

Shifting (un)concerns in considering appearance important among Finnish adolescents and young adults

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Abstract

Due to hyper-visual culture, the importance of physical appearance has allegedly grown among young people. Given the role of appearance in socialization and identity formation, understanding how appearance-related values vary by gender, age, and socio-economic status is crucial for exploring their impact on social inequalities and cultural norms. Using Finnish youth survey data from 2005 and 2019 ($N = 3343$) and ordinal logistic regression, we examine whether there is a change in self-reported importance of one's own appearance according to survey year, gender and age, and whether parental socio-economic status plays a role in appearance-related values among 15- to 29-year-old Finns. Our findings reveal that indifference towards the importance of appearance has in fact increased. Overall appearance importance has not risen, but rather become more pronounced among certain social categories, such as young men whose parents have vocational or university education. The alleged significance of appearance regimes may manifest more in forms of self-expression and social belonging among youth, rather than being strictly tied to the perceived importance of physical appearance, thereby hindering the reported importance of appearance. We conclude by discussing the differences between appearance pressures and appearance importance.

Keywords: physical appearance, appearance attitudes, adolescents, appearance value, appearance importance

Introduction

The importance of appearance is a well-established fact in contemporary society. Norm-obedient appearance yields social and economic benefits: prestigious jobs, better salaries and higher school grades (for a detailed review, see Anderson et al., 2010). Physical appearance affects social judgments, and looks are also intentionally used to communicate belonging to chosen social groups while distancing from others (e.g., Mears, 2020; Vandebroek, 2017). Four factors have been recognized behind the rise of the 'beauty regime': visual consumer culture, social media, the shift to a service economy and the democratisation of appearance standards across society (Kuipers, 2022).

On a population-wide scale in Finland, including adults and youth aged 18–29, the importance of appearance has slightly increased during the 21st century (Sarpila et al., 2017). The rise in appearance-re-

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lated pressures, especially among young females and on social media (Hakim, 2018; Modica, 2020; Åberg et al., 2020), does not necessarily correlate with an increased value placed on one's own appearance. Despite seeming conceptually similar, appearance pressures are a form of social pressure (APA, 2021a), encompassing all the factors that contribute to individuals feeling constrained to conform to beauty standards, such as cultural norms, (social) media influence and peer pressure. Appearance as a *value*, however, concerns how important an individual considers appearance in their life; the importance and usefulness attached to it (APA, 2021b). The value attached to appearance may be linked to how it can be utilised as a resource in different contexts (Kukkonen et al., 2018).

Until recent years, the increased demands on appearance were thought to affect mainly women (Mears, 2020; Sarpila et al., 2020; Widdows, 2018). Previous research has shown that appearance is important for women's self-esteem (Fox & Vendemia, 2021; Grogan, 2016), but its importance for men's self-worth has also increased as a result of the general insecurity of life (Hakim, 2015; 2018). This trend highlights the need to examine how young men assess the importance of their own appearance, particularly as beauty standards and body image pressures have expanded to include them. However, the importance of appearance is not only mediated by gender and age, but also by socio-economic background (Bourdieu, 1984; Vandenbroeck, 2016; Åberg et al., 2020). Affected by socioeconomic status, perceptions of appearance are passed onto future generations through socialisation and taste (Bourdieu, 1984), peer pressure from friends and school (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006) and meeting different aesthetic requirements in working life (Van der Berg & Arts, 2019; Warhurst & Nickson, 2001; 2007). Despite the growing societal emphasis on appearance, little is known about how socio-economic background, gender, and age shape the importance young people place on their own appearance. Existing research has largely focused on adults and women, leaving questions about how these dynamics apply to youth. This study addresses this gap by exploring how these factors are associated with young people's perceptions of appearance, offering fresh insights into an underexplored demographic.

Exploring the importance of appearance among young people is vital, as appearance and related attitudes function as mechanisms for creating and reproducing inequalities (Kukkonen et al., 2024; Mears, 2014; 2022), even in a relatively egalitarian Nordic welfare state such as Finland (Sarpila et al., 2017). Appearance is also tied to identity formation, especially in adolescence and young adulthood, which plays a role in shaping lifelong perceptions and behaviours and might shed light on appearance attitude trends. In this study, we examine whether the importance of young people's own appearance has changed between 2005 and 2019, and how gender, age and socio-economic background are associated with these assessments of one's own appearance. We focus on young people between the ages of 15 and 29, as people under 29 are legally considered as youth by the Finnish Youth Act (Finlex, Youth Act 16/1285). We will briefly explore earlier literature that discusses the increasing significance of appearance for individuals in the twentieth century. We then present our data and methods. Finally, we discuss our findings, observe our limitations as well as propose directions for future research.

The decision to examine the years 2005 and 2019 is based on several key factors. First, 2005 marked the first-year appearance importance was surveyed, providing a baseline for comparison. Additionally, this period predates the rise of hyper-visual social media platforms, which gained significant influence in the late 2000s, reshaping youth culture. Moreover, societal changes, such as post-2008 economic austerity, may have contributed to the increasing role of body work and appearance management as a form of self-worth, particularly among men, as theorized by Hakim (2018) in relation to shifting gender roles and economic precarity. Given the link between postmodern identity formation and appearance with the rise of 'beauty regimes' (Giddens, 1991; Kuipers, 2022), it stands to reason to assume that appearance became a more prominent value among young people in 2019 compared to 2005.

