

“Youth undisguised”

The self-perception and self-esteem of adolescents and young adults

PR Storyline

A depth psychological-representative study from rheingold salon compiled for IKW – German Cosmetic, Toiletry, Perfumery and Detergent Association

There are many studies that examine the values, preferences or media use of adolescents and young adults. However, the actual transition to adulthood is often neglected. What are the concerns and hardships involved in becoming a man or a woman? How do young people deal with the typical mood swings during puberty or burgeoning sexuality? How do they develop self-esteem and confidence with regard to how they are perceived by others?

The development of self-esteem in these turbulent times is the focus of this depth psychological-representative study with adolescents and young adults between 14 and 21 years of age, which rheingold salon has conducted for the German Cosmetic, Toiletry, Perfumery and Detergent Association. We were not only interested in the values of young people, but the underlying reasons: Why and how did they emerge? Furthermore, we wanted to find out which role the body and/or the physical appearance play in the mind of this target audience. What influence does taking care of their appearance have on their self-esteem? Can cosmetics and beauty products support young people in their phase of self-discovery?

The results of the depth psychological study show youth undisguised – including aspects that young people usually prefer to hide.

Grafik

Body- and beauty care are very important in my life (73%)

I think that you can tell by the appearance of a person what kind of a person he or she is (60%)

1. Undisguised but masked nonetheless? – Taking a look into the mindset of young people

Young people tell their stories in an undisguised and open manner, even when they involve difficult family situations or real strokes of fate. Young people –

including young men – behave in a versed manner where emotions are concerned, provided they have already experienced them and feel they are in the past. They are not as ready to talk about what affects them right now, especially when their current transition to adulthood, becoming a man or a woman, or uncontrollable (hormonally caused) emotions are concerned. They prefer to let their appearance “talk”: 73% of the polled young people consider body and beauty care to be “very important” in their life. Good looks give them the feeling of social acceptance, security and control over their emotions. We analysed why this is such a major factor for the personal development of young people.

2. “Social welfare or Nobel prize”? The realities of adolescents and young adults

77% of the polled young people are in search of security and stability. By contrast, puberty is something completely unstable. This in itself already leads to uncertainties for many of them.

Grafik

I am in search of security and stability in my life (77%)

I feel loved and cared by my parents (76%)

Moreover, many of the 14-21-year-olds grow up in rather “fragile circumstances”. They have been through separations, patchwork, new partners of their parents, new siblings and schools, house moves, and sometimes even neglect or domestic violence.

“My father first moved out next door, but when the fights continued, he moved to Hamburg and now I have hardly any contact with him – and when I see him, he knows nothing about me.”

They don’t feel much loved by their parents (23%) or only have trust in themselves (28%). They hope for a more stable life, and at least their appearance should not suggest that their life has had a chaotic course. They ascribe particular value to make-up, a perfect haircut and a spot-free complexion.

“It is important for me that every hair is exactly where I want it to be. This is why I first use a setting lotion, blow-dry, then add wax and at the end fix it all with hairspray.”

At the same time, there are young people who grew up in almost overprotected circumstances (58%) who feel loved very much. They are convinced that with their skills they can achieve almost everything (and often tend to have lofty, sometimes completely exaggerated life goals). A sick friend is not only an inspiration to study medicine, but inspires dreaming of a Nobel Prize for cancer research. Whether the future holds opportunities as a TV show star or a top lawyer prosecuting the tyrants and dictators of the world – life, education and career seem to be meticulously plannable, calculable and designable according to one's own wishes. 78% believe that their dreams will come true.

“I will graduate secondary school next year and will study astronautics. I've already planned everything: Bachelor's, Master's, PhD at the Technical University of Aachen or a college in America, then I will join the DLR or NASA. I've always wanted to be an astronaut.”

“I want to study biology and work in cancer research. I want to cure cancer and increase the chances for combatting it with less side effects – I would like to receive a Nobel Prize for it.”

“I love to write about arts, I'm simply good at that, then maybe get married later and have four children, but I will only have a maximum of two myself. I do not want to ruin my physique. After all, one can also adopt children...”

An astonishing insight: According to the study, there is no marked middle range. The young people either experience a lot of uncertainty or a lot of overprotectedness: The over-protected ones feel loved and self-assured. They have practically been vaccinated with the 'distinctiveness gene' by their parents (62% consider themselves to be special; 38% even consider themselves to be very special).

“The two of us – my sister and I – are a wish come true.”

By contrast, 28% have always lived in rather difficult circumstances. However, they do not want to show this fragility in their appearance and do not want to attract attention because of their otherness (18% want above all to belong and be like all the others). Those, whose idyllic world already suffered significant cracks during their young life, want to present themselves above all as unassailable and toughen themselves against injuries (47%).

