“It’s Better Saying I Look Fat Instead of Saying You Look Fat”: A Qualitative Study of U.K. Adolescents’ Understanding of Appearance-Related Interactions on Social Media

PADDOCK, DL <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1825-8731> and BELL, BT <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6587-0336>

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Abstract

Appearance-related interactions with peers, both positive and negative, are commonplace on social media. Using qualitative methods, this study explores UK adolescents' shared understandings and experiences of these interactions. Sixty-four adolescents (*Age M* = 12.56; *SD* = 0.97; *Girls* = 33) from a secondary school in Northern England participated in semi-structured focus groups. Using thematic analysis, three themes were developed that encapsulate their shared understandings of appearance-related interactions: (1) positive appearance commentary is the norm, especially if you are popular and attractive, (2) comments to others should be positive, but comments about the self should be modest and self-deprecating (3) negative appearance comments are problematic but not always intentionally harmful. Overall, our findings suggest that, to adolescents, the boundaries between positive and negative interactions are blurred, as content, intention, gender and social rules intersect with social media platform design. Further research is needed to better understand how social media site design alters adolescents' appearance interactions, as well as the role of these interactions in the development and maintenance of peer relationships and body image concerns.

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Appearance concerns are prominent during adolescence (Calzo et al., 2012); with 52% of 11-16-year olds in the UK reporting dissatisfaction with their appearance (Be Real, 2017). Peer relationships play a pivotal role in the development of adolescent appearance concerns (Ata et al., 2007). Research in offline settings shows that adolescents engage in a range of appearance-related interactions with their peers, both positive and negative (Calogero et al., 2009; Lunde & Frisen, 2011). These interactions serve to reinforce and perpetuate problematic sociocultural messages surrounding appearance and may feed into appearance concerns. Increasingly, adolescent peer interactions occur in social media spaces. Image-based social media sites, such as Instagram and Snapchat, are particularly popular among adolescents. These social media sites feature a high proportion of appearance ideal images and are designed to encourage conversations around such images, thus creating a pervasive platform for appearance-related interactions. While studies have started to document the prevalence of appearance-related interactions online (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018), little research has sought to consider how adolescents understand and experience such interactions. Therefore, the present study uses focus groups to explore adolescents' shared understandings and experiences of appearance-related interactions on social media.

Adolescent Appearance Concerns

Early adolescence (aged 10-14 years; Steinberg 2002) is an important period for the development of appearance concerns. The considerable physical, cognitive and social changes characterizing early adolescence contribute to appearance concerns reported among girls and boys (Calzo et al., 2012). The onset of puberty heighten adolescents' bodily awareness and begins the desire to be seen as attractive by others (Truby & Paxton, 2002). Cognitive changes, such as the development of metacognitive abilities (i.e. awareness of one's own thought

process) which leads to increased self-oriented thinking and imaginary audience ideation (Elkind, 1978; Galanaki, 2012), also begin in early adolescence. These changes often manifest as self-consciousness towards the body and appearance (Frankenberger, 2000; Terán et al., 2020). Great value is placed on acceptance and rejection from the peer group during early adolescence, which is often associated with physical attractiveness (Somerville, 2013). Last, adolescents report increased sensitivity to the sociocultural environment (Blakemore & Mills, 2014) wherein appearance-related messages are frequently communicated. However, in the UK and other parts of the Western world, sociocultural appearance-related messages are problematic and so contribute to the high levels of appearance concerns reported by adolescents (Rodgers et al., 2015).

Sociocultural theory (Thompson et al., 1999) and objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) account for the role of the sociocultural environment in the development of adolescent appearance concerns. According to the sociocultural theory, appearance concerns emerge due to perceived pressure from sociocultural agents (e.g. parents, media, and peers) to conform to an unattainable and unrealistic appearance ideal (Thompson et al., 1999). In Western society, the ideal is thin and curvy for women, and lean and muscular for men (Dittmar et al., 2000; Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005), coupled with other increasingly complicated markers of physical attractiveness (e.g., clear skin, straight white teeth; Schaefer et al., 2017). Over time, these appearance ideals become internalized by adolescents as personal goals (Hermes & Keel, 2003), and serve as social comparison targets, leading to body dissatisfaction, as adolescents perceive themselves as failing to live up to the unrealistic ideal (Rodgers et al., 2015). In parallel, objectification theory focuses on the way in which physical attractiveness, particularly of women, is overly valued within society. This, coupled with the internalization of the appearance ideal, leads to self-objectification (Van Diest & Perez, 2013) - the tendency to adopt an external viewers' perspective of one's body and treat oneself as an object - which