Why and for whom physical appearance is important

The body as a postmodern identity project

While societal changes, such as the individualisation of society and consumerism (Shilling, 1993) affect appearance attitudes, pursuing the ideal body can also be seen as a central identity project (e.g., Featherstone, 1991; Giddens, 1991). This is especially important during youth (Quittkat et al., 2019) and in a capitalist society, often happens through consumerism (Deutsch & Theodorou, 2010). Emphasising the body as ‘a constitutive part of the self’ (Shilling, 1993, p. 3) highlights the meaning of physical appearance in judging a person’s worth. The body serves as both a personal asset and a social symbol, reflecting and conveying socially significant traits that others may use to infer key characteristics about an individual.

According to Giddens (1991, p. 57), control of the body is ‘integral to the very nature of both agency and of being accepted by others as competent’. Body control serves to maintain a sense of self-identity while simultaneously placing the individual ‘on display’ through their physical presence. Referring to socially or culturally organised regimes, Giddens (1991) states that the demand of constant display also creates the need to monitor the ways in which identity is performed through appearance. The body thus narrates identity in an external form. Regimes partly connect personal habits and social conventions with aspects of the visible appearance of the body, while also reflecting personal inclinations and dispositions (Giddens, 1991) – all of which are especially pronounced during adolescence and young adulthood.

In the twentieth century, the value of appearance has been said to have become a ‘moral imperative’ (Widdows, 2018) and with the rise of ‘beauty regimes’ (Kuipers, 2022), appearance has been seen to be the core of understanding self-control and social worth. This is seen as a result of four intertwined developments contributing to the rise of appearance importance: visual consumer culture, social democratisation of ideal physical characteristics, the shift to a service economy and the recent rise of social media (Kuipers, 2022). However, while postmodern identity formation and the rise of ‘beauty regimes’ may suggest that appearance holds greater significance in young people’s values in 2019 compared to 2005, it is important to consider that postmodernism also challenges social conventions, including traditional, rigid beauty standards. Movements such as body positivity and the increasing space for individuals to express their identities through appearance may also have shifted focus away from the importance placed on one’s own appearance. At the same time, individuals’ relationships with their aesthetic bodies are complex, often marked by a coexistence of both appreciation and dissatisfaction (Quittkat, et al., 2019). Additionally, the Finnish youth have been shown to prioritize values such as health, peace, and freedom (Pekkarinen & Myllyniemi, 2019), and the challenges of living in a rapidly changing world may further shift their focus toward these broader concerns. Thus, the role of appearance in shaping youth values may be more nuanced than a mere increase in importance.

Gender and age dynamics in appearance importance

Looks are thought to be more useful for women than for men, but research suggests that the benefits of appearance are more complex (Kukkonen et al., 2024). However, women are judged on their appearance (Kukkonen et al., 2018; Sarpila et al., 2020), and are expected to do more “appearance work” (Kukkonen, 2021), putting more effort into their appearance, whether in work or in relationships.

In addition to gender, age is a key factor in defining the importance of appearance. It has been noted that appearance importance peaks during the teenage years in both men and women (Quittkat et al., 2019). Having the right clothes, style, body shape and size are important for fitting in with peers, but also a way for standing out from the crowd (e.g., Wilska, 2002; Frost, 2003). Men report lesser body appreciation than women in different age groups, which may result from men’s self-concept being more tied to functionality and thus more affected by ageing (Quittkat et al. 2019). In comparison to men, women also report higher levels of appearance importance across age (Quittkat et al. 2019; Åberg et al. 2020).

However, the expanding beauty regime, the rise of social media and hyper-visual culture, appearance is an established part of the lives of both young men and women. According to Hakim (2018), the rise of appearance importance in men stems from a modern-day anomie: the financial crisis of 2008 and post-crisis austerity economy, which have eroded men's traditional breadwinning capacities and penetrated young people's lives with precariousness (Hakim, 2018). Historically, labour and financial security have acted as means to form a sense of self-worth and identity for men. However, as the job market has become more precarious, young men are increasingly looking for new ways to create self-value. The widening array of masculinities offer men a broader range of self-expression through appearance, and the emerging masculinities have been referred to by inventing idiosyncratic names, such as "metrosexual", which was primarily used in the 2000s to refer to young single men living or working in the city who were preoccupied with their appearance and ready to invest in it (Simpson, 2002). The metrosexual was followed by the "spornosexual", referring to the rise of men attending the gym for the sole purpose of gaining appearance-related capital later to be exchanged into other forms of capital (Hakim, 2018; Simpson, 2014).

It is uncertain how entwined appearance pressures and the value placed on appearance are; appearance pressures are reflected in body dissatisfaction, which seems to stay stable across age, whereas appearance importance tends to decrease (Quittkat et al., 2019). Thus, it remains rather unclear whether the alleged widening of possibilities in terms of identity expression affects appearance importance among young people. However, these gendered directions of development and the rise of the meaning of appearance in formation of young men's identities may indicate a decrease in the gap between the two genders in considering appearance important, making possible gender differences in appearance importance less notable.

