



# A longitudinal study of 340 young people with or without a visible difference: The impact of teasing on self-perceptions of appearance and depressive symptoms



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## ABSTRACT

Previous research in both the general population and in those with a visible facial difference has identified potential associations between teasing, dissatisfaction with appearance and emotional distress. However, most studies are based on cross-sectional and retrospective methodology, restricting the interpretation of findings. The present study explored the longitudinal impact of perceived teasing on satisfaction with appearance and depressive symptoms in young people with and without a visible congenital condition. Routine psychological assessments were conducted at ages 10 and 16 years ( $N=340$ ). Experiences of teasing after the age of 10 significantly impacted on appearance evaluations and depressive symptoms in adolescent females. The impact of teasing on adolescent males was possibly counteracted by reports of more positive social experiences. Early identification of perceived teasing in all children to prevent the development of emotional problems and dissatisfaction with appearance is of vital importance.

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## Introduction

Within the general population, appearance concerns are deemed to be 'normative' (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002; Grogan, 2007). Adolescence in particular is known to be a challenging time, in which 'blending in' and belonging to a social group is central to psychological wellbeing, and in which a key component of evaluating social and psychological adjustment is appearance (Frisén, Lunde, & Berg, 2015). Adolescence is also a key time for appearance-related comments, teasing and bullying to occur (Lovegrove & Rumsey, 2005), which are thought to impact further on subjective appearance evaluations (Menzel et al., 2010; Smolak, 2004). Concurrently, potential associations between teasing, dissatisfaction with appearance and psychological distress have been proposed (Bellmore & Cillessen, 2006; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2000; Lunde & Frisen, 2011; Menzel et al., 2010).

One group of young people who may be particularly vulnerable to feeling dissatisfied with their appearance, and to the associated social challenges, are those born with a visible facial difference

(Rumsey & Stock, 2013). Research has identified a number of psychosocial challenges for this group (Rumsey, 2002), including staring, questions, comments, and aversive behaviours from their peers. However, more recent studies in the field of visible difference have highlighted findings which show levels of adjustment to be in line with, or better than those of their peers (Berger & Dalton, 2009; Feragen, Kvaalem, Rumsey, & Borge, 2010). While conflicting research findings may partly be explained by the complex, multifaceted and fluctuating nature of adjustment, differences in findings also reflect methodological problems. One major methodological problem, both in the general appearance literature, and regarding research on visible conditions, is the lack of longitudinal datasets (Hunt, Burden, Hepper, & Johnston, 2005; Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010; Rumsey & Stock, 2013). In the absence of longitudinal data, conclusions such as the directionality of associations between negative social experiences, dissatisfaction with appearance, and emotional distress are severely limited.

## The Challenges of a Visible Facial Difference

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 (Changing Faces, 2010; Julian & Partridge, 2008). A large proportion of such visible differences are present from

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birth, such as the most frequent craniofacial condition observed in humans (Cox, 2004), cleft lip and/or palate (CL/P). In spite of surgical and other interventional procedures from birth through to adulthood, young people with a cleft may feel that they differ from others in their facial appearance. Psychological adjustment to a visible difference such as CL/P is multifaceted, and research investigating how affected individuals fare in relation to their peers without a visible difference has thus far been largely inconclusive (Rumsey & Stock, 2013). However, some areas of emerging consensus have been identified, specifically highlighting potential difficulties in relation to subjective satisfaction with appearance, social interactions, and symptoms of anxiety and depression (Hunt et al., 2005), in addition to potential appearance-related teasing (Hunt, Burden, Hepper, Stevenson, & Johnston, 2006, 2007; Shavel-Jessop & Shearer, 2013; Turner, Thomas, Dowell, Rumsey, & Sandy, 1997). Traditionally, it has been assumed that young people with CL/P and other visible conditions would experience more teasing and poorer self-perceptions as a result of their visible difference. However, the literature offers conflicting perspectives, with some studies reporting more positive social experiences and a comparable or higher level of appearance satisfaction in young people with a cleft than has been demonstrated in the general population (Berger & Dalton, 2009; Feragen et al., 2010), suggesting that this relationship is not straightforward. Furthermore, results and interpretations of findings are mostly based on cross-sectional designs, due to a lack of longitudinal datasets. Some of these contradictory findings could also be explained by differences in the choice of measurements (Stock, Hammond, et al., *in press*), such as whether appearance satisfaction is based on self-perceptions or is evaluated by other people. Psychological perspectives of adjustment to a visible difference have clearly demonstrated the centrality of subjective evaluations, compared to those based on more objective measures of visibility (Appearance Research Collaboration, 2009; Moss, 2005; Ong et al., 2007). Conflicting findings may also be related to sample characteristic, such as representativeness, gender distribution and age (Rumsey & Stock, 2013).