in turn leads to increased body surveillance and body shame (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Taken together, these complementary theories provide a comprehensive account of how appearance concerns emerge in adolescence (Dakanalis et al., 2015). Additionally, both theories postulate that appearance pressures are more potent for girls than boys, and so girls are more affected by them (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Thompson et al., 1999). In support of this, research shows that girls typically report higher levels of body ideal internalization, social comparison tendency and self-objectification than boys, as well as more body dissatisfaction (e.g., Knauss et al., 2007).

Peer Appearance Interactions

Peers play an influential role in adolescent development, including in relation to appearance concerns. Research indicates that many of adolescents' interactions with their peers, especially among girls, are heavily appearance-focused (Jones, 2004; Jones et al., 2014; Jones & Crawford, 2006; Clark & Tiggemann, 2006). These peer appearance-related interactions can take many forms and have been conceptualized by researchers in multiple different ways. Interactions may include direct comments about appearance, that may be ostensibly positive (i.e., complimenting, sexual advances; Calogero et al., 2009) or negative (i.e., teasing, banter; and bullying; Lunde & Frisen, 2011). These interactions may also be positively or negatively intended and received. For example, a comment that appears negative on the surface (i.e., deviation from sociocultural appearance ideals) may be intended and received as a humorous interaction (Ging & O'Higgins Norman, 2016). Research has also focused on adolescents' engagement in body talk, a particular form of appearance-related interactions that involves self-disparaging remarks about ones' own appearance that are often reciprocal (e.g., "You're not fat, I am"; Nitcher & Vuckovic, 1994).

Understood within the lens of the sociocultural theory and objectification theory, appearance-related interactions provide an everyday environment in which appearance is

focused upon, interpreted and then internalized as important. Appearance interactions strengthen personal attitudes, norms and beliefs surrounding the appearance ideal leading to internalization of societal messages about appearance. Research has consistently linked self-reported engagement in appearance interactions with both self-objectification and body ideal internalization, as well as body dissatisfaction (Calogero et al., 2009; Bailey & Ricciardelli, 2010). This has led authors to describe these interactions as a form of "appearance training" with peers (Jones, 2004; Lawler & Nixon, 2011), cumulatively creating a micro-level "peer appearance culture" (Jones, 2004) wherein macro-level appearance norms and ideals are communicated, negotiated, shared, modelled and reinforced (Jones & Crawford, 2006). Appearance-related interactions also serve an important supportive function, wherein adolescents provide reassurance to one another based on appearance, strengthening friendships and developing group affirmation (Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). For example, self-disparaging conversations about appearance have been found to strengthen social cohesion among peer groups (Britton et al., 2006; Mills & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2017).

Past research has highlighted the gendered nature of peer appearance interactions. Research suggests girls engage in more appearance interactions than boys (Jones, 2004; Lawler & Nixon, 2011) and report receiving more appearance-related commentary (Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). Qualitative research has also found some types of appearance interactions (e.g., fat talk, a form of body talk centred on weight) that are social norms among female adolescent peer groups, rarely occur among adolescent boys (Stranbu & Kvalem, 2014). As such, girls' appearance interactions have been more intensively studied (Jones, 2004; Lawler & Nixon, 2011) and less is known about boys' experiences of appearance interactions. Of the little research that has examined appearance interactions among boys, findings indicate that boys do engage in body talk but the focus of their conversation is different, e.g., engaging in muscle-related talk rather than weight-related talk, which is more common in girls (Engeln,

Sladek & Waldron, 2013). Furthermore, studies have suggested that discussing some aspects of appearance is regarded as social taboo among boys, e.g., expressing feelings of body dissatisfaction in conversation with friends (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006; Whitaker et al., 2019). There is also evidence to suggest that boys may use humour (i.e., banter/teasing) as a way of interacting about appearance with friends (Taylor, 2011). Because of these qualitative differences, it is possible that gender differences in frequency of appearance interactions may be, in part, due to the female-centric nature of measures.

