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# Identity Challenges of Gender-Dissatisfied Adolescents: A Phenomenological Study

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**Abstract**
**Background:** Gender identity represents a significant facet of the challenges and uncertainties experienced by adolescents. The present study aimed to explore the experiences of adolescents dissatisfied with their gender in schools, specifically delving into how their interactions with peers and school staff influence their self-perception and the challenges they encounter.
**Methods:** This research examined the experiences of 30 adolescents (18 females and 12 males) navigating gender dissatisfaction in school. Using a qualitative approach, participants were selected through purposive sampling, and data were collected via semi-structured interviews. The gathered data were analyzed following Strauss and Glaser's interpretative approach.
**Results:** The findings of this study revealed a journey of self-awareness characterized by pain, confusion, and a search for identity. The results highlighted negative self-perception, feelings of loneliness, experiences of discrimination, and resentment towards educators. Additionally, peer harassment, acceptance, and attraction emerged as significant themes. Participants also expressed clear expectations for supportive school staff.
**Conclusion:** This study highlighted the unique aspects of the participants' experiences, offering valuable insights for school counselors and teachers. By fostering a deeper understanding of the needs and vulnerabilities of this demographic, educators and counselors can work more effectively to support them.
**Keywords:** Gender identity, Gender dysphoria, Transgender persons, Schools

## Introduction

Adolescence, marking the threshold to adulthood, is characterized by the central challenge of identity development (1, 2). Identity forms a perceptual construct and a self-referential framework that takes shape and reshapes through the intricate tapestry of life experiences and the evolving trajectory of one's personality (3). Consequently, the notion of identity assumes a dual nature: self-identity and collective identity (1). Self-identity encompasses the perception of one's personal attributes, particularly within a social milieu. Conversely, collective identity pertains to the recognition of one's affiliation with a group, where the identity of the group becomes interwoven with the individual's identity (4).

Identity development is an ongoing process throughout the life cycle (5). However, during adolescence, identity takes on the aspect of a developmental crisis due to rapid physical changes, the emergence of instinctive needs, social expectations, and the introduction of adult life commitments (6, 7). These factors give rise to fundamental questions for adolescents. In their pursuit of a coherent sense of identity during this period, teenagers question both their individual identity and their identity within a group context (8). Erikson asserts that adolescence is primarily characterized by the conflict between societal expectations and individual capabilities, thrusting teenagers into an identity crisis. This phase demands that adolescents make choices about their future and lifestyle, necessitating a preliminary exploration of their capabilities to construct a cohesive identity (9). As adolescents reflect on their past experiences to discern their identity, they may cast doubt upon their current way of life. This might lead them to test their capabilities and effectiveness through diverse experiences (10). At times, to delay the intricate process of identity formation, adolescents enter a phase of psychosocial respite—an interval of waiting. Enveloped in the ongoing crisis, they navigate a challenging period marked by identity confusion and a state of moratorium (1).

Gender identity represents a significant facet of identity confusion among adolescents (11). It is established through an individual's perception of masculinity and femininity, influenced by biological, environmental, and sociocultural factors (12, 13). In its natural context, gender identity encompasses an individual's self-conception as either male

or female, wherein personal traits, values, behaviors, and characteristics align with the societal norms assigned to women and men (14, 15). However, in certain cases, due to various factors, an individual's gender identity can diverge from the gender assigned or biologically determined at birth. In these instances, individuals may experience gender identity disorder, leading them to identify with a different gender. This discordance results in the presence of a strong and enduring identification with the opposite gender, causing discomfort and a sense of incongruity with their assigned identity (16). Individuals experiencing this disorder often endure intense anxiety and encounter challenges in adapting to social, occupational, and personal contexts. As classified in the DSM-5-TR, gender dysphoria characterizes a condition wherein there is a significant incongruence between an individual's expressed gender and their gender assignment at birth (17).