The body, appearance and socio-economic status

Appearance importance is not only tied to life precariousness, but also socialisation, culture and family values. According to Holmqvist and Frisén (2010, p. 135), "body dissatisfaction is a phenomenon that appears to be more common in countries that are economically wealthier and where people have a more Western lifestyle". Parental characteristics influence adolescents' educational choices (e.g., Jæger & Holm, 2007; Heiskala et al., 2021), especially in early adulthood (Erola, 2009), affecting identity formation and intergenerational values, which might also affect views on appearance importance.

The body holds a significant value in a consumer-driven society that highly emphasises appearance (e.g., Featherstone, 1991; Smith Maguire, 2008) and capitalism is indeed an integral part of identity formation (Deutsch & Theodorou, 2010). The distinctions between social classes are manifested in behaviours, preferences, and lifestyles, the human body serving as the most tangible representation of one's social class preferences (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 190). The embodied, socialised social class Bourdieu calls *habitus*, where the social structure becomes ingrained in individuals' bodies, making social divisions an accepted part of everyday social interactions. However, what distinguishes different classes or class fractions is not simply the act of investing in one's body, but the understanding of specific strategies and the expected benefits associated with particular forms of bodywork. (Vandebroek, 2017, pp. 80—81). As the relationship between the body and social status has been extensively documented (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984), it is unlikely that we would observe a significant temporal difference between 2005 and 2019 in the importance placed on the aesthetic body across different class backgrounds.

The main opposing forces that define class differences in bodily management and modification are not solely physical appearance per se but preferences for practices that either produce short-term, visible and tangible results (such as muscularity) or practices oriented towards long-term, abstract and invisible benefits (such as better health) that are naturalised in everyday interactions (Bourdieu, 1984; Vandebroek, 2017), which again highlight the importance of appearance and the work put into it. Occasionally, physical appearance is conceptualised as a complementary form of capital (Anderson et al., 2010; Holla & Kuipers, 2015; Mears, 2014; Sarpila et al., 2017; 2020) that bears an independent symbolic value in global consumer society and, when appropriately accumulated, compensates for the lack of other (i.e., social, cultural and

economic) capitals.

Examining the role of parental socio-economic status in the appearance attitudes of young Finns, we look into the association between social background and appearance. As adolescents have not completed their full education yet and their social conditions are partly affected by their parents' education, we focus on their parents' education as a demarcation of their socio-economic position.

Research design

Objectives of the study

In the previous chapter, we explored earlier research that highlighted the significance of appearance for modern individuals. We will be looking into survey year, gender and age, as appearance attitudes have previously been found to be gendered and age-related. As parental education is associated with young people's life values, we look into whether it is also linked to the assessment of one's own appearance importance among Finnish youth. Furthermore, prior research has shown a positive correlation between life satisfaction and appearance satisfaction (Frederick et al., 2022). Therefore, we will also be looking at the association between life satisfaction and appearance importance responses. Since we're focusing on measuring the importance of appearance rather than satisfaction, we cannot predict a specific outcome. Therefore, we'll consider life satisfaction as a control variable.

Accordingly, we ask the following research question:

RQ: How have self-assessments of the importance of appearance changed from 2005 to 2019, and how are these assessments associated with gender, age groups, and parental education?

Data and measures

We employ Finnish Youth Survey data collected in 2005 and 2019, consisting of a total of 3898 respondents of 15- to 29-year-old Finnish citizens, formed from population register data by random sampling. The 2019 Youth Survey is based on 1907 telephone interviews, with the quota sampled by age, sex and mother tongue. In overall, the response rate was 17 per cent, with over 11 000 declined responses. The share of those who agreed to be interviewed has been on a decline over the past years, and the most common reasons for not participating in the survey were lack of time, lack of interest for the survey themes and also not answering the call. It is also typical that the phone numbers of young people are not very easy to find. Moreover, it has been acknowledged that the response rates in telephone surveys, and other survey modes as well, have been in decline for the past decades. (Dillman et al., 2014; Haikkola & Myllyniemi, 2019.) The 2005 Youth Barometer is based on 1900 telephone interviews and stratified sampling by age, sex, mother tongue and place of residence. The data description does not show the response rate (or thus, the magnitude of responses lost), so assessing the reliability of the data from this point of view is difficult (Finnish Youth Survey, 2005).

The Finnish Youth Survey data are gathered annually by the Advisory Council for Youth Affairs and Finnish Youth Research Network. Looking into young Finns' attitudes towards different life values such as occupational life, importance of health and appearance, and materialistic well-being, the following values were charted by asking how important they consider love and relationships, self-respect, national security and traditions, religion, equality, social relations, work, their own health and their own appearance. The surveys vary annually in terms of the questions' emphasis, but the surveys conducted in both 2005 and 2019 examined the importance of the respondent's own physical appearance among other values.

For the dependent variable, we used the following question: "Importance of your own appearance".

The responses were asked via a 5-point Likert scale in which 1 = very important, 2 = important, 3 = neither important nor unimportant, 4 = not very important, and 5 = not at all important. In the analysis, we inverted the variable values to make the analysis easier to interpret the possible increase in appearance importance.

