



# Self-perceptions of romantic appeal in adolescents with a cleft lip and/or palate



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## ABSTRACT

During adolescence, romantic relationships are a key developmental milestone. Coupled with the increasing salience of appearance and social acceptance, adolescents with an appearance-altering condition may feel particularly vulnerable when it comes to romantic relationships. This study aimed to explore the prevalence of romantic experiences among adolescents with a cleft lip and/or palate (CL/P), and to investigate how these experiences could be related to depressive symptoms and global self-worth. The study included 661 Norwegian adolescents with CL/P, who were compared to a large national sample. The prevalence of romantic relationships was lower among adolescents with CL/P compared to the reference group, although the overall impact on depressive symptoms and global self-worth appeared to be low. This study is one of few to explore the impact of a congenital visible condition on experiences of romantic relationships and provides preliminary insight into a significant, yet complex topic.

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## Introduction

During adolescence, the experience of romantic relationships is a key developmental milestone in the progression toward social maturity (Furman, 2002). Far from trivial, these relationships are a major topic of conversation among adolescents (Thompson, 1994), play a central role in the development of identity and close friendships (Furman, 2002; Furman & Shaffer, 2003), and have significant implications for health, adjustment, and overall life satisfaction (Bouchey, 2007; Donaghue, 2009). Although it has long been recognised that adolescents' peer relations and friendships significantly contribute to psychological health, considerably less is known about the influence of romantic experiences (La Greca & Harrison, 2005).

Romantic popularity has been shown to be associated with physical attractiveness (Feingold, 1990; Langlois et al., 2000), and with subjective appearance evaluations (Bale & Archer,

2013). Appearance becomes increasingly salient during adolescence (Smolak, 2004). Coupled with the physical changes which take place at this key developmental stage and the pressure to conform to societal standards of beauty, adolescents can become preoccupied with their appearance and the appearance of others around them (Smolak, 2004). Such concerns may be exacerbated by an increased interest in forming romantic relationships during this developmental period (Markey & Markey, 2006).

One group of adolescents who may be at risk of appearance dissatisfaction and exposed to appearance-related comments from peers, are those affected by an appearance-altering condition. The prevalence of young people with a 'significant' visible facial difference has been calculated to be between one in fifty and one in a hundred (Julian & Partridge, 2008). This includes the most common craniofacial condition found in humans, cleft lip and/or palate (CL/P). Although the primary surgery to repair the cleft typically occurs during the child's first year of life, those affected by CL/P must engage in a multidisciplinary treatment pathway throughout childhood and into adulthood. Consequently, young people born with a cleft can feel they differ from their peers, particularly in relation to appearance (Rumsey & Stock, 2013). These appearance concerns have the potential to impact significantly upon social experiences and emotional wellbeing (Rumsey, Clarke, White, Wyn-Williams, & Garlick, 2004). Adolescents with CL/P may

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therefore feel particularly vulnerable when it comes to romantic relationships.

Up until the past two decades, research on adolescents' romantic experiences among the general population has been scarce (Furman, 2002). Concurrently, only a minority of studies have directly discussed the potential impact of a visible difference on the prevalence and reported experience of adolescent romantic relationships (Griffiths, Williamson, & Rumsey, 2012). Some studies mention the potential importance of romantic relationships for this population only briefly, rather than focussing on the area as a primary topic of research interest (Feragen, Stock, & Kvaalem, 2015; Fox, Rumsey, & Morris, 2007; Havstam, Laakso, & Ringsberg, 2011; Stock, Feragen, & Rumsey, 2016; Tevik & Feragen, 2015; Williams, Gannon, & Soon, 2011). Interestingly, while a number of these studies report clear concerns regarding the negative impact of a visible difference on the chances of experiencing romantic relationships (Fox et al., 2007; Havstam et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2011), the overall impact on adjustment appears to be low in retrospect (Stock, Feragen, & Rumsey, 2015). Further, one quantitative study reported self-perceptions of romantic appeal in adolescents with CL/P that were comparable to a same-aged reference group (Feragen et al., 2015). Inconclusive findings may partly be explained by the complex, multifaceted and fluctuating nature of self-perceptions, while also reflecting differences in age ranges, measures and constructs. Given the potential influence of romantic experiences upon psychosocial adjustment during adolescence, a key research priority should be to investigate factors that are associated with positive romantic self-perceptions, particularly among those with a visible difference who may be especially vulnerable.