While the formation and development of gender identity hinges on self-knowledge and self-perception, these aspects are cultivated within the framework of time and space, and through the personal experiences of each individual (18). Consequently, socio-educational environments such as family, school, and the expectations, interactions, and role models encountered during adolescence, significantly contribute to the maturation of adolescent gender identity (19, 20). Parents alone do not solely shape or create the gender identity of their children; schools also play a crucial part in the development of gender identity by evaluations, endorsements, and consequences (21-24).

Peer groups also have a significant influence on the formation of gender identity among adolescents. Peers serve as references, offering role models, reactions, expectations, and evaluations that aid adolescents in acquiring social skills and shaping their identities (25). Additionally, the educational interactions between teachers and students can be significant in contributing to the development of gender identity within the school context (26). For instance, students might face diverse forms of harassment from their peers or school staff, or they might perceive themselves as either favored or disadvantaged based on the gender they identify with (27). These students' negative experiences can detrimentally impact their academic achievement, physical and mental health (28, 30).

Previous research indicates that students who are dissatisfied with their gender face elevated risks of experiencing suicidal ideation, depressive symptoms, insecurity, and bullying (30, 31, 32, 33, 34), as well as a higher likelihood of engaging in drug use (35). Moreover, studies reveal that students dissatisfied with their gender are more susceptible to negative and violent treatment (36), consequently influencing their perception of school. These factors underline the need for educators to raise awareness and effectively address the needs of gender-dissatisfied students on a global scale.

Narrowing the focus to specific regions in Asia, such as the Middle East and, more specifically, Iran, the literature within this context indicates that, despite the significant importance of identity for students dissatisfied with their gender, their numbers remain underreported due to prevailing social and cultural norms (21, 26, 37, 38). A review of the literature reveals that insufficient research has examined the process of gender identity development in adolescents experiencing gender dysphoria, particularly within the Iranian school system. In particular, there is a notable lack of qualitative studies, which can provide a richer understanding of these adolescents' experiences by capturing the intricacies of their emotions and perceptions. Given the need to raise awareness among teachers and counselors about the challenges faced by students struggling with gender identity confusion—and to create opportunities for supporting them in their identity exploration—such research is essential. Therefore, the present study aimed to explore the experiences of adolescents dissatisfied with their gender in school settings, focusing on how their interactions with peers and school staff influence their self-perception and the challenges they encounter.

## Methods
### Design
The present study employed a phenomenological approach to investigate the identity challenges faced by adolescents dissatisfied with their gender in school. The primary objective of this study was to capture the subjective experiences (39) of adolescents who reported dissatisfaction with their gender. We investigated their experiences in relation to their identity formation within the context of their interactions with peers and school staff in school settings, using semi-structured interviews (40).

### Participants
A total of 30 adolescent students (18 female and 12 male), aged 12 to 18 years, participated in this study after accounting for data saturation and repetitive responses. Participants were selected using purposive sampling and criterion-based selection. Four specific criteria guided participant selection: (1) experiencing gender dissatisfaction, (2) being between 12 and 18 years old, (3) current enrollment as a student, and (4) willingness to engage in conversation and participate in the research. To recruit participants, we identified and joined virtual groups of gender-dissatisfied adolescents and invited individuals who met the inclusion criteria and were willing to participate in the study.

Interviews were conducted until data saturation was achieved (41). The total number of adolescent students who participated in this study, considering data saturation and repetitive responses, amounted to 30, with a mean age of 17.63 years. The duration of each interview varied

between 60 and 180 minutes.

### Data Collection

In this research, data were collected through semi-structured interviews. In this approach, the interview questions were initially designed as a general framework based on a thorough review of relevant studies and literature, as well as consideration of the primary research question and specific study objectives. However, the questions were flexibly adjusted in response to participants' answers (42,43) to elicit deeper insights and capture their emotions and perceptions. As shown in Table 1, the main outline of the interview questions is presented below.

### Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the thematic analysis approach developed by Strauss and Glaser (40). Initial codes were derived from the extracted concepts. Subsequently, initial central categories were inferred by amalgamating the primary concepts, taking into account the frequency of responses. The researcher examined additional responses and allocated pertinent data to each of the created categories. When encountering a new theme, a new concept and category were defined. Finally, the categories underwent a thorough comparison and review to ensure the comprehensiveness of classes and the appropriateness of the subject.