Peer Appearance Culture and Social Media

Social media have become increasingly popular over the past decade with 70% of adolescents aged 12-15 years in the UK owning a social media account (Ofcom, 2020), with similar statistics reported across Europe, where over 50% of 9-16 year olds report using social media regularly (Smahel et al., 2020). Adolescents primarily use social media as a communication tool to facilitate peer relationships and identity development (boyd, 2014). However, social media also plays an important role in the development, maintenance and perpetuation of an appearance culture. Typically, research has focused on how the appearance culture is reflected in the images posted to social media. Previous content analyses have highlighted the prevalence of body and appearance ideals within the images posted to social media (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2017; Talbot et al., 2017). In addition, individuals are encouraged to actively participate within this appearance culture by creating and sharing their own appearance ideal self-images (Terán et al., 2020). This is especially common among girls (Cohen et al., 2018; Salomon & Brown, 2019), though boys do also report sharing self-images to social media (Boursier et al., 2020; Jarman et al., 2021). In qualitative research across cultures, adolescents have reported striving to create and share images that conform to sociocultural appearance ideals, with the purpose of receiving positive feedback, in the form of likes and comments, from peers (Bell, 2019; Chua & Chang, 2016; Yau & Reich, 2019).

Quantitative research, again spanning across cultures, has shown how viewing, taking, posting and editing self-images is linked to appearance concerns among adolescents and young people, especially among girls (de Lenne, 2020; Prieler et al., 2021).

However, image creation and sharing represent only part of the functionality of social media. Importantly, social media platforms are designed to encourage users to interact around images. Thus, sociocultural messages surrounding appearance are also likely to be reflected in the way users respond to images. Understanding these interactions is essential to the development of more holistic understandings of how social media perpetuates and contributes to body and appearance concerns among adolescents. Crucially, interactions on social media may differ from those occurring offline, due to the constraints imposed on interactions by social media platforms. The transformation framework (Nesi et al., 2018) provides a useful tool for understanding how social media site design impacts upon adolescents' peer interactions and relationships. It identifies seven design features of social media sites that have potential to transform peer interactions; *asynchronicity* (whether communication is synchronous or asynchronous), *permanence* (whether content is ephermeral or persistent), *publicness* (ability to communicate with large groups of people simultaneously), *availability* (ease in which content can be shared and accessed), *cue absence* (how much anonymity is afforded by the platform), *quantifiability* (numerical social metrics such as the "like") and *visualness* (whether the platform emphasizes text, photo or video). These design features work together to create a unique interactional context that is different to the offline social world, yet still retains some similarities and consistencies. For example, research on cyberbullying has shown how bullies navigate the different features of social media sites to conceal their bullying from a broader audience, using more private (e.g., direct messenger) or anonymized accounts (e.g., when trolling) to engage in victimization without scrutiny (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). The

permanency of these interactions, and that they can be received anytime anywhere, may mean that they are experienced with increased intensity from the receiver.

Research examining adolescents' appearance interactions on social media has been limited. Quantitative research has noted the prevalence and diversity of appearance interactions on social media. Chrisler et al., (2013) demonstrated how positive and negative appearance-related remarks, orientated towards both the self- and others- featured in the Twitter posts of viewers watching a Victoria's Secret fashion show. Other studies have documented how self-reported engagement in appearance-related conversations on social media (e.g., feedback on self-images) is correlated with body image among young women (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018; Niu et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2019). However, these studies reveal very little about how adolescents experience appearance-related interactions, the meanings attached to them, gender differences, and the function that they play in peer relationships. Qualitative studies involving adolescents and young adults have shed some light on this. In some studies, adolescents have described how positive feedback on self-images, serve as a form of peer approval (Bell, 2019; Chua & Chang, 2016), and some suggest that adolescents post selfies for the sole purpose of receiving compliments though not always (Burnette et al., 2017). Given that self-images typically conform to appearance ideals, comments serve as another aspect of the social media environment wherein appearance ideals are negotiated and reinforced. Furthermore, Berne et al., (2014) specifically investigated appearance-related cyberbullying and found typically such comments revolved around non-conformity to appearance ideals. Negative remarks were also were highly gendered; girls received comments centered on fatness, whereas boys received comments about appearing feminine.

