The finding that early adolescent Korean girls and boys reported greater body dissatisfaction than did their US counterparts ([Jung, Forbes, & Lee, 2009](#)) supports this contention. Given prevalent overconcern with physical appearance, it is timely to investigate predictors and latent trajectory classes of body dissatisfaction among Korean youth.

The Present Study

Despite considerable attention to research on body dissatisfaction, qualitatively different developmental trajectories in body dissatisfaction have been unexplored. An underlying assumption that all individuals follow approximately the same developmental trajectory over time may be unrealistic in research on body dissatisfaction among youth. Moreover, youth with different growth trajectories may have different antecedents. This study was designed to examine subgroups reflecting distinct longitudinal trajectories of body dissatisfaction and its covariates in Korean youth over a period of 5 or 6 years, in two different developmental phases, from late childhood to early adolescence and from middle to late adolescence with two nationally representative cohorts of youth. In an effort to provide a more comprehensive understanding of variability in developmental trajectories, relationship variables (i.e., connectedness to parents and friendship closeness) and psycho-

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