### Trustworthiness

To ensure the reliability of the process, all research team members participated in executing the aforementioned steps. Additionally, each participant received a copy of their interview transcript, allowing them to provide clarifications where necessary and resolve discrepancies in the text (44). To maintain consistency and minimize individual biases, team members cross-checked their coding. Furthermore, they engaged in a bracketing process (45) to reflect on and acknowledge their own backgrounds, including values, prejudices, and social and cultural norms.

### Ethical Considerations

Before the interviews, informed consent was obtained to ensure participants understood the study's purpose, their

rights, and the voluntary nature of their participation. They were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time without consequences, fostering trust and comfort. To protect privacy, all personal information was kept confidential and securely stored. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, and identifying details were removed. Data were stored in password-protected files, accessible only to the research team. Any identifiable information shared during interviews was excluded from the final analysis, ensuring strict confidentiality throughout the study. Furthermore, in adherence to ethical considerations, an ethical code (IR.UT.PSYEDU. REC.1399.040) was obtained.

### Results

Upon analyzing the collected data and interpreting the results, the identified themes have been categorized into four distinct dimensions: Self-perception, perception of relationship with the school and its staff, perception of peer relationships, and expectations from the school. The key components within each dimension were derived as follows:

As shown in Table 2, this section explores the inner confusion experienced by adolescents facing gender dissatisfaction. Their complex emotions have been thematically categorized into five key areas: "Perceived Lack of Resemblance to Same-Gender Individuals," "Resistance and Effort to Conform to Biological Gender," "Self-Knowledge Confusion," "Negative Self-Perceptions," and "Feelings of Loneliness and Isolation."

As shown in Table 3, this section examines the perceptions of gender-dissatisfied adolescents regarding their interactions with school staff and the overall school environment. The findings reveal a mix of positive and negative emotions, with negative experiences being more prevalent. This section is categorized into "Sense of Discrimination, Humiliation, and Rejection," "Fear, Resentment, and Hatred," and "Acceptance and Support."

As shown in Table 4, this section examines how gender-dissatisfied adolescents perceive their interactions with peers, highlighting both positive and negative experiences. The categories include "Peer Harassment and Humiliation," "Attracting Peers' Attention," and "Acceptance, Support, and Positive Communication."

**Table 1.** Interview Outline

| Main Themes | Key Questions |
|---|---|
| Self and Identity (Focusing on Gender Identity) | *How would you define yourself? (Who are you?)*<br>*How did you come to understand yourself?*<br>*What challenges have you faced in getting to know yourself?* |
| School Experience (Focusing on Experiences in School) | *How do you feel about school? How would you describe your experience at school?*<br>*What do you like about school, and what aspects do you find challenging or bothersome?*<br>*What does your ideal school look like?*<br>*What qualities make a school feel safe for you?*<br>*What behaviors from school staff would you like to see removed or added?*<br>*How do you feel about your friends and classmates?*<br>*What experiences have you had with them regarding your feelings of gender dissatisfaction, both positive and negative?* |

As shown in Table 5, this section explores the expectations of gender-dissatisfied adolescents regarding their school environment. The categories include "To Not Judge," "To Offer Empathy and Support," "To Facilitate Peer Conversations and Connections," and "To Increase Knowledge and Awareness in School."