For independent variables, we used survey year, gender and respondent's parental education. In 2005, the respondents were able to choose from two response categories (male/female). In 2019, gender was asked via three categories, but due to a lack of responses in the "other than male or female" category ($n = 5$), we focused only on binary differences and removed the "Other" category from our analyses. We recoded gender into a dummy variable, where 0 = female and 1 = male. Respondents' age was determined via an open-ended question in which the respondents reported their age. To explore the age differences within different phases of adolescence, we divide age into three groups at five-year intervals. We recoded these responses into three categories: 1 = 15—19, 2 = 20—24 and 3 = 25—29.

Furthermore, to measure the socio-economic status, the highest parental education was coded similarly to match respondents' education with a minor exception, where we deleted the category "Do not know". However, we have to keep in mind, that in general, children's answers regarding parental education should be interpreted with caution, because children are likely to overestimate the education of their parents (Engzell & Jonsson, 2015). Thus, parental education was coded as 1 = vocational, 2 = Upper secondary, 3 = University degree and 4 = No degree. Also, we combined the responses in parent's education "vocational college" and "matriculation examination" into Group 2. Life satisfaction was measured with the question, "Overall, how satisfied are you with your life today on a school grading scale?" This variable was used as a continuous variable where 4 is a "fail", and 10 is "excellent".

Methodology and analysis

We began our analysis by direct distributions of the attitudinal variable on the importance of appearance by survey year (Figure 1) and then by survey year, respondents' gender and age groups (Figure 2). After analysing the direct distributions, we conducted a multivariable analysis using ordered logistic regression (OLR). OLR is suitable for analysing ordinal variables without the need for dichotomising the data, as demanded for logistic regression. While our main interest was examining the change in Important responses, we also wanted to explore the change within other categories. For clarity and to allow for between-group comparisons, the original five categories were reduced into three: Important (original values 4 and 5), Neutral (original value 3) and Not Important (original values 1 and 2). Thus, we wanted to use OLR analysis, which only makes assumptions concerning the order of the values of the dependent variable rather than the distance between those values. We present the results as average marginal effects (AME) to get a better sense of the average effects of the independent variables on our variable of interest and the estimates can be interpreted as predicted probabilities (Table 2) (Mood, 2021).

Assuming a consistent relationship between each group is referred to as the parallel regression or proportional odds assumption, meaning that the coefficients' magnitudes are assumed to be equal between the two groups, regardless of the specific categories being compared. For instance, this involves comparing Very Important with other responses on the scale (i.e., 3 vs 2 + 1) or Not At All Important with other responses (i.e., 3 + 2 vs. 1). (Long, 1997.) The parallel regression assumption was tested for the variables using the Brant test.

Only respondents with valid scores on all variables (Year 2005 $n=1,670$, year 2019 $n=1,673$, total $n=3,343$) were included in our models to allow comparisons. For the distribution of the variables, see Appendix 1.

Results

As seen in Figure 1, the direct distributions of the dependent variable “appearance importance” varies by survey year and there appeared systematic differences (Pearson $\chi^2=230.161$, $p<.001$). In 2005, roughly half of the respondents (52 %) considered their own appearance important, 11 per cent considered it very important and 29 per cent considered as neither important nor unimportant. In 2019, the answers in the category “neither important nor unimportant” increased from 2005 by approximately 14 percentage points (from 29 % to 43 %). About 8 per cent reported in 2019 their appearance to be very important, 14 percent not very important and 2 percent not at all important.

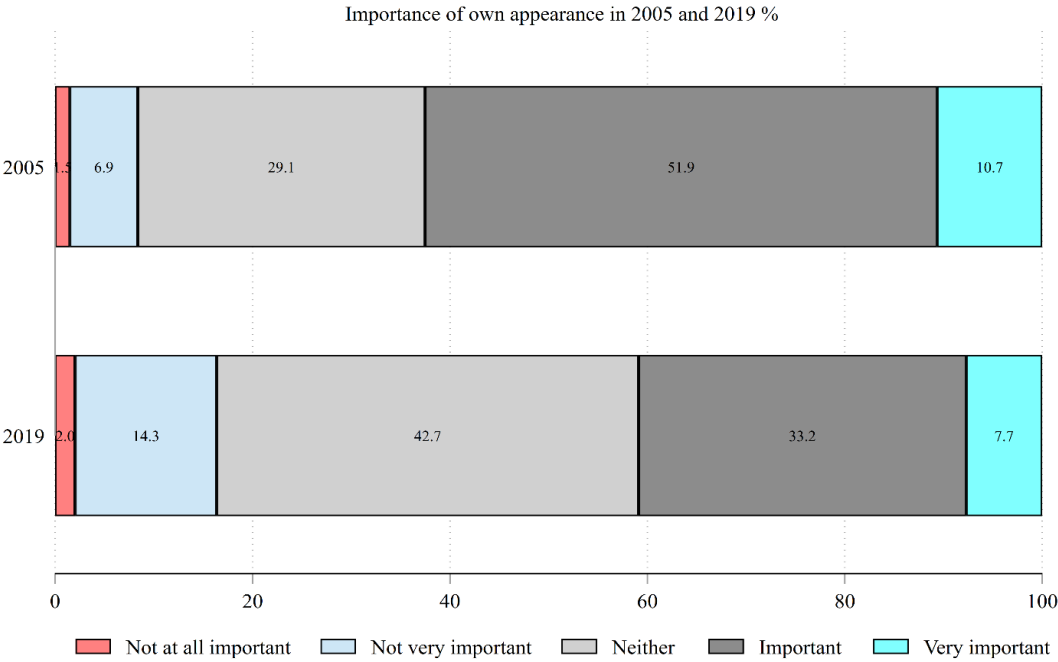


Figure 1. Importance of own appearance in 2005 and 2019 among 15 to 29-year-olds in Finland (%).

