

» Youth Sexuality 9th Iteration

In Focus: Body Image

The Federal Centre for Health Education's (BZgA) representative study Youth Sexuality 9th Iteration is a representative repeat survey. A large-scale survey of young people, their parents and young adults was launched for the ninth time in the summer of 2019. It follows on from predecessor studies conducted between 1980 and 2014. The goal of the study is to acquire reliable data about the attitudes and behaviours of young people in the Federal Republic of Germany with regards to sexuality and contraception.

When adolescents grow into adults, there are many physical and psychological changes that take place. The confrontation young people have with themselves and their bodies takes place within the context of societal norms and expectations that have a crucial impact on the young people's sense of wellbeing and self-worth.

This fact sheet presents an overview of the subjective body image the adolescents and young adults between the ages of 14 and 25 experience. The attempt to bring in objective metrics (such as including body mass index (BMI) or the like) was deliberately rejected.

Results: An Overview	Page
1 Boys and young men generally have a more positive attitude about their bodies than girls and young women.	2
2 Subjective body image: there is no general positive development with increasing age.	4
3 Subjective body image: a supportive social environment is important.	5
4 Girls and young women are more open to cosmetic surgery.	6

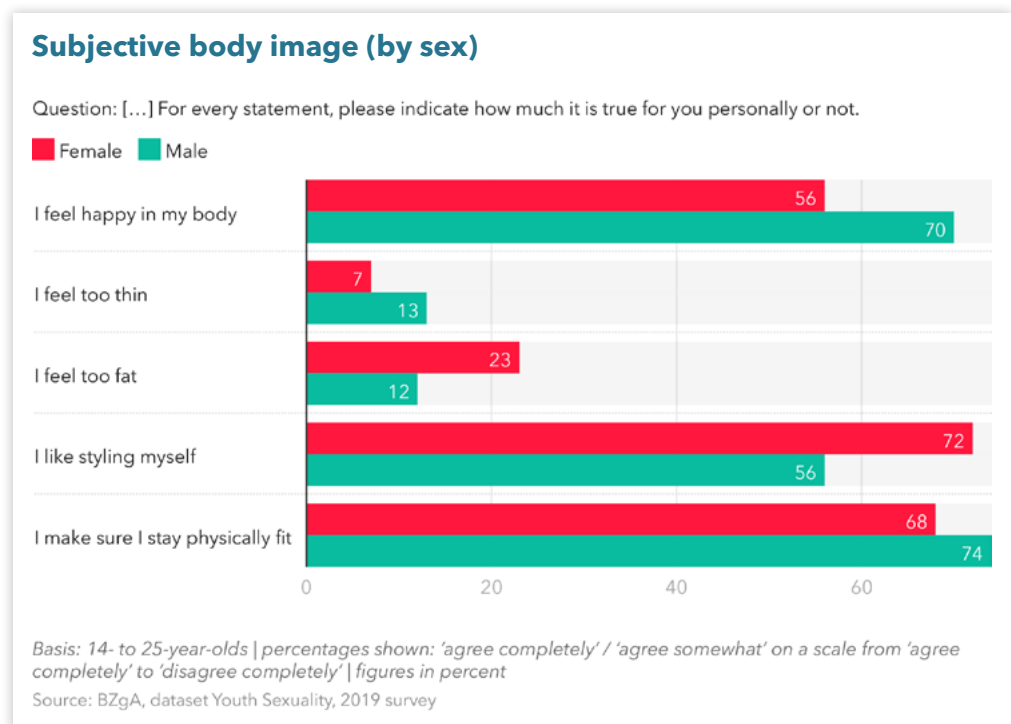
Result 1

Boys and young men generally have a more positive attitude about their bodies than girls and young women.

What attitude adolescents and young adults between the ages of 14 and 25 will have about their own bodies depends on their sex (see Figure 1).

- Boys and young men generally have a positive attitude about their own body: seven in ten (70 %) feel happy in their body the way it is.
- Among the girls and young women only just more than half say the same (56 %).

Figure 1



Compared to the previous Youth Sexuality survey, dating from 2014, girls and young women's body image has improved by a whole 9 percentage points (47 % at the time). This indicates a more relaxed attitude to their own physicality.