**Table 2.** Identity and Self-perception Challenges

| Exemplary responses | Subthemes |
| --- | --- |
| Perceived Lack of Resemblance to Same-Gender Individuals | "I didn't care about all those things that girls usually care about." / "I just wasn't into the stuff girls were into, their talk, or what they did." / "Girls' tastes and interests? Nah, not my thing at all." / "I noticed I wasn't as socially active as other kids my age. They had girlfriends, but I didn't." |
| Resistance and Effort to Conform to Biological Gender | "I couldn't fit in with other girls because I really tried to be like them."/ "Wearing that scarf didn't feel right; I just wanted to hang out with the guys, but that made everything even tougher; I felt even more out of place." / "I didn't think I was transgender; it wasn't like that at all. I read about it, and I thought, No, that's not me." / "Accepting all of this was a real struggle for me." |
| Self-knowledge confusion | "I was wondering, like, who am I, you know?"/ "I felt like I was different from everyone else, but I didn't know what to call it" / "people kept saying, You're not a 'girly' girl." / "Everyone kept asking me why I acted like the boys." / "They even said I made a mistake being a girl and should've been a boy." / "At first, I thought maybe I was gay, because of my feelings and stuff." / "It was all so confusing." / "But then, I figured out I'm actually trans, and it felt like a huge relief." |
| Negative self-perceptions | "Thinking that I might be gay or something just made me feel awful. Nobody seemed to accept me, not society, not my family, not even the school." / "This whole being different thing just made me feel terrible." / "I hated myself." |
| Feeling of loneliness and isolation | "I always believed it was only me who felt like this, like no one else could possibly understand." / "Comparing myself to the boys, how they went to school and how I had to, that was super painful." / "I'd look at myself and feel sorry that I was so different and alone!" |

**Table 3.** Perception of the relationship with the school and its staff

| Exemplary responses | Subthemes |
| --- | --- |
| Sense of discrimination, humiliation, and rejection | "Back then, the vice principal would hear out everyone, but he never let me speak up when I wanted to. For instance, if he said, 'This isn't a boys' school; you shouldn't act like this.' To me, it felt like other students did the same things, but he had a problem with just me!" "I felt like I was being treated unfairly compared to other students. They called me the troublemaker of the school and wouldn't let me be myself. The school counselor even told me that what I was going through (not feeling like a girl inside) was just a phase and that I was brainwashing myself!" |
| Fear, resentment, and hatred | "I never talked to the principal because she's super intimidating to me!" / "I just hated it!" / "High school was really tough, and I remember a teacher getting mad at me for not being a good girl. I started hating school big time." |
| Acceptance and support | "There was this one school counselor who totally got it, you know? She was super helpful and understanding. I felt like I could really trust her. She knew her stuff and knew how to help me out." |

**Table 4.** Perception of peer relationships

| Exemplary responses | Subthemes |
| --- | --- |
| Peer harassment and humiliation | "Students were giving me a hard time." / "They all bullied us." / "My friends don't understand me, so they judge me." / "They mocked me and called me a lesbian." / "My friends, the boys, pushed me in the gutter. I was speechless." / "Well, they would call me by girls' names, and when calling me, they would act flirty and ridicule me." |
| Attracting peers' attention | "Plenty of kids weren't too keen on me because I was a boy, but there were some who genuinely appreciated and enjoyed my company." / "In high school, kids were attracted to me." / "They loved me because I was like a boy." |
| Acceptance, support, and positive communication | "When I talked to my friends, and they didn't judge me, I started feeling better." / "It was actually my friend who helped me get through some really tough times. Now that I'm in high school, things are better because my friends are more mature and they understand me." / "My friends knew about what I was going through, and they didn't give me a hard time about it."/ "I was in the best class, and my classmates were awesome. If anyone ever tried to hassle me, my friends had my back." |

**Table 5.** Expectations from the school

| Exemplary responses | Subthemes |
| --- | --- |
| To not judge | "Being judged is seriously painful." / "I try my best not to judge others, and I hope they won't judge me when they don't even know my story." / "My dream school would be a place where they teach, interact, and make decisions without worrying about gender." / "A comfortable spot for all, no matter your gender. It should be chill, with an atmosphere where we can all hang out with each other." |
| To offer empathy and support | "If I were in their shoes, I'd have a one-on-one chat with them. I'd try to get to know them better and build a strong connection." / "As a school staff member, I'd make sure to talk to them and let them know they don't have to go through this alone." / "If they can't talk to their family, I want them to feel comfortable coming to me as someone at the school." / "Counseling should be available." |
| To facilitate peer conversations and connections | "They should help us all get along." / "I feel like I could use their support to build better relationships with other kids." / "If they really got to know the real me, I think they'd like me. But I really need some help in having those conversations with other kids." |
| To increase knowledge and awareness in school | "If the school treats everyone the same, no matter their gender, they should really take this stuff seriously." / "It'd be really good if they could teach the teachers what being transgender is all about." / "In my high school, when the counselor talked about transgender things, it felt a bit weird. But if everyone was cool with it and the whole system was on board, that would be great." / "It was cool when the teachers didn't keep saying I acted like a boy and instead helped others understand what I was going through." |