3. The deep uncertainty – strategies against the loss of control

A deep longing for security (52%), family (83%), also the desire for having their own family (80%) one day and the importance of friendship are key elements for the adolescents. Friendship offers them more security than “love affairs” (for 52% these are even more important than “love affairs”). All of this is mainly driven by the experienced loss of control. The young people today experience the loss of control on at least two different levels:

- On the personal level: As a result of puberty itself – and partly as a result of their personal family circumstances.
- On a cultural and social level – not only insecure political situations, but also too many degrees of social freedom create uncertainties.

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My family is very important for me (83%)

I want to have an own family (80%)

Friendship is more important for me than relationship/partner (52%)

Puberty is a strongly disconcerting life phase. It is often experienced as a chaotic, uncontrollable condition. For young people, love and relationships today are dangerous rather than desirable – because falling in love can also mean losing control. 52% would rather bet on the security of friendship than on “insecure relationships”. Sexuality, too, implies devotion and possibly loss of control – from the adolescents’ point of view it should therefore be treated with extreme caution. Meeting friends is more important (only 21% considered dates to be more important than meeting friends).

The typical feeling of losing control during puberty is further enhanced by the social situation, e.g. as a result of the political situation in light of the refugees. However, the basic feeling of adolescent insecurity is also marked by the parent generation: nothing is sure, everything is relative. All roles, definitions and boundaries have become arbitrary and exchangeable – gender roles, living situations, working and eating rhythms, rules and regulations. “Everything is possible” also means everything is unstable, manipulable and uncontrollable.

Young people try to counter this feeling of loss of control. They would like to ban all nasty, unpleasant, uncontrollable “realities” and fragile elements from their life as far as possible. They have developed different strategies to do so:

They hardly talk about what is really embarrassing for them – in this way they try to give less space to these feelings. And they attach increasing value to their appearance in order to win back control and security. 85% use cosmetic products to feel more secure. Moreover, 64% do not want to leave a negative impression.

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Why do adolescents use cosmetic products?

Because I feel safer, eg. as I do not smell badly or have pimples (85%)

More attractive to the other gender (67%)

Not to get negative attention (64%)

Because I feel more like a young man/young woman (53%)

To be included (26%)

4. Juvenile staging

Young people invest much more in their appearance than in the past. (83% use a deodorant on a daily basis/several times a day, 61% use shampoo on a daily basis, 59% of the girls use mascara on a daily basis/several times a day, 35% do so with concealers and 32% with make-up.) Creating an attractive appearance is a good method to get in or take back control. The embarrassing and unpleasant can be moved to the background by focussing on the appearance. It serves to reset anything perceived as uncontrollable in the inner life.

Grafik

Toothpaste, Deo, Shower products, shampoo, Perfume, Face cream, hair styling, body lotion, pimple products, peeling

Particularly greasy hair, suddenly emerging spots, brittle nails or peeled off nail polish and especially an unpleasant smell of sweat are perceived as disgusting.

“It is an unpleasant feeling if you notice that you smell of sweat ... I personally perceive it as unpleasant and do not feel at ease.”

“Broken fingernails often come out of the blue ... like when I stumble into something. Looks stupid and is really annoying!!”

Psychologically speaking, these are examples for adolescents and young adults trying to deal with their anxieties around the unknown and uncontrollable during puberty. Although many physical changes have a hormonal origin, they

are mainly embarrassing because they are also an indication of the new and still unknown sexuality. Sweat for instance implies one is feeling hot and possibly aroused.

In order to take the stage, but more importantly to gain security and control, adolescents perceive cosmetics to be indispensable. Not only for themselves, but also for others. Whether others share the same values can be derived from their appearance: 60% of young people believe that in general you can tell by the appearance of a person what kind of a person he or she is. 34% do so in an almost self-evident manner.

Young people make themselves and their world so beautiful that they like it – make-up, styling and body care primarily serve the purpose of preserving or getting back security and control. The products must thus prove that they deliver the promised effect (for 91% the effect is important, for 81% the effect is very important). However, the products themselves must be as optically appealing as the people who use them (for 54% the product must look good, for 48% the package must look good, too) in order to represent the values that young people have. 45% of the young girls already have their own vanity table where they can go about their personal staging. “A vanity table instead of a desk for homework” would be an extreme way to put it – but it perfectly depicts the fact that a well-groomed appearance offers security!

5. “Copy & Paste”: Youth as a tutorial

The Internet is the primary source for advice on the use of cosmetic products. Tutorials and blogs provide valuable tips for the right application of cosmetics and make-up products for young girls (51%). Young people are inspired by role models which they like to copy via Instagram – but they only admit this in in-depth interviews. On the outside they want to be something special and even say that blogs and tutorials have hardly any role model function for them.

In the morning, the first thing for adolescents and young adults to do is check their smartphone. WhatsApp and 24/7 online accessibility give young people the feeling to never miss out on anything and hence to have everything under control. They often do not realise how dependent on these information sources they have become.

By contrast, they view classical advertising in a more reserved way: 29% consider both TV and print advertising in the field of cosmetics as unrealistic

and exaggerating. *“You can immediately see that the eyelashes are applied with glue”.*

Nonetheless this advertising still provides relevant information for 36% (TV) and/or 32% (print) of the adolescents. Here they have a good sense of reality.