Nevertheless, even today girls and young women often find it more difficult than their male peers to accept their body the way it is: around one in four feel they are 'too fat' (23 %), while only half as many of the boys and young men say the same (12 %). On the flipside, male respondents are more likely to think they are 'too thin' (13 % compared to 7 %).

Sport, being physically active and fitness play a big role among the boys and young men. 74 percent say they pay attention to staying physically fit. The percentage is not much smaller among the female respondents, at 68 percent.

What also emerges from the data is that girls and young women often take the body cult more seriously and are more likely to make an effort to conform to beauty ideals compared to their male peers. At 72 percent, personal styling holds a much more important place among the female respondents than among the male respondents (56 %).

Result 2

Subjective body image: there is no general positive development with increasing age.

Even though it would be easy to assume that body image would improve with increasing age and that pubescent self-doubt would make way to a more relaxed attitude towards their own body, this is not the case for the age group of 14- to 25-year-olds surveyed, especially not among the girls and young women.

The norm of the 'dream figure' and the associated feelings of insecurity actually tends to gain influence with increasing age: among the 14- to 17-year-olds 21 percent said they felt 'too fat', while 24 percent of the 18-25-year-old young women said the same. Equally, there is no increase in acceptance of the own body with increasing age and the results vary by no more than 6 percentage points (see Table 1).

Among the boys and young men there is also no discernible linear development towards a more casual attitude with increasing age. However, among this cohort there is a marked increase of a good 10 percentage points with regards to a positive body image, starting at age 16, that persists among the 21- to 25-year-olds (see Table 1). The attitude of the male adolescents is more relaxed at all ages than that of the girls and young women. Depending on age group, the difference between the sexes is as high as 18 percentage points.

Table 1

Acceptance of the own body - a comparison between the sexes and age groups

Question: [...] For every statement, please indicate how much it is true for you personally or not. Agreement with 'I feel happy in my body.'

	14- to 15-year-olds	16- to 17-year-olds	18- to 20-year-olds	21- to 25-year-olds
Adolescents and young adults (total)	58	66	62	64
Female	55	59	53	57
Male	62	73	71	70

Basis: 14- to 25-year-olds | percentages who said 'agree completely' or 'somewhat agree' on a scale of 'agree completely' to 'disagree completely' in percent

Source: BZgA, dataset Youth Sexuality, 2019 survey

Subjective body image: a supportive social environment is important.

The age of the respondents is less important to a good subjective body image than the availability of people with whom the respondents could talk in confidence about sexual matters. This correlation is particularly relevant for minors.

- Those who possessed such confidants – among peers, but better still in their own home – were more likely to be accepting of their own body.
- Those who were unable to draw on this resource and who did not have a confidant were much less self-assured. The differences here are up to 24 percentage points among the girls and 23 percentage points among the boys.

An additional aspect is that a good communicative environment in the home increases the chances for both girls and boys that they will have a positive body image. A good communicative environment is one where young people have the ability to talk openly about sexuality. Where there is such an environment in the home regarding sexual questions, the majority of the female (64%) and the male (73%) report having a positive body image.