## Discussion

Findings indicate that the experience of adolescents dissatisfied with their gender in school is influenced by their interactions with peers and school staff, subsequently impacting their self-perception and identity. The captured experiences of these adolescents revealed four primary themes: their perception across three domains—self, relationships with school and its staff, and relationships with peers—and finally, their expectations from the school.

### Identity and Self-perception Challenges

**Painful self-awareness.** Based on participant interviews, adolescence for individuals dissatisfied with their gender is characterized by heightened self-awareness concerning their gender differences. Although these experiences may have surfaced before adolescence, the puberty period assumes significant importance as it becomes a defining phase for shaping their identity (46, 47), particularly their gender identity (48). As their emotional and sexual desires emerge and their physical appearance undergoes changes aligned with their biological gender, the dissonance between internal and external gender identities becomes notably pronounced. Initially, they grapple with a sense of divergence from peers of the same gender. This divergence encompasses various gender-related aspects, such as attire preferences, disinterest in conforming to stereotypical "female-appropriate" activities, a lack of belonging among female peers, and potential emotional and sexual attraction towards individuals of the same gender. It's crucial to note that most of these differences remain internalized, even though they might manifest in subtle external cues like clothing choices, remaining largely invisible to peers and school staff. Consistent with findings from other studies (49), this internal struggle results in considerable confusion and distress.

Subsequently, upon recognizing their dissimilarity from peers, these adolescents navigate a challenging, dual experience: resisting societal norms linked to their biological gender while concurrently feeling pressure to conform to these expectations (50). Both coping mechanisms—conforming to or resisting their biological gender—result in internal turmoil and distress. Attempts to conform to societal gender norms, driven by societal pressures, lead to a profound internal conflict between self-identity and societal expectations. Resistance, on the other hand, often invites rejection by peers and school authorities (51), accompanied by systemic repercussions within the school environment.

**Negative Self-perception.** As discussed earlier, the recognition of differences between adolescents dissatisfied with their gender and their peers leads to a profound sense of not belonging and an inability to fit in. In such cases, individuals experiencing this feeling often internalize self-blame for their differences and their struggle to conform (52). This leads them to believe that something must be inherently wrong with them, fostering a pervasive sense of self-loathing, as expressed in their interviews (e.g., 'I hate myself'). Additionally, in line with findings from other studies, this self-loathing may escalate into destructive behaviors such as self-injury among this population (53, 54). Adolescents experiencing gender dissatisfaction may also experience a profound aversion toward their physical bodies, perceiving a significant disconnection between their authentic selves and their physical form. Additionally, they might attribute the difficulties stemming from their gender dissatisfaction to their mismatched body (55).

**Feeling of loneliness and isolation.** The participants reported feelings of loneliness and isolation, which stemmed from two distinct mechanisms. Firstly, gender dissatisfied adolescents intentionally distance themselves from peers and school staff due to a pervasive sense of alienation, lack of belonging, and fear of rejection rooted in their negative self-perception, potentially evolving into a form of social anxiety (56, 57). This distancing can also be a strategy to safeguard their difference from others, aiming to evade potential social rejection resulting from revealing their dissimilarity. These findings align with research conducted by Mirzaei et al (55), suggesting that individuals dissatisfied with their gender often experience profound loneliness due to the shame and negative emotions associated with their dissatisfaction with their biological gender.