Within the general population, a number of factors have been suggested to affect the relationship between romantic experiences and psychosocial adjustment. These include adolescents' reports of having had (or not had) a romantic relationship (Madsen & Collins, 2011; Yu, Branje, Keijsers, & Meeus, 2014), self-perceptions of romantic appeal (Bouchey, 2007), self-perceptions of social experiences and close friendships (Bouchey, 2007; Cash, Thériault, & Annis, 2004; Furman & Collins, 2011; Furman, Low, & Ho, 2009), perceptions of relational and global self-worth (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1998), and self-perceived attractiveness and body image (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007; Bale & Archer, 2013). In parallel, depressive symptoms are known to increase during adolescence, particularly in females (Twenge & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2002; Wichstrom, 1999), and have also been shown to be associated with experiences of dating during adolescence (Natsuaki, Biehl, & Ge, 2009). It is therefore important to investigate correlates of depressive symptoms as a way of understanding these associations and of optimising psychological health (Chow, Ruhl, & Buhrmester, 2015; Natsuaki et al., 2009). Given the centrality of appearance perceptions to social 'belonging' and psychological wellbeing in adolescence (Smolak, 2012), as well as the social status of having a romantic partner at this age (Brown, 1999), the impact of having a visible difference on young people's perceptions of romantic appeal, depressive symptoms, and global self-worth should be explored further.

Gender differences have been demonstrated in young people with CL/P (Berger & Dalton, 2009; Feragen et al., 2015), and within the general population (Franko & Striegel-Moore, 2002; Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994), with higher levels of appearance dissatisfaction and emotional distress found in young females compared to males. Thus, gender is an important variable when exploring concepts such as self-perceptions and depressive symptoms in adolescent samples. Another possible contributory factor in the relationship between CL/P and romantic relationships could be how 'visible' the condition is to others. Although many studies have identified subjective perceptions of visibility to be more predictive of psychosocial adjustment than the objective 'severity' of

the condition, many CL/P studies still make reference to the importance of separating samples according to cleft type. For the purpose of the current study, analyses were therefore performed according to 'visible' (cleft lip, cleft lip alveolus) and 'nonvisible' (cleft palate, submucous cleft palate) cleft types. Finally, additional conditions, such as a genetic syndrome, developmental delay, or learning difficulty, are prevalent in young people with CL/P (Sivertsen et al., 2008) and are known to potentially affect psychological function (Feragen, Stock, & Rumsey, 2014). Their presence, particularly in cleft samples, should thus be accounted for and controlled when possible (Feragen et al., 2014).

## The Present Study

The paucity of research on the romantic experiences of those with a visible difference stands in sharp contrast to the importance of this factor in many people's lives. Romantic relationships play a central role in adolescent development, health, and overall satisfaction with life (Bouchey, 2007; Furman & Shaffer, 2003), and has been shown to impact on appearance evaluations (Bale & Archer, 2013). Young people with a visible difference may therefore be particularly vulnerable when it comes to satisfaction with appearance and romantic appeal, and could possibly struggle to initiate romantic relationships. Further, the negative impact of a visible difference on romantic experiences could be expected to be stronger in females, due to higher levels of appearance dissatisfaction and emotional distress in the general population as well as in those with a visible difference (Feragen et al., 2015; Franko & Striegel-Moore, 2002). Nevertheless, few studies have specifically investigated the impact of a visible difference on adolescents' romantic experiences (Griffiths et al., 2012), and knowledge regarding the nature and extent of the potential impact of a visible condition on romantic relationships is therefore strongly needed.

The aim of the present study was to conduct preliminary investigation into possible associations between experiences of romantic relationships, self-perceptions of romantic appeal, global self-worth, and emotional adjustment in young people with CL/P at age 16, with the objective of informing future research in this area. More specifically, the aims were to: (a) investigate the prevalence of previous and current romantic relationships reported by adolescents with CL/P compared to same-aged adolescents without CL/P, (b) investigate the impact of a number of relevant factors (gender, cleft visibility, additional conditions, satisfaction with appearance, self-perceptions of social acceptance and close friendships, and current and previous romantic relationships) which may contribute to the development of potential concerns, and (c) explore the impact of having had or not having had experience of being in a romantic relationship on levels of depressive symptoms and global self-worth.

## Method

### Setting

Norway provides a centralised setting for CL/P treatment. The present study was based on case records of 16-year-old adolescents born with CL/P, collected from routine psychological clinical assessments within the Oslo team. This team that is responsible for two thirds of the entire cleft population, treating approximately 70–80 new babies born with CL/P per year. The team's clinical psychologist met with each participant before he or she completed a questionnaire.

The present study conformed to the guidelines set by the local ethics committee (Regional Committee for Medical Research Ethics, Oslo-East).

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