The Present Study

Adolescents' appearance-related interactions on social media may take many forms, varying in terms of content, intentions, and reception, in both positive and negative ways. These

interactions may be the product of several factors; pervasive sociocultural messaging surrounding appearance, social media platform design (e.g., visualness, permanence, publicness; Nesi et al., 2018), and the adolescents' micro-level peer group and culture (including gender norms). Little research has considered how adolescents understand and experience these appearance-related interactions in social media settings, and how such interactions function within both their peer relationships and developing body image. Using focus groups to elicit shared meaning and understandings, the present study aims to address the following research questions:

RQ_1. What are adolescents' perceptions, understandings and experiences of appearance-related interactions on social media?

RQ_2. What gender differences exist in online appearance-related interactions?

Method

Participants

Sixty-four participants (*Age M* = 12.56; *SD* = 0.97; *Range* = 11-14; Female *N* = 33, Male *N* = 30, Other *N* = 1) were recruited from a secondary school in Northern England. The school catchment area encompasses a large area of economic deprivation (according to UK Government data; Ministry of Housing, Communities, & Local Government, 2019). Approximately, 94% of participants were white, 3% mixed race, and 2% African Caribbean. All participants used social media, with most reporting that they check their social media accounts every few hours (36%), every hour (22%), and every ten minutes (14%). Most participants reported Instagram as their most used social media site (45.3%), followed by YouTube (26.6%), Snapchat (14.1%), WhatsApp (6.3%), Facebook (4.7%) and Twitter (1.6%).

Participants took part in the focus group as part of their citizenship lessons during the normal school day. Focus group allocation was arranged by the head of citizenship curriculum. There were 9 focus groups in total, with 5-8 participants per group. There were 3 male only; 3 female only; and 3 mixed gender focus groups. All groups included adolescents of mixed educational abilities. These gender configurations facilitated the exploration of gender dynamics in understandings of appearance interactions. Focus groups lasted between 29.29 - 49.23 minutes.

Focus Group Design

Through focus groups, we were able to explore the social norms and group understandings of appearance-related peer interactions, as they are co-constructed. Focus groups are particularly appropriate for adolescents since they can provide a less intimidating atmosphere than one-on-one interviews. They were semi-structured with facilitators using both

physical stimuli (examples of appearance-related interactions on social media) and a semi-structured questioning guide to stimulate discussion.

Physical Stimuli (vignettes). Ten custom-made vignettes were made to represent five different types of appearance interaction that have been the focus of previous research (i.e., compliments, body talk, sexual advances, teasing/banter and bullying), as they may occur within social media platforms. The vigenttes showed different interactions on different platforms (e.g., compliments were shown on Instagram, body talk was shown on Snapchat). There were two versions of each appearance-related interaction that were shown to participants in every focus group; one involving a male adolescent protagonist, and one involving a female adolescent protagonist. This allowed for participants to discuss possible gender differences in these interactions. Some of the vignettes included a screenshot of the interaction occurring on different social media (e.g., compliments, body talk and teasing/banter). Other vignettes, (e.g., sexual advances and bullying) involved a short story explaining the interaction that was captured within a blank template of a social media platform. All vignettes were accompanied by text giving participants context regarding the scenario. Prior to the study, 4 adolescents (*Age* M = 12.50, *Female* = 2) provided verbal feedback on the authenticity of the vignettes, which were amended on the basis of their feedback. Copies of vigenttes are available as supplementary materials and on the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/fsvcw/?view_only=b7213d70c2e641fe850c8d8295092f0f).