Young people do not use cosmetic products because of advertising dream worlds, but because of emotionally relevant product results. Cosmetic products provide support and orientation. If the media bring these values to life, like in tutorials, they are particularly successful with young people.

6. “Self-esteem in a bottle”?

For young people cosmetic products are self-chosen companions in the development of their self-esteem. Products which help to get to grips with the imponderable and uncontrollable are particularly relevant for their self-esteem.

The respective products, however, differ in their relevance for bringing about control and enhancing self-esteem. On the one hand, there are products which particularly at a younger age help to hide everything embarrassing. This includes deodorants, shampoo, hairstyling or concealers for spots. And then there are products which support the development of an own image of what being a man or woman is all about: perfume, lipsticks, beard care and face care.

Some examples:

Mobbing fighter deodorant

Deodorants are amongst the most important products for young people in order to protect and support their self-esteem. 83% use deodorants on a daily basis or several times a day and 81% consider them to be particularly important for strengthening their self-esteem.

With the beginning of puberty, one literally gets “hot”. Sudden fits of heat happen in all possible situations. The smell of perspiration, triggered by pheromones, is perceived as disturbing and embarrassing – a new, so far unknown odour. Young people who do not use a deodorant face rejection or even mobbing. Behind all this there is a whole other story – the deodorant is used to cover up the emerging sexuality. And this part is also often concealed

from the parents. Deodorant is not even used in the parents' home, but frequently only once the adolescents are not at home but outside.

“When I wanted to have my first deodorant, my mother said: “You do not smell at all. But I wanted to have it nonetheless!”

“A deodorant is proof that you belong and are growing up(!).”

The hair is in place – with hair stylers

Hair care plays an important role for all young people polled, but in particular, for boys and young men. A lot of effort is put into hairstyles. Styled hair is considered as perfection and shows that one endeavours to make a good and neat impression.

Undone hair is a sign of unstable, fragile circumstances.

“Greasy hair would be bad – that’s a lack of hygiene. Dirt has gathered there.”

Moreover, hairstyling products have a special relevance for men: they give the impression of everything being in place and stable, including when they take their first steps as a man. (45% feel they can strengthen their personality in this way).

Nail varnish against the brittleness of the world

Many young girls own whole treasure troves full of nail varnish: Polished and colourful nails are part of a perfect world of wellbeing and pampering, in which disturbing elements of the inner and outer world have no place.

Hiding and highlighting

The accentuation and highlighting of the eyes was important for almost all female interviewees. Eye make-up helps to transform oneself into something aesthetically perfect and helps to enhance the own femininity whilst controlling the emerging sexuality.

Young women accentuate the eyes in order to direct glances – and to divert from the “sexual”. The most important product is “mascara”. It was even considered as more important than toothpaste or deodorant in the interviews. And the quantitative evaluation showed that mascara must by all means be

packed for a desert island. 62% of the interviewees use mascara on a daily basis.

“I have three types of mascara – one for every day, a watertight brand for sports, for instance, and one with a larger brush for grand appearances.”

Concealers are another example of a product which is a must have in every handbag. On average, blemish sticks, concealers and foundation are used for the first time at the age of 14 or 15 years. Some interviewees only like themselves with make-up and therefore hardly leave the house without or even wear make-up at home– otherwise they stated they would not feel like themselves.

Others have a more flexible attitude towards the use of make-up. They decide on a case-by-case basis. These girls are happy when they are able to let themselves go a little at home and don't have to permanently hide their “weaknesses”.

During this early phase, young people experiment a lot and in retrospect sometimes overshoot the mark. After a brief period of time (one to two years) they tend to find the right balance. In some cases, this can also mean that “less is more”. For special occasions, such as celebrations with friends, outings at the weekend or important family celebrations such as birthdays and weddings, most young people use make-up.

“On a school morning I will at least use a concealer against dark eye rings.” (17 years)

Conclusion:

Body- and beautycare play a central role in the everyday life of today's adolescents and young adults. At a time when they deal with uncertainties and loss of control, an appealing and neat appearance is an important support in the transition to adulthood. The feeling of looking good strengthens them within their peer group and other social contacts. It gives them a positive value orientation in an increasingly intransparent world outside and offers protection against any devaluating sensations when it comes to the physical changes during puberty. Young people use cosmetic and beauty-care products

deliberately and confidently in order to achieve the effects they want – often as part of a daily routine.

Facts about the study:

The findings on the topic of “adolescents, young adults and cosmetics” have been obtained through unaided, product-independent polls. They were not influenced by product questions and do not serve for product-related market research.

- Within the framework of the qualitative polling, group discussions and individual in-depth interviews were conducted in Cologne, Hamburg, Dresden and Munich. Altogether 38 boys and girls between 14 and 21 years of age participated.
- For the representative quantitative survey more than 1,000 people were questioned in an online panel. Overall, 511 young women and 501 young men between 14 and 21 years of age participated in the survey.

The study conducted by rheingold salon was compiled for IKW

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