In Figure 2, we present the distribution of answers within each year with respondents’ gender and age group. In 2005, almost 70 per cent of both female and male respondents considered their own appearance important (categories “important” and “very important”) in the youngest age group, 15–19-year-olds. In older age groups, the perceived importance of own appearance decreased slightly and this is similar between men and women. However, in 2019 only 43 percent of 15- to 19-year-old females and 44 per cent of males considered appearance important (categories “important” and “very important”). The importance of own appearance was greater for women in the second age group (20–24-year-olds), whereas only 39 per cent of men in the similar age group considered it important. Furthermore, the importance kept decreasing to 35 per cent in the oldest age group, 25- to 29-year-old men. The decrease was less clear-cut for females, settling into 42 per cent of 25- to 29-year-old women. However, instead of a significant rise in appearance importance, what seems noteworthy is the increase in the number of respondents indifferent to appearance importance in 2019. The increase of the responses in the “neither” category varied from 7 to 20 percentage points. Among younger women, the difference was as high as 20 percentage points, decreasing to a 10-percentage-point difference in the older age group. Among men, the differences followed a similar pattern.

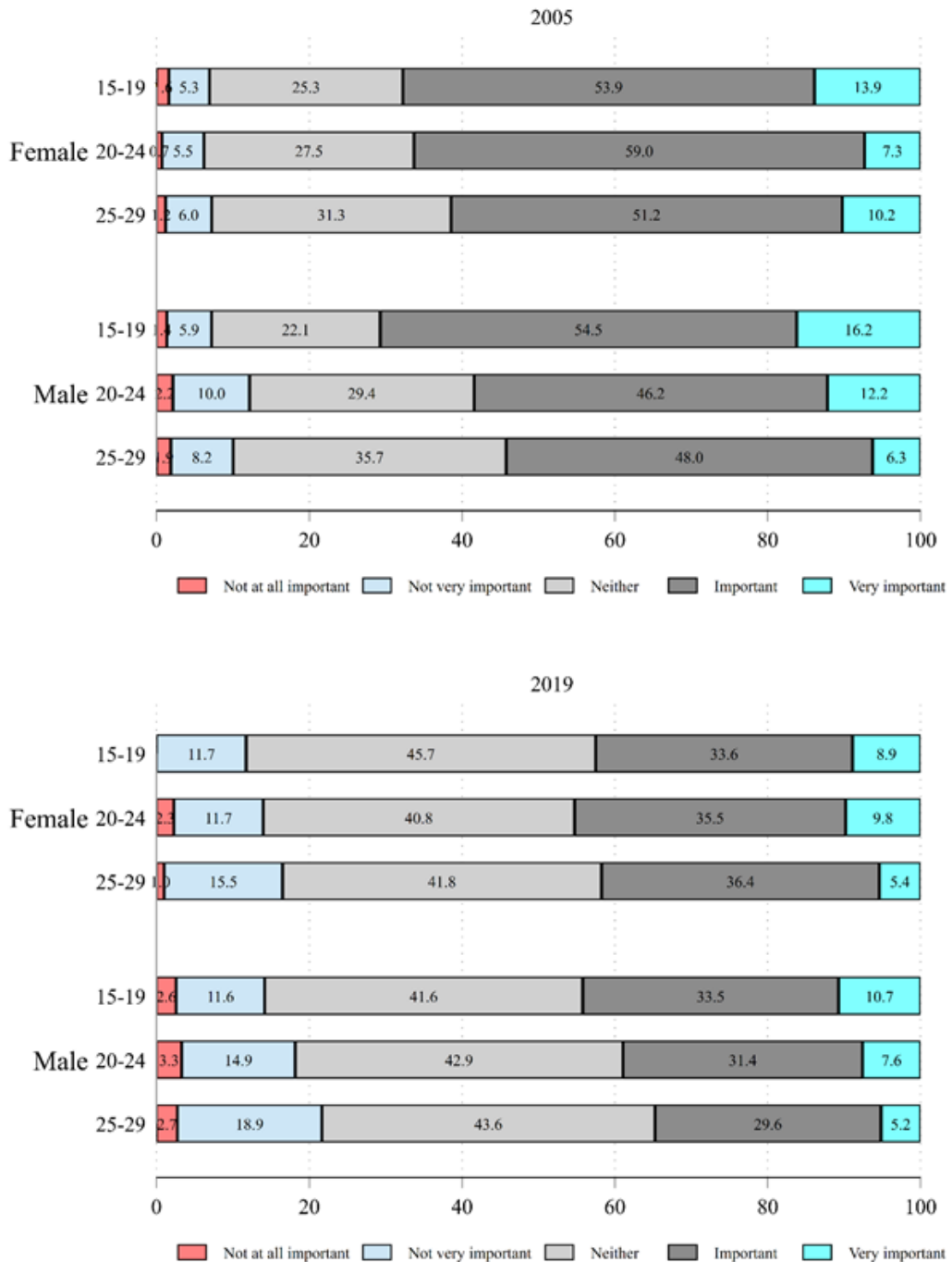


Figure 2. The direct distributions of the importance of respondents' own appearance in survey years 2005 and 2019, by age groups and gender (%).

