



Perceived physical appearance and life satisfaction: A moderated mediation model of self-esteem and life experience of deaf and hearing adolescents



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ABSTRACT

In this study, we investigated the relationship between perceived physical appearance and life satisfaction, and the role of self-esteem as mediator and life experience as moderator of the relationship in deaf and hearing adolescents. 118 Chinese deaf adolescents (55.1% male; mean age = 15.12 years, standard deviation [SD] = 2.13) from 5 special education schools and 132 Chinese hearing adolescents (53.8% male; mean age = 13.11 years, SD = .85) completed anonymous questionnaires regarding perceived physical appearance, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. Perceived physical appearance, self-esteem, and life satisfaction were significantly and positively associated with each other. Moreover, self-esteem partially mediated the relationship between perceived physical appearance and life satisfaction; however, this indirect link was weaker for deaf adolescents than it was for hearing adolescents. Implications of the findings and future research directions are discussed, as are potential interventions that can be applied to increase subjective well-being in deaf adolescents.

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Introduction

Life satisfaction is a subjective evaluation of the overall quality of life. Negative life satisfaction has been associated with emotional disturbance (e.g., Griffin & Huebner, 2000), eating disorders (e.g., Halvorsen & Heyerdahl, 2006) and suicide (e.g., Valois, Zullig, Huebner, & Drane, 2004). Recently, interest in investigating this construct among children and adolescents has increased because of the disparity in mental health and educational outcomes associated with varying degrees of life satisfaction. However, most studies have evaluated general samples of students, overlooking how young people with disabilities perceive the quality of their lives.

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Researchers investigating life satisfaction are generally concerned with how and why people experience their lives in positive ways. However, little has been determined regarding the effects such as perceived physical appearance and self-esteem exert on life satisfaction in deaf adolescents, or how the effect differs between deaf and hearing adolescents. Thus, the present study examined the interrelationship between perceived physical appearance, self-esteem, and global life satisfaction among deaf and hearing adolescents. That is, according to a proposal by Sheridan (2001), we focused on the possible moderating effect life experience of deaf and hearing adolescents exerts on the relationship.

Perceived physical appearance, self-esteem, and life satisfaction among adolescents with disabilities

Body image is a crucial component of the self and includes perceived physical appearance. The considerable social, cognitive, and physical changes young people experience during adolescence and the emphasis society places on appearance have contributed to a heightened awareness of physical appearance-related concerns among adolescents (e.g., Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2006) that have transcended gender and cultural boundaries. In addition, self-perceived physical appearance is increasingly critical because of its potential to cause severe mental and physical health problems, such as eating disorders (Peat, Peyerl, & Muehlenkamp, 2008), depression (Stice, Hayward, Cameron, Killen, & Taylor, 2000), and emotional distress (Johnson & Wardle, 2005).

Young people with visible disabilities have difficulty forming positive perceptions of their bodies because of the negative images and beliefs they perceive about their disabilities. For example, young people with spina bifida, particularly girls, greatly value physical appearance and are therefore at greater risk of lower self-worth (Appleton et al., 1994). However, hidden disabilities such as deafness are not readily apparent to others, and therefore, many assume that body image problems for deaf people are not as acute as they are for people with visible disabilities. Studies have indicated that self-esteem varies according to disability identification (i.e., hidden or visible disabilities) (Nario-Redmond, Noel, & Fern, 2013). People with hidden disabilities encounter unique challenges when reappraising and modifying self concept or utilizing strategies to preserve the emotional and physical self (Fitzgerald & Paterson, 1995). Similar to hearing adolescents, deaf adolescents primarily develop the self through meaningful contact with adults, such as parents and teachers, and peers in the public domain, such as classmates (Harter, 1999). Because communication problems may hinder them from developing a strong social network outside of their family (Calderon & Greenberg, 2003), developing a sense of self is particularly complicated for deaf adolescents.

Numerous scholars have identified a variety of self-related problems experienced by deaf people, such as developing low levels of self-control and personal autonomy (e.g., Calderon & Greenberg, 2003; Harvey, 2003), engaging less in self-initiated activities, exhibiting limited faith in personal capabilities (Meadow-Orlans, 1990), and feeling inferior to hearing people (Klanssek-Kyllo & Rose, 1985). In addition, hearing impairment is closely linked to lower levels of mental health (Tamsb, 2004) and well-being (e.g., Theunissen et al., 2014; Weisel & Kamara, 2005).

Although previous studies have determined that deaf people typically have lower self-esteem than do hearing people (Bat-Chava, 1993), deaf adolescents have a more positive self-esteem if they have a rich sense of language and heritage through belonging to a vital cultural group (Bat-Chava, 1993). A positive affiliation with the deaf community is a strong protective factor during the development of self-esteem (Jambor & Elliott, 2005). Percy-Smith, Cayé-Thomassen, Gudman, Jensen, and Thomsen (2008) suggested that cochlear implants enabled children to participate actively in the hearing community and score the same as or higher than their hearing peers on surveys regarding self-esteem and social well-being.

Unlike in the United States and numerous other countries in which the majority of deaf children and adolescents are educated in public schools, in China, children with special needs are sent to special education schools (Yang & Wang, 1994). Although the Learning in the Regular Classroom movement gained popularity in the early 1990s (Ellsworth & Zhang, 2007), most Chinese parents prefer that their deaf children attend completely segregated boarding schools or day school programs because Chinese general education classrooms have large class sizes, lack trained special education teachers, and are full of students who do not understand how to interact with students with disabilities (Kritzer, 2012); that is, students with disabilities in Chinese public schools are given the opportunity to go to school, but not the right to be equally educated. Therefore, Chinese parents, educators, and psychologists assume that deaf children and adolescents can benefit more from attending a special education school. For example, in special education schools, students can develop more effective communication skills and adjust psychosocially in the positive environment. In addition, deaf students can gain more comfort and emotional security from relationships with other deaf peers than from relationships with hearing peers (Stinson, Whitmire, & Kluwin, 1996). However, whether Chinese deaf adolescents in special educational environments contend with fewer challenges caused by their disability remains unclear. To address this issue, this study compared the perceived physical appearance, self-esteem, and life satisfaction experienced by Chinese deaf adolescents in special education schools and those experienced by hearing adolescents in public schools. If deaf adolescents indeed face fewer challenges in special education schools, their perceived physical appearance, self-esteem, and life satisfaction is comparable to that of the hearing students.

Relationships between life satisfaction, self-esteem, and perceived physical appearance

Previous research has indicated that life satisfaction is strongly associated with self-esteem. For example, Moksnes and Espnes (2013) determined that self-esteem positively influenced the life satisfaction of adolescents, regardless of age or

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