

# BODY IMAGE IN ADOLESCENCE:

Through the Lenses of Culture, Gender, and Positive Psychology

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Avhandling för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i psykologi, som med vederbörligt tillstånd av Samhällsvetenskapliga Fakulteten vid Göteborgs Universitet kommer att offentligens försvaras fredagen den 29 november, 2013, klockan 10.00 i sal F1, Psykologiska Institutionen, Haraldsgatan 1, Göteborg.

Fakultetsopponent: Professor Niva Piran, Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development, University of Toronto, Canada

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Avhandlingen grundar sig på följande fyra artiklar:

- I. Holmqvist K., Lunde, C., & Friséen, A. (2007). Dieting behaviors, body shape perceptions, and body satisfaction: Cross-cultural differences in Argentinean and Swedish 13-year-olds. *Body Image, 4*, 191-200.
- II. Friséen, A., & Holmqvist, K. (2010). Biological, sociocultural, and behavioral factors associated with body dissatisfaction in Swedish 16-year-old boys and girls. *Sex Roles, 63*, 373-385.
- III. Friséen, A., & Holmqvist, K. (2010). What characterizes early adolescents with a positive body image? A qualitative investigation of Swedish girls and boys. *Body Image, 7*, 205–212.
- IV. Holmqvist, K., & Friséen, A. (2012). "I bet they aren't that perfect in reality." Appearance ideals from the perspective of adolescents with a positive body image. *Body Image, 9*, 388-395.



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## Abstract

Holmqvist Gattario, K. (2013). *Body Image in Adolescence: Through the Lenses of Culture, Gender, and Positive Psychology*. Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

Adolescents' body image (i.e., feelings and thoughts about their body and appearance) is central to their health and wellbeing. This thesis, which examined adolescents' body image, comprised two parts. The first part (including Studies I and II) examined adolescents' body image from a cultural perspective using questionnaires. **Study I** was a cross-cultural comparison of 874 Swedish and 358 Argentinean 13-year-old adolescents concerning their body image and body-changing behaviors. The results indicated that Swedish and Argentinean adolescents were similar in their levels of body-esteem, but that dieting and weight loss attempts were more prevalent among Argentinean adolescents, especially among girls. The findings indicate a need to further investigate Argentinean girls' dieting behavior and to determine whether the low rates of dieting among Swedish adolescents may be due to protective anti-dieting factors embedded in Swedish society. **Study II** focused on Swedish adolescents and examined the body image of 758 Swedish adolescent girls and boys aged 16 years. Specifically, Study II examined how a set of factors (i.e., BMI, body ideal internalization, pubertal timing, peers' appearance teasing, and weight loss attempts) was related to Swedish adolescents' body image. The results indicated that this set of factors predicted the adolescents' body image, in particular, girls' feelings about their weight. Body ideal internalization (i.e., the adoption of current body ideals as one's personal standard of beauty) was the strongest predictive factor. In addition, even in a society as gender egalitarian as that of Sweden, there were well-established gender differences in body image with girls being more dissatisfied than boys. These findings highlight the significance of gender in adolescents' body image and the importance of understanding the processes by which adolescents internalize media ideals.

The second part of this thesis explored adolescents' body image from a positive psychology perspective, focusing on adolescents' positive body image. Interviews were conducted with 30 Swedish 14-year-old adolescents with a positive body image recruited from a large longitudinal sample. **Study III** examined how adolescents with a positive body image reflected on their bodies, their views of exercise, and the influence of family and friends on their body image. The results revealed that the adolescents' positive body image was characterized by a functional and accepting view of the body. The vast majority of the adolescents were physically active and found exercise joyful and health-promoting. The results indicate the importance of encouraging adolescents to think of their bodies as functional, active, and useful rather than as passive, decorative objects. **Study IV** investigated how adolescents with a positive body image reflected on the subject of appearance ideals. The results indicated that the adolescents were very critical of current ideals, describing them as unnatural and unrealistic, and criticizing the media for only showing subjects consistent with these ideals and for having ulterior motives for doing so. Instead, the adolescents defined beauty widely and flexibly and stressed the importance of looking like "oneself." These findings support media literacy interventions and providing adolescents with alternative views of beauty.

To conclude, this thesis emphasizes the importance of encouraging adolescents to have functional and accepting views of their bodies, for example, through joyful exercise and media literacy. It is also suggested that the role of culture in weight loss behaviors and gender differences in body image should be further scrutinized.

Keywords: Body Image, Adolescence, Culture, Gender, Positive Psychology

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