Next, we tested the statistical differences between survey year, gender, age groups and socioeconomic background in the assessment of own appearance importance. We present the results of the ordinal

logistic regression as average marginal effects in Table 1.

Survey year, gender and age have a significant effect on the probability of the assessment of appearance importance. The estimated probability of the importance of own appearance is (category “Important”, Model 3) is 22 percentage points lower in 2019 than in 2005. Also, in 2019 the estimated probability to answer “Neither” (Model 2) is 13 percentage points higher than in 2005.

Table 1 Average marginal effects after ordered logistic regression of survey year, gender, age and socio-economic status for the assessment of respondents’own appearance (response categories: Not important, Neither, and Important), controlling for life satisfaction.

	Not important (Model 1)	Neither important nor unimportant (Model 2)	Important (Model 3)
2019, ref. 2005	0.09*** (0.01)	0.13*** (0.01)	-0.22*** (0.02)
Male, ref. Female	0.02** (0.01)	0.03** (0.01)	-0.05** (0.02)
20-24-year olds, ref. 15-19-year olds	0.02* (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	-0.04* (0.02)
25-29-year olds, ref. 15-19-year olds	0.03*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	-0.08*** (0.02)
Parental education: Father			
Vocational, ref. No degree	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	0.04 (0.03)
Upper secondary, ref. No degree	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.03 (0.02)	0.05 (0.03)
University degree, ref. No degree	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.03 (0.02)	0.05 (0.03)
Parental education: Mother			
Vocational, ref. No degree	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.03* (0.02)	0.06 (0.03)
Upper secondary, ref. No degree	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.03 (0.03)
University degree, ref. No degree	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.04 (0.03)
Life satisfaction (from 4 to 10)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)
Observations	3,343	3,343	3,343
Pseudo R2	0.0314	0.0314	0.0314

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

On average, the probability for considering one's own appearance important for males is five percentage points less than females and three percentage points more likely to have a neutral opinion on their appearance importance than female respondents. Considering own appearance not important is more likely for males than for females: the estimated probability is for males two percentage point higher than for females (Model 1). Appearance importance also decreases with age: the probability for 25- to 29-year-olds to consider their appearance important is 8 percentage points lower than the youngest age group, 15- to 19-year-olds.

The average marginal effects for parental education and the assessment of own appearance importance were not statistically significant, and indicates no systematic association between socio-economic background and the assessment of appearance importance. However, mothers' education shows that having a vocational degree, compared to no degree, is associated with a small negative effect (-0.031) on the assessment of own appearance importance as neither important nor unimportant. This effect is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), but not consistent across the models.

