



A cross-sectional study of changes in Norwegian adolescents' body image from 1992 to 2002

Elisabet E. Storvoll^{a,*}, Åse Strandbu^b, Lars Wichstrøm^c

^a*Norwegian Institute for Alcohol and Drug Research, P.O. Box 565 Sentrum,
N-0105 Oslo, Norway*

^b*NOVA — Norwegian Social Research, Norway*

^c*Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway*

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Abstract

The present study examines changes in adolescents' body image over a 10-year period. Both satisfaction with appearance in general, and satisfaction with different aspects of appearance (e.g., face, muscle tone, and weight) are considered. We analyzed data from two general population studies of 13–19-year-old Norwegians, “Young in Norway 1992” ($N = 10,460$, response rate = 97.0%) and “Young in Norway 2002” ($N = 11,371$, response rate = 92.3%). These studies used identical sampling procedures, data collection procedures, and measures of body image. The analyses showed a polarization in adolescents' body image — concurrent with an increase in the proportion of adolescents with a very negative body image, there was an increase in the proportion of adolescents with a very positive body image. The greater proportion of adolescents with a very negative body image could partly be explained statistically by the increased body mass index (BMI) in the same period. Girls had a more problematic body image than boys, both in 1992 and in 2002. Whether the strength of this gender difference changed or not depended on the aspect of appearance considered.

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Introduction

The proportion of people who are dissatisfied with their physical appearance is often claimed to have increased considerably during the last few decades, at

least in western countries (e.g., Labre, 2002; Rosenblum & Lewis, 1999; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tanleff-Dunn, 1999). However, there are few well designed empirical studies to support this statement. The lack of such studies is particularly true for adolescents.

The most cited cross-sectional studies on changes in body image over time were conducted among readers of the *Psychology Today* magazine in 1972

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +47 22 34 02 56;
fax: +47 22 34 04 01.

E-mail address: elisabet.storvoll@sirus.no (E.E. Storvoll).

(Berscheid, Walster, & Bohrnstedt, 1973), 1985 (Cash, Winstead, & Janda, 1986), and 1995 (Garner, 1997). According to these surveys American females' and males' dissatisfaction with their appearance increased considerably both from 1972 to 1985 and from 1985 to 1996. However, as pointed out by Cash (2002), these studies have several shortcomings: The samples were self-selected readers who responded to the *Psychology Today* surveys, the presentation of the purpose of the three surveys differed, the analyses in 1972 and 1985 but not in 1996 were conducted in a stratified sample selected to match the U.S. census on various demographics, and the item wording and scaling formats varied across the surveys.

Cash and Henry (1995) also published a paper indicating a worsening of women's body image from 1985 to 1993. This paper was based on a representative survey of American women in 1993, using some of the same questions as the 1985 survey among the *Psychology Today* readers (Cash et al., 1986). Even though the sample from 1993 was representative of American women, the basis for comparison was the self-selected sample of readers who responded to the *Psychology Today* magazine survey.

Moreover, four cross-sectional studies of changes in body image among American college students have been carried out. The first of these studies also concluded that females' body image became worse from 1966 to 1996 (Sondhaus, Kurtz, & Strube, 2001). However, in contrast to the *Psychology Today* studies they found great stability in males' body image over time. Whereas Sondhaus et al. only looked at two time periods, the second study of college students examined change over five time periods: 1983–1989, 1990–1992, 1993–1995, 1996–1998, and 1999–2001 (Cash, Morrow, Hrabosky, & Perry, 2004). This study also reported increasing body image dissatisfaction among non-black females until the mid 1990s. However, this increase was followed by a body image improvement among both non-black and black women. Again males' body image was reported to be stable over time.

The third study of college students only considered acceptance of body shape, and the fourth study only considered acceptance of weight. Neither of these studies investigated satisfaction with other features of appearance. The third study, which considered the

discrepancy between rating of current and ideal body figures using silhouettes, indicated stability in both females' and males' dissatisfaction with body shape from 1983–1984 to 1995–1998 (Rozin, Trachtenberg, & Cohen, 2001). The fourth study indicated stability in males' self acceptance of body weight from 1982 to 1992 (Heatherton, Nichols, Mahamedi, & Keel, 1995). However, among females the self acceptance of body weight increased.

In summary, most studies indicate that males' body image has been stable during the last few decades and that females' body image became worse until the early/mid 1990s. However, a recent study indicates that females' body satisfaction has improved from the mid 1990s (Cash et al., 2004). In order to make conclusions about changes in body image from the mid 1990s, studies that consider change in body image during the last few years are needed. The present paper provides such knowledge by examining changes in females' and males' body image in two general population samples of Norwegian adolescents: "Young in Norway 1992" and "Young in Norway 2002". These studies used identical sampling procedures, data collection procedures, and measures of body image. Both feelings about body and appearance in general (The Physical Appearance subscale of Harter's Self Perception Profile for Adolescents; Harter, 1988) and satisfaction with different aspects of the body and appearance (a measure modeled after Body Area Satisfaction Scale; Brown, Cash, & Lewis, 1989) are considered. The latter measure is useful in its ability to distinguish the physical foci of body satisfaction.

Gender differences in body image

Earlier studies indicate that females have a more problematic body image than males have (e.g., Feingold & Mazzella, 1998; Holsen, Kraft, & Røysamb, 2001; Kostanski & Gullone, 1998; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001; Mendelson, Mendelson, & Andrews, 2000; Muth & Cash, 1997). Also among the participants in "Young in Norway 1992", girls were more dissatisfied with their appearance than boys were (Wichstrøm, 1998). Due to the greater attention on males' appearance during the last years (Olivardia, 2002), one could expect that this gender difference is less pronounced today than it was some years ago.

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