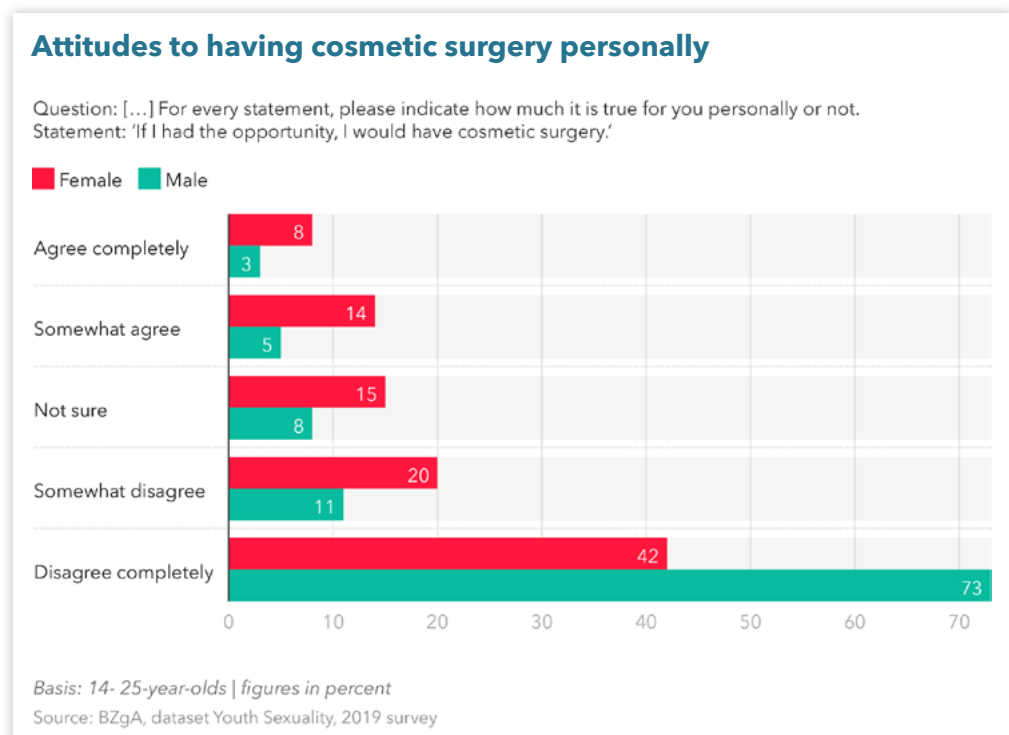
Result 4

Girls and young women are more open to cosmetic surgery.

The subject of cosmetic surgery is also an indicator of the respondents' attitude towards their own body. Surgical interventions with the goal of achieving a better appearance are generally only seriously considered by a minority of the adolescents and young adults. The group that firmly rejects surgical measures is the largest: most pick the lowest category in the five-category scale, which expresses the strongest level of rejection ('disagree completely').

The opinions of the boys and young men are much more clearly against cosmetic surgery than those of their female peers, as Figure 2 illustrates. Three quarters of them (73 %) report having no desire to assist their appearance using surgical methods.

Figure 2



The already ambivalent body image experienced by the girls and young women compared to the boys and young men is also expressed in their greater openness to cosmetic surgery:

- The female respondents were generally more open to surgical interventions than their male counterparts. 23 percent of them said they agreed completely or somewhat agreed with the statement 'If I had the opportunity, I would have cosmetic surgery.'
- The equivalent figure among the male respondents was just 8 percent.

The age of the respondents does not play a significant role when it comes to their willingness to entertain surgical cosmetic interventions. However, acceptance of their own body is important here: those who struggle more with their own body is also more open to the idea of getting surgical help in order to come closer to their own (or a relevant third party's) beauty ideal. Those who are happy with their body tend to reject the idea of surgical intervention.

Once again the connection is more pronounced for the female respondents than for the male respondents. Up to 44 percent of the girls and young women surveyed, who had an ambivalent relationship to their body said they would consider cosmetic surgery if they had the opportunity. Among the boys and young men who felt the same about their body, the equivalent figure was just 16 percent, meaning less than half as many.

Despite the different levels of willingness, the trend development for both sexes is similar. The data from the Youth Sexuality studies reach back to 2005 for the 14- to 17-year-old cohort. That was the first time young people were asked about their attitude to cosmetic surgery. A comparison would suggest that the openness towards such surgical interventions has gradually, but measurably increased over the past 15 years: in 2005 agreement among the girls aged 14 to 17 was 17 percent, the current figure is 22 percent. Among the boys the figure has risen from 6 percent to 9 percent over the same period.