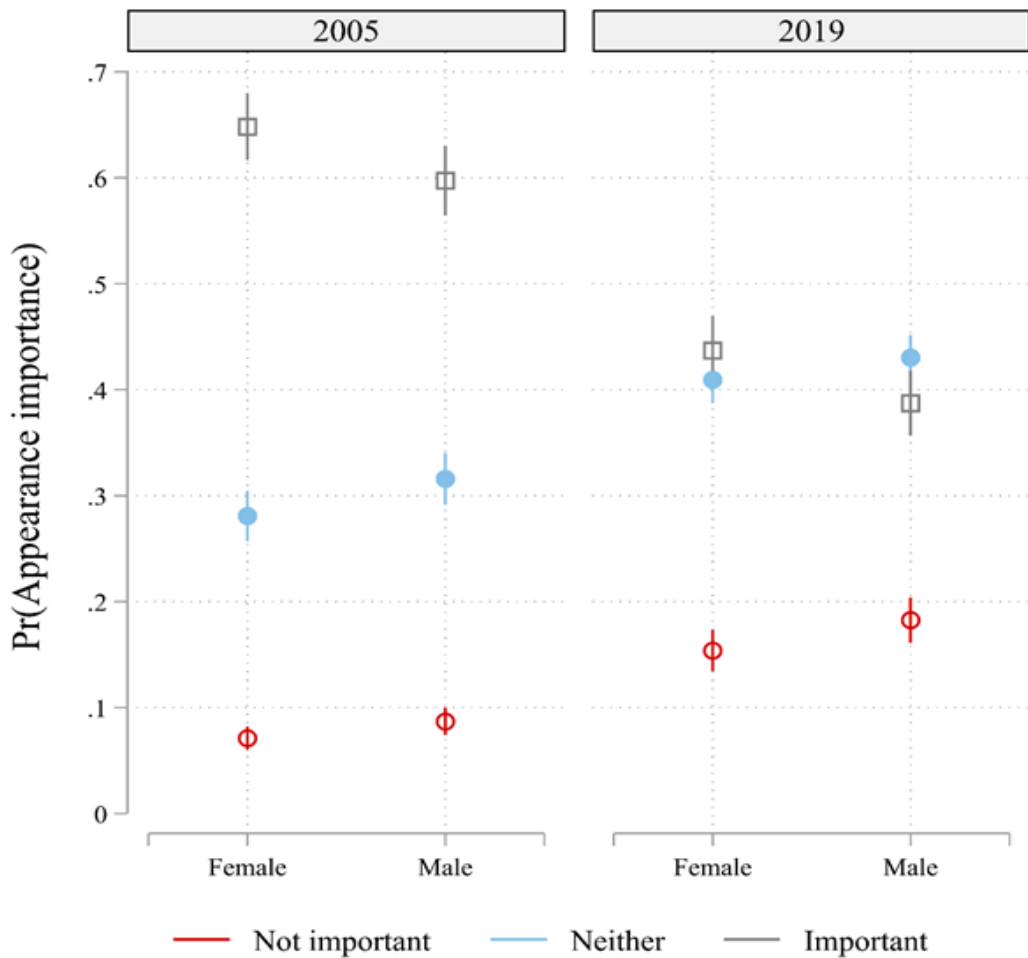


Figure 3. Predicted margins for the assessment of own appearance importance by respondents' gender and survey year (2005 and 2019).

Given the fact that the associations of survey year and respondents' gender were significant, and considering existing literature on the gendered nature of physical appearance and its assessments (e.g., Kuipers, 2022; Kukkonen et al., 2024; Mears, 2014), we tested, whether the survey year moderates the association between respondent's gender and the assessment of appearance importance (Figure 3). We provide the estimates as predicted margins over survey years at males and females and plot the interaction in figures for the interpretation of the results (see, e.g., Mize, 2019).

However, both the Likelihood ratio test and the Wald test indicated that the interaction was not statistically significant. Thus, there is no statistical evidence that gender differences in the assessment of one's own appearance importance change significantly over time. Despite this, we present the predicted margins of gender and survey year to illustrate the observed trends, particularly the decrease in the "Important" category and increase in the "Neither" category. These estimates should be interpreted as descriptive rather than causal effects. Since the interaction was non-significant, any apparent differences may not reflect real gender and year effects. Additionally, we tested the interactions between age groups and year, as well as socioeconomic status and year, but none of these interactions were statistically significant. The figures of the predicted margins over survey years at age groups and respondents' parents' education are presented in the appendices (Appendix 2–4).

In Figure 3, both males and females show an increase in the likelihood of the assessment of their own appearance as "Not Important" over time. For females, the probability to assess their own appearance "Not Important" was in 2019 15.4 per cent, which is more than double compared to 2005 (7.1%). For males to assess their own appearance not important in 2019 was also more than double compared to 2005 (18.3%). The "Neutral" category shows an increase for both genders over time. The probability for females in 2005 was 28.1 per cent, and in 2019, 40.9 per cent, indicating over 10 percentage points increase. As for males, the change was similar: from 31.6 per cent to 43 per cent. The probability of the assessment of own appearance as "Important" decreases sharply for both genders, with females consistently reporting higher probabilities than males. In 2005, the probability for females was 64.8 per cent and for males 59.7 per cent, and in 2019, the probabilities were 59.7 per cent and 38.7 per cent, respectively.

Discussion

This article focused on Finnish adolescents' and young adults' attitudes towards the importance of their own appearance, and also, whether different demographic factors played a role in the assessment of appearance importance. We used Finnish Youth Survey data from years 2005 and 2019 to examine changes in the perceived importance of appearance over time, as well as differences by respondents' gender, age, and socio-economic background.

In our analysis, we found that in 2019, the importance of appearance had very slightly decreased when compared to 2005. There was little difference between genders. However, there was an increase in the so-called middle category responses, i.e., indifferent attitudes towards the assessment of respondent's own appearance. There was variation in the importance attached to appearance when examining the background variables. The importance of appearance decreased with age; younger groups (15- to 19-year-olds) found appearance more important than older age groups (24- to 29-year-olds).

The prevailing public discussion on the contemporary appearance-obsessed society, and social media establishing itself as a medium for visual self-presentation stresses the alleged heightened importance of appearance. The same assumption is repeated in prior research, which assumes that appearance plays an ever-greater role (e.g., Kuipers, 2022). The importance of appearance is assumed to be increasingly interwoven into the lives of people and resonates with, for example, new areas of work. In this context, our discovery of the growing prevalence of indifference to appearance importance is unexpected. Indifferent attitudes have risen significantly between the two younger age groups regardless of gender, doubling the share of respondents unconcerned with appearance from 2005 to 2019.

Appearance importance peaks during adolescence, which is a crucial time for identity formation and rapid biological, social and cognitive changes. The changes at the onset of puberty increasingly shift teenagers' attention to their changing bodies. Teenagers are just forming their identities, making them more susceptible to sociocultural pressures, representations in the media and appearance ideals. Identity confusion has previously been linked to appearance comparisons and beauty ideal internalisation in both boys and girls (Palmeroni et al., 2021), while the body acts as a means to form and express one's identity (Giddens, 1991). These factors may highlight appearance importance among the youngest respondents, but may also contribute to explaining why young adults are more indifferent about appearance. As appearance regimes (Kuipers, 2022) are strongly related to the external habitus of the body, their rising meaning may not necessarily be evident when asked about the perceived importance of one's own appearance: identity formation might be more perceived as different forms of self-expression rather than mere appearance. Perhaps the implementation of different regimes is also more associated with things like social belongingness rather than strictly one's appearance among the youth.