Secondly, gender-dissatisfied adolescents may encounter rejection and social distancing, irrespective of their efforts to connect, from both peers and school staff. This pattern aligns with previous research, which highlighted that parents of girls dissatisfied with their gender displaying behaviors such as cross-dressing or adopting traditionally masculine hairstyles, frequently tended to reject and create distance from their children (58, 59). While a sense of belonging and fitting in with peer groups is considered an integral aspect of adolescence (60), and adolescents typically seek this feeling through social connections, individuals experiencing gender dissatisfaction begin to realize that they feel internally different from their peers. They face the dilemma of either resisting or conforming, both of which cause significant distress. As a result, they engage in self-blame for their inability to "fit in" and develop hatred toward their mismatched body. This often leads them to distance themselves—either as a protective coping mechanism or due to rejection from others—ultimately resulting in feelings of loneliness and isolation.

**Identity pursuit: Confusion to coherence.** In addition to experiencing negative emotions such as shame and self-blame—often leading to feelings of loneliness—the painful awareness of dissatisfaction with their gender identity compels adolescents to embark on a personal exploration of their identity, particularly in relation to gender identity and gender-related behaviors. During this self-examination, they may compare themselves to individuals with different sexual orientations or those

with sexual or genetic disorders. However, due to the fundamental differences between their experience of gender dissatisfaction and these groups, such comparisons can further intensify their confusion and distress in their quest to shape their identity. This finding aligns with prior research (61-64), emphasizing the experience of feeling distinct or divergent among individuals dissatisfied with their gender. This feeling often leads to confusion, self-dissatisfaction, and distress, as highlighted in these studies.

Adolescence marks the period when individuals strive to discover and mold their identities, answering the fundamental question of who they are (65). It's a stage characterized by identity formation and role confusion (1), where they initially struggle with societal expectations to define their social roles, leading to psychological conflict. Resolving this conflict during this developmental phase contributes to the construction and consolidation of individual identity. Adolescents experiencing gender dissatisfaction encounter amplified confusion as they strive to overcome internal conflicts and shape their identity, particularly in relation to their gender. In other words, the identity moratorium phase, initially introduced by Erikson (1) and later expanded upon by Marcia (66), is inherently complex but becomes even more intricate for adolescents experiencing dissatisfaction with their gender. This process underscores the challenging nature of recognizing and embracing their differences. Glasser views individuals experiencing gender dissatisfaction as those struggling to form a comprehensive identity, potentially paving the way for the development of a 'failure identity' within this population (67). This interpretation applies not only to those confirmed to be transgender after physiological assessments but also to those expressing gender dissatisfaction without a confirmed transgender identity.

### School and Relationship Challenges

Participants in this study reported interpersonal challenges with both school staff and their peers, reflecting some similarities and differences influenced by the inherent dynamics of teacher-student and peer relationships. For instance, themes such as "being judged," "feeling humiliated," and "experiencing isolation" emerged as common experiences in interactions with both school staff and peers. However, themes such as "experiencing harassment in school," "not feeling accepted as a friend," and "being subjected to sexual objectification" were notably associated with peer relationships (as detailed later in this section). Conversely, experiences such as "being discriminated against" and "not receiving the same respect" were exclusively reported in relationships with school staff by the participants.

### Relationship With School Staff
**Sense of discrimination, humiliation, and rejection.** The provision of emotional security and support is paramount in shaping students' motivation and interest in their education within schools (68,69). Particularly, students dissatisfied with their gender encounter adverse experiences in their interactions with teachers and other school staff. They report experiencing both overt and subtle forms of discrimination, rejection, and humiliation, leading to feelings of isolation and a lack of understanding (70). The inherent power differential in student-teacher dynamics renders these students particularly vulnerable. Moreover, given their stage of identity development, these negative experiences detrimentally impact their self-perception, identity development, mental well-being, and academic success (71). Previous research also indicates that encountering discrimination in school settings can result in isolation, academic underachievement, feelings of insecurity, and estrangement from school staff (72).