Focus Group Schedule. To help participants actively engage in the group, an icebreaker was used. This involved asking adolescents to state their participant number, age and the last social media they used. Introductory questions aimed to explore how adolescents' use social media. The schedule then comprised of questions that were used alongside each of the vignettes to help prompt discussion. Questions aimed to ask about how adolescents understand and experience each interaction (e.g., "How do you characterize this interaction?"), how online

interaction may differ to offline interaction (e.g., "How likely is this to occur in face-to-face, i.e. offline?") and to explore gender differences (e.g., "Would you expect this to occur more between girls or boys and why?"). There were some questions regarding other functions on social media such as receiving likes, responses to certain types of images, and differences between appearance-related interactions with friends and celebrities. The focus group ended with the researcher providing participants with the opportunity to discuss any other types of online appearance-related interactions that they felt were not covered. Both the questioning schedule and vignettes were piloted with a group of six older adolescents to assess feasibility. The questioning schedule is available on the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/fsvcw/?view_only=b7213d70c2e641fe850c8d8295092f0f).

Procedure

Active consent was obtained from the head teacher of the participating school, opt-out consent was gained from parents in advance of study participation, and active consent was gained from participants on the day of the study. Focus groups took place on school grounds during the adolescents' citizenship lessons over a period of one week. In each focus group, participants and the facilitator were seated around a table in a quiet meeting room, with the vignettes placed face down in a pile in front of them. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time and were given the opportunity to ask any questions. Before beginning participants were asked to fill in a small demographic questionnaire regarding age, gender, ethnicity and general social media use. At the start of the focus group, the facilitator asked participants general questions about their social media use. Participants were then asked to pick up the first two vignettes, which had been paired (i.e., the male and female protagonists version of the same online appearance interaction) and randomly ordered. They were asked to take a few moments to look at them then describe the example. Participants then discussed the interaction and the facilitator asked questions to prompt discussion surrounding how these

examples link to adolescents' own experiences and understandings. At the end of the study, participants were thanked for their participation and reminded about their right to withdraw. All focus groups were facilitated by the first author, a 23-year-old cis-female postgraduate researcher with five years' experience working with adolescents in a school environment. Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. The study adhered to BPS Ethical Guidelines and received ethical approval from the relevant University Ethics Committee.

Analytic Procedure

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data set, using the six-step process outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006), through a critical realist lens. Critical realism poses that reality exists but operates independently of our knowledge and awareness of it (Archer et al., 1998). This allows for recognition of participants' own knowledge as reality but also the ability to consider the sociocultural context in which this knowledge about online appearance interactions is situated. First, analysis begun by the first author familiarizing themselves with the data (Step 1) through repeated reading and listening of the transcripts. Then, initial codes were developed and applied to the data (Step 2), including both semantic and latent codes that enabled the understanding of surface meanings, as well as deeper underlying conceptualizations. During this stage, the first author regularly met with the second author, a female academic with over 15 years' experience of research with adolescents to discuss the coding of extracts. However, all initial coding was performed by the first author. Once all data were coded, initial themes were developed (Step 3) and then themes were refined and reviewed to check that identified themes adequately represented the data set (Step 4). The second author was also involved in this process, and regularly met with the first author to discuss and review theme development in relation to the dataset. Once the themes were reviewed, definitions of the themes were created (Step 5) in order to fully capture the essence of each theme in relation

to the data that it captures. Steps 3-5 were conducted iteratively, with theme and theme definitions being modified and refined multiple times.

Throughout the analysis, themes were developed through an inductive approach, allowing themes to be data driven. However, themes were interpreted and contextualized according to existing research that examines adolescent appearance interactions, social media use and appearance concerns more broadly. During the production of the final report (Step 6) themes, codes and quotes were verified by checking the transcriptions and recordings to ensure accuracy. Inter-rater reliability was not considered appropriate, thus any incongruities between the researchers were resolved through active discussion in order to validate the themes (as suggested by Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Results

Through thematic analysis, three themes were developed that encapsulate adolescents' understandings and experiences of appearance-related interactions on social media. Participants are referred to by pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality, and the relevant focus group information (i.e. gender and number) is provided in parentheses (e.g. B2: boy group 2; M3: mixed gender group 3). Quotes to support each theme were found across all nine focus groups.