References

Census UK (2019): Tolland, L. & Evans, J. (2019, February 21). *What is the difference between sex and gender?* Gov.uk; Office for National Statistics. Available at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/whatisthedifferencebetweensexandgender/2019-02-21> [accessed 3 April 2023]

Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis). (2021). *Migrationshintergrund* [Migrant Background]. Available at <https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/Glossar/migrationshintergrund.html> [accessed on 11 Jul 2021]

Notes on the data



- As the percentages shown has been rounded to whole numbers, it is possible that they may not add up to 100 percent.
- For the same reason the combined categories (e.g. 'very satisfied' and 'mostly satisfied') can deviate from the sum of the individual categories depicted.
- For questions where the respondents were able to pick several answers, the total figure can exceed 100 percent.
- Where data is available from previous surveys, the survey results are shown in a trend comparison. Because of how the samples were done it is possible to see the long-term trend covering almost 40 years for boys and girls between 14 and 17 without a migrant background.
- Participants are deemed to have a migrant background if they themselves or at least one parent was born without German citizenship; this definition is also used by the Federal Statistical Office of Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2021).
- The level of education is determined by the (desired) qualifications the study participants were / are seeking at school based on the education system in Germany. Low: 9 years of school, most are around 15 years old when they leave (e.g. Hauptschule) Moderate: 10 years of school, most are around 16 years old when they leave (e.g. mittlere Reife). High: 12 to 13 years of school, most are 18 to 19 years old when they leave (e.g. Abitur).
- Because of the methodological design of the Youth Sexuality Study a further non-binary differentiation of gender has had to be left out. For this same reason, the term 'sex' (biological aspects, assigned by birth) continues to be used (in contrast to 'gender' in the sense of social construction, gender identity as personal internal perception of oneself) to enable statements on long-term trends (see also Census UK, 2019). This decision is purely a methodological necessity and not based on a lack of awareness of diversity here.

Imprint

Publisher

Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche
Aufklärung (BZgA) [Federal Centre
for Health Education (BZgA)]

Acting Director:
Prof. Dr. Martin Dietrich

Maarweg 149-161
50825 Köln
Tel.: 0221 8992-0

www.bzga.de
www.sexualaufklaerung.de

Twitter: @BZgA_SchKG

Authors

Dr. Sara Scharmanski,
Angelika Hessling, BZgA

Translation

Josephine Cordero Sapién, Exeter/England

Editing, Concept and Design

Kühn Medienkonzept & Design GmbH,
Ruppichteroth, Köln

Version

PDF version (EN) 1.0,
published online July 2023,
translated from German version 1.1
(May 2022),
first published online October 2021

All rights reserved.

Citation Style

Scharmanski, S. & Hessling, A. (2021).
*In Focus: Body Image. Youth Sexuality
9th Iteration. BZgA Fact Sheet.*
Cologne: Federal Centre for Health
Education (BZgA).

[https://doi.org/10.17623/
BZgA_SRH:fb_JUS9_en_body_image](https://doi.org/10.17623/BZgA_SRH:fb_JUS9_en_body_image)

The Research Project: Background, Research Team, Methodology

The Federal Centre for Health Education's (BZgA) representative study Youth Sexuality 9th Iteration is a repeat survey. In the summer of 2019 the ninth large-scale survey of young people, their parents and young adults began. A total of 6,032 interviews were conducted nationwide. Since 1980, the BZgA has been investigating the attitudes and behaviour of young people in the Federal Republic of Germany with regard to sexuality education, sexuality and contraception. This current study follows on from the previous years' studies with the explicit aim of illustrating trends.

Project profile

Client	Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA)
Project lead	Angelika Hessling, BZgA
Survey institute	Kantar GmbH
Survey population	Adolescents and young adults between the ages of 14 and 25
Survey method	Computer-supported combined oral-written survey; for the more intimate questions the questionnaire was to be filled out by the respondents without the interviewers being able to see.
Selection method	A disproportionately selected quota sample with regards to sex, age and migrant background
Sample of young people	6,032 interviews of which 3,556 were with adolescents between the ages of 14 and 17 and 2,476 with young adults between 18 and 25
Sample: parents	In the households of the 14- to 17-year-old adolescents without a migrant background one parent was also surveyed (2,422 interviews)
Weighting	All the data shown underwent a representative weighting in order to remove the sample's disproportionalities caused by the design.
Survey period	May to October 2019



More information about the study Youth Sexuality 9th Iteration Central results and further fact sheets

<https://www.sexualaufklaerung.de/en/english/projects/detail/youth-sexuality-9th-iteration/>