Interestingly, although previous research has both theoretically and empirically demonstrated an increase in experienced appearance pressures in adolescents and young adults (Hakim, 2018; Quittkat et al., 2019), we did not observe a corresponding rise of these pressures on the attitudes towards one's own appearance. This suggests that appearance pressures and the value placed on one's own appearance may be conceptually and experientially distinct: the increase in sociocultural pressures to look a certain way does not necessarily make appearance more important, but it may even increase exhaustion or heightened criticism regarding the subject.

Boys and young men seem to slightly differ from girls and women: appearance importance decreases as young men get older, whereas the difference between different aged women is not as clear. However, due to the data being cross-sectional, we cannot observe within-individual changes, but rather broader differences among different-aged people at one point in time. The age-related changes are in line with previous research, which suggests rather stable attitudes towards appearance importance for women throughout their lives (Åberg et al., 2020). For men, the importance of appearance has been found to diminish with age after adolescence (Quittkat et al., 2019).

Appearance is known to cause inequality by various mechanisms such as through class (Kukkonen et al., 2024; Mears, 2014; 2020), and the current research did demonstrate that the assessment of one's own appearance importance had in fact become more scattered among different sociodemographic groups. Respondents with a mother having a vocational education, the assessment of own appearance importance was neutral compared to mothers with no degree. This, however, was not a statistically significant effect, indicating a higher degree of uncertainty in this estimate than is typically accepted for inference.

Finnish people in general tend to downplay the importance of appearance as they are more concerned with practicality than aesthetics (Kukkonen, 2022; Wilska, 2002), and this might be especially true for men, who are not similarly socialised into talking about their bodies from an aesthetic point of view. Being concerned with appearance is considered feminine in Western societies (e.g., Gough et al., 2014; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006). As men may not feel comfortable expressing their body concerns freely, an overestimation of the degree of satisfaction in their own appearance may occur, as well as underestimation of appearance importance. For this reason, gender-specific ways of researching appearance importance should be considered for future data-collecting methods.

Due to self-presentation concerns, the respondents might have reported lesser importance and greater indifference related to appearance in order not to appear as vain or egocentric. As appearance has been demonstrated to play a greater role in today's society (Widdows, 2018; Kuipers, 2022), there is a possibility that the growing indifference might also partly result from social desirability bias (Grimm, 2010). Moreover, the ways in which the questions were interpreted may have had an effect on the results: the survey questions were not explicitly formulated about the importance of appearance in society in general, nor about appearance pressures, but rather about the importance of one's own appearance. This can affect how the questions were answered. As the importance of one's own appearance was assessed after asking about

the importance of larger societal questions such as the environment, love and relationships and financial well-being, a person's own appearance might not seem as important in comparison.

Naturally, this article is subject to some limitations. In light of exploring the effects of the assessment of appearance attitudes, the data employed are limited, as they are cross-sectional instead of panel data. Although the data we used were gathered through random sampling from the population register with strata based on age, gender, mother tongue and place of residence, our results must be approached with some caution because of the possibility for data selection. Previous research (e.g., Sarpila et al., 2017) has reported low response rates as especially prevalent among young men. Moreover, it has been acknowledged that when using phone interviews in surveys, the sampling will be skewed if those respondents who are hard to reach are replaced by respondents who are easier to reach (Kivijärvi, 2022). For example, in the case of the Youth Survey data, telephone numbers might either be missing or changed (Haikkola & Myllyniemi, 2019, p. 17), and reaching out to the most disadvantaged young people is likely to be challenging. Therefore, the generalisability of this study should be treated with caution. While the issues of obtaining a nationally representative dataset are often corrected by using weights or further analysing the data, a quota system's national representativeness is contested, as it is seen as subject to interviewer bias and human error (e.g., Moser & Kalton, 2017). Similarly, the concern over respondents' tendency to give socially desirable responses in surveys (i.e., social desirability bias; Grimm, 2010) or to avoid disclosing sensitive issues (Haikkola & Myllyniemi, 2019; 17) is always present when collecting data through personal interviews - especially with men, as they are socialised into not articulating aesthetic concerns when describing their own bodies (Gough et al., 2014), which might result in overestimating appearance satisfaction (Grogan, 2016) or underestimating appearance importance. Our study also focuses on respondents' self-assessment of their appearance, not appearance as a broader societal phenomenon. This approach may overlook some cultural and social nuances, broader perceptions of beauty, and pressures influencing appearance-related self-worth. Therefore, while the operationalization is consistent with the aim of our study, it may not fully reflect the multi-dimensional nature of appearance in contemporary society.

Despite these limitations, our results shed light on an under-researched topic. Appearance importance is not similarly on the rise with appearance pressures, and we observed an upsurge in appearance neutrality. For future research, we suggest broadening current knowledge in males' appearance attitudes by developing male-specific measures to control for possible social desirability bias and observe the role of appearance in young men's lives.

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