**Fear, resentment, and hatred**: This emerging theme can be interpreted as the aftermath and repercussions of the preceding theme, indicating that students who encounter discrimination and rejection from school staff also experience negative emotions, particularly feelings of fear, resentment, and hatred towards the school staff. A notable distinction in the emerging themes on interactions with schools versus peers is the unique responsibility placed on teachers and other staff to provide support and security for all students (73, 74). It appears that students dissatisfied with their gender hold school staff accountable, and when these expectations are not met, they become significantly distressed.

**Acceptance and support.** Despite the prevalence of negative experiences in relationships with school staff, a few positive experiences were reported with particular school counselors and teachers who demonstrated knowledge in working with this population. They offered empathy, support, and acceptance, thereby establishing positive relationships with the participants. For those who received no support from their own families (75) and faced negative experiences from their peers, these few school counselors and teachers were considered the sole source of support and therefore deemed significant.

School plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging for students. However, experiences of discrimination, conflict, and rejection within the school environment can intensify negative self-perceptions among gender-dysphoric students and undermine their ability to engage in social interactions. The dynamics between students and school staff differ significantly from those between students and their peers. While fitting in among peers is important, the power imbalance between students and school staff, such as teachers, creates a distinct influence that can affect gender-dysphoric students in ways different from their peers.

### Perception of Peer Relationships
**Peer harassment and humiliation.** The experience of

physical and emotional harassment, along with verbal abuse, emerges as a significant theme among students dissatisfied with their gender regarding their relationship with their peers. This particular population presents a seemingly paradoxical manifestation of their gender-related behavior and their visible biological gender, often leading to mistaken perceptions of individuals having homosexual tendencies (76). This exacerbates the process of stigmatization and contributes to the establishment of a *tainted identity* (77) for this population, resulting in feelings of fear, insecurity, and isolation from their peers. These findings are consistent with previous studies (78, 79).

During the adolescent stage of development, being accepted and forming positive relationships with peers is considered a significant factor in shaping the evolving narrative of individuals' identities (80). Adolescents dissatisfied with their gender not only typically lack the support they need from their peers but also endure social pressure, harassment, and negative perceptions from their peers, which can detrimentally impact their sense of self and mental health (81).

**Attracting peers' attention.** Among the female participants, reports emerged of experiences of attraction (i.e., being attracted to and/or being the object of attraction) involving a person dissatisfied with their gender, who assumes a more masculine role in the relationship, and other students. These attractions have the potential to foster relationships characterized by emotional and sexual dynamics. This emerging theme suggests that there are students in the school who are willing to accept and engage with their female peers who are dissatisfied with their gender as male partners. Notably, this phenomenon did not manifest among the male participants of this study, as they did not report experiencing attraction towards or from other students. This difference could be attributed to cultural perceptions regarding masculinity and femininity, where masculine traits are often more valued, as suggested by previous studies (82). Another plausible explanation for this phenomenon is that for women seeking intimacy, trust, and emotional support are often more significant factors (83), hence they may find these qualities in their peers who exhibit more masculine characteristics, despite their biological gender being female. Conversely, men may prioritize feminine appearances in intimate relationships (84), and it appears that male students exhibiting feminine characteristics may not present sufficiently feminine appearances to attract other male peers. However, it's worth noting that the feeling of attraction was not a common experience among all female participants, as some reported negative experiences, similar to those discussed in the previous emerging theme.

**Acceptance, support, and positive communication.** While the majority of reported experiences by the participants indicated negative interactions with their peers, some participants shared positive experiences, including acceptance, support, and positive communication from certain peers. Participants attributed these positive experiences mainly to the knowledge, awareness, and "good intentions" of those who treated them positively. Other studies have also emphasized the importance of multicultural training in effectively supporting individuals dissatisfied with their gender (85). Although peer relationships emerged as a distinct theme, they can influence the previously discussed theme of identity. Negative interactions with peers—such as harassment, humiliation, or excessive attention—may hinder the process of self-understanding, which is crucial for identity formation. Conversely, positive interactions can facilitate this process.