### **Teasing, Appearance, and Emotional Adjustment: Directionality of Associations**

Evidence that negative social interactions and peer harassment can impact on self-perceptions of appearance and emotional adjustment has been reported in both the general population (Bellmore & Cillessen, 2006; Lunde & Frisen, 2011; McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015; Menzel et al., 2010) and in young people with a visible condition (Feragen & Borge, 2010; Hunt et al., 2006, 2007). More specifically, factors such as the timing and duration (Rueger, Malecki, & Demaray, 2011) and the intensity of the emotional reaction to experiences of peer victimisation (Kvalem, von Soest, Roald, & Skolleborg, 2006) have been shown to play an important role for the impact of negative social experience on emotional adjustment. Again, the cross-sectional and retrospective nature of most studies on congenital visible conditions to date has prevented a comprehensive understanding of the direction of these associations and of how these relationships may change over time (Smolak, 2004). Teasing may be a cause or a consequence of psychological problems, or a combination of both (McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015; Reijntjes et al., 2010). As has been shown within the general population (Harter, Stocker, & Robinson, 1996; Lunde & Frisen, 2011; Webb, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Donovan, 2014), teasing and bullying in young people with visible conditions could be expected to trigger or exacerbate dissatisfaction with appearance (Feragen & Borge, 2010). However, emotional difficulties may also precede subsequent teasing. Individuals with a low appearance self-concept or a high level of social anxiety are more likely to

perceive ambiguous social experiences as threatening, and to interpret these experiences as appearance-based rejection (Frisén, Lunde, & Hwang, 2009; Lavell, Zimmer-Gembeck, Farrell, & Webb, 2014; Rosser, Moss, & Rumsey, 2010). In parallel, positive social experiences, such as peer acceptance, have been shown to protect against emotional distress in a longitudinal study from the general population (Holsen, Kraft, & Roysamb, 2001). Interestingly, more positive self-perceptions of social acceptance have been found in the CL/P population compared to reference groups (Feragen & Stock, 2015; Feragen, Stock, & Kvalem, 2015), which could affect the pathways between experiences of teasing and satisfaction with appearance in this population. However, in order to untangle the directionality of these associations, and to inform prevention and intervention more generally, longitudinal approaches are needed. Further, given the prospective contributions of satisfaction with appearance to emotional adjustment, an important research priority should be to investigate the development of appearance dissatisfaction from childhood to adolescence and to examine the impact of social experiences, positive as well as negative, on this central variable.

### **The Significance of Gender and Conditions Additional to the Cleft**

A number of additional factors may also impact upon the relationships between teasing, appearance concerns and emotional adjustment. In the general population, the nature of appearance evaluations, in addition to its risk factors, outcomes and developmental course, are known to vary according to gender (Bucchianeri, Arikian, Hannan, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2013; Smolak, 2004). Females from the general population have been shown to report higher levels and earlier onset of emotional distress (Twenge & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2002; Wichstrom, 1999), and to be less satisfied with their appearance over time than their male peers (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Paxton, 2006; Frisen & Anneheden, 2014). Similar gender differences have been demonstrated in young people with a cleft (Feragen et al., 2015). Gender-wise comparisons between clinical samples and the general population do not suggest any differential processes that would strengthen or reduce expected differences between males and females with CL/P (Feragen & Stock, 2015; Feragen et al., 2015). Regarding the impact of negative social experiences such as teasing, females from the general population, in comparison to males, have demonstrated residual effects of peer victimisation, even after the cessation of teasing and bullying (Rueger et al., 2011). Less evidence is available, however, for gender differences in the impact of teasing and peer victimisation on emotional adjustment (Rueger et al., 2011). One study found that the risk for depression and emotional problems was related to the frequency of teasing in males, while this association was present in females irrespective of the frequency of teasing (Brunstein Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould, 2007). To the present authors' knowledge, no studies have investigated the residual effects of teasing on emotional adjustment, or differential consequences of teasing on appearance satisfaction in young people with a visible difference, based on a longitudinal dataset.

A second contributory factor in the relationship between teasing, appearance satisfaction and emotional symptoms in cleft samples could be the presence of an additional condition, such as a genetic syndrome, developmental delay, or learning difficulties. These conditions are prevalent in young people with CL/P (Sivertsen et al., 2008), and are known to potentially affect psychological functioning (Feragen, Stock, & Rumsey, 2014). Therefore, their presence, particularly in cleft samples, should be accounted for and controlled when possible (Feragen et al., 2014).

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