### Expectations From the School

According to the findings, the participants expressed their expectations from the school in four main themes: to refrain from judgment, to offer empathy and support, to facilitate peer conversations and connections, and to enhance knowledge and awareness within the school community. Based on a substantial body of research, one of the primary factors in the development of tolerance towards diversity is the increase in knowledge, awareness, and understanding of marginalized groups. Therefore, a lack of knowledge and awareness can lead to increased discrimination and prejudice. This aligns with the findings of this study, indicating that adolescents dissatisfied with their gender perceive the primary cause of negative judgment towards them in school to be the lack of knowledge and awareness among educational practitioners, especially school counselors. Therefore, their awareness not only enables them to foster better and more supportive relationships with students experiencing gender dissatisfaction but also empowers them to educate other students to develop healthier relationships with this group. These findings resonate with the study by Perez-Brumer et al underscoring the importance of promoting knowledge and awareness to cultivate positive relationships among different student groups within schools (30). Previous studies also underscore the supportive role that schools should play for adolescents, emphasizing that schools should be safe and nurturing environments for all students, with particular attention to supporting students with special needs and minorities, just like any other student (31, 86). As previous research indicates, marginalized individuals dissatisfied with their gender often require more emotional support and empathy from their teachers and counselors, given their experiences of discrimination by school staff (87).

Another expectation voiced by participants was the facilitation of conversations and connections among peers. It can be inferred from this emerging theme that the majority of participants not only struggled to maintain positive relationships with their own families (88) but

also felt challenged in forming positive relationships with other students, thus relying on their teachers and counselors to facilitate interpersonal connections. This need for support could be attributed to the discrimination they face within the school environment. Positive and secure interactions and communications with peers could also provide opportunities for self-discovery (89, 90), which is crucial during the moratorium phase of identity development (91). Conversely, the presence of negative prejudice and judgment renders this population more inclined to conceal their gender identity to manage the stigma associated with their identity, thereby hindering the process of self-exploration (77, 92). The school environment is especially important for gender-dysphoric adolescents, as it significantly influences their sense of identity and belonging. A supportive and inclusive school setting can foster self-awareness and provide a safe space for these adolescents to explore and express their gender identity. Conversely, negative experiences—such as discrimination, bullying, or rejection from peers and staff—can deepen feelings of alienation, confusion, and self-blame. The findings in this section highlight the need for active collaboration between families and schools, as well as the critical role of school counselors in supporting students experiencing gender dissatisfaction.

## Conclusion

The results of the present study provide a deeper understanding of the experience of students with gender dissatisfaction in the school setting and their interactions with peers and the school staff with regard to their unique condition. The results highlight the fact that students with gender dysphoria not only have to go through a more challenging process in their gender identity development, but also may experience negative emotions such as anger and hatred towards themselves. This may also lead to a process of suppressing their emotions for the purpose of matching their visible gender others recognize. Moreover, the results reveal that the target population experiences fear, discrimination, humiliation, and rejection more frequently and intensely than those who do not present the gender dissatisfaction condition. They also expect the school staff to educate other students and their families on the gender dysphoria condition.

The clinical and educational implications of this research provide valuable insights for teachers, school counselors, and parents, aiming to enhance their understanding and awareness of the experiences, challenges, and unique needs of students experiencing gender dissatisfaction within the school system. Specifically, the clinical implications highlight the key differences in these students' experiences, identifying unique areas of emotional vulnerability as they navigate their educational journey and identity development. For school counselors, the findings emphasize the importance of addressing these vulnerabilities proactively and tailoring support to meet the specific needs of these students. The results also underscore the critical responsibility of teachers and counselors to actively fulfill these students' expectations of a supportive and inclusive school environment. Furthermore, the study highlights the need for additional research to explore the perspectives and experiences of other student populations in relation to this group, which could provide additional insights into the subject. Additionally, further research is essential to examine the experiences of teachers and school counselors who work with students dissatisfied with their gender, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges in working with this population.

## Authors' Contribution
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## Ethical Approval
In adherence to ethical considerations, participants' identities were kept confidential, and an Ethical Code (IR.UT.PSYEDU. REC.1399.040) was obtained.

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