Positive appearance commentary is the norm, especially if you are popular and attractive

Adolescents described highly visual social media platforms (i.e., those centred on sharing edited images, such as Instagram) as highly appearance-focused environments, wherein appearance-related commentary - especially positive appearance-related commentary - was the norm and was linked to positive attributes such as popularity and attractiveness. Looking good was constructed as more important than inner attributes for boys and girls, both on social media and in the broader sociocultural environment *"well it's just how the online world works at the moment cause people are more obsessed with how people look"* (Jack, 12, B1), and "*because nowadays everyone just cares about how they look and not what you're like* (Charlotte, 13, G3)". As such, appearance-related comments from other users were both the norm and expected, "*because you can't really comment on their personality in a post, if someone puts a selfie you're not going to comment going hahaha you're so funny"* (Jake, 14, M3). Girls were constructed as caring more about their appearance than boys:

> Jack, 12: Girls care more about their appearance because they all want to look like famous celebrities and have certain hair color certain body weight
>
> Simon, 11: I think girls deffo care more about their appearance than boys
>
> Charlie, 12: Boys don't really care as much. (B1)

Positive appearance commentary tended to involve general statements about appearance (e.g. "beautiful", "pretty", or the use of heart eye emoji) rather than explicit comments that referred to body parts or weight and were posted in direct response to images that meet the appearance ideal. They were positively intended and resulted in positive consequences: *"friends would give you positive comments to sort of make you feel good"* (Theo, 13, B3). It functioned as a form of both appearance-related approval: *"it makes you feel good about yourself cause you know you've posted summat and everyone seems to like it so you're just like aw everyone likes that post I must look good in it* (Ashleigh, 14, G3)" and social approval: *"oh a lot of people think I'm alright you know what I mean like they like me"* (Monty, 14, M3). Positive appearance comments (i.e. compliments) were described as more important and more meaningful than likes on sites that allowed such quantifiable feedback *"yeah it'd be nicer for them to give one compliment saying "you look nice" it'd make them happy rather than a like* (Lucy, 12, M2)", because they perceived this action as more effortful than 'liking' the image. Adolescents described employing strategies, such as tagging friends into their self-images, in order to receive more positive appearance comments.

Sexual advances (i.e. comments that focus on sexual body parts or contain innuendo) represent a distinct type of compliment that can either be sincerely intended or have more malicious intent (e.g., harassment). These are commonly made on less public platforms (e.g., Facebook Messenger) *"you get comments like that in DMs or stuff like that and anonymous* (Jasmine, 14, M3)", and occur more frequently than in person interactions due to the level of anonymity afforded *"I guess people can say whatever they want and social media can't they because if they're really shy in person they can be really confident on social media so they'll say it on there in private* (Charlotte, 14, G3)". Regardless of intent, sexual advances were perceived as a response to meeting appearance ideals. Adolescents described how receiving these comments from someone they knew, this would be interpreted as a way of stating

romantic interest, however if it was from a stranger, it would be received with more skepticism. That said, there were also age differences in how sexual advances were interpreted. The slightly older adolescents in our sample (i.e., those aged 13-14 years) described sexualized comments from peers as being indicative of sexual attraction and welcomed there possibility: *"if I know the person they might be into me so I might go talk to them a bit more"* (Teddy, 13, B3), whereas the younger adolescents in our sample (11-12 years) positioned these interactions as "weird", even if they knew the poster, suggesting potential age differences in how these were interpreted.

Lola, 11: Well they're saying positive things but its negative because its creepy

Bobby, 12: I don't think they're positive

Lola, 11: Yeah it's really sexual and I know if I got messages like that I'd be like woah-

Bobby, 12: -Go away

Moderator: Would it still be weird if it came from someone you knew?

Bobby, 12: Yes and then I would never speak to them again

Katie, 12: I think it would be even weirder if it came from someone you knew. (M1)

The quantity of compliments received on more public and permanent social media was described as dependent on your status within the broader peer group. High-status "popular" adolescents were described as receiving more positive comments, *"cause if you're someone who's really popular and got loads and loads of friends you'll get complimented more but you wanna try be the one that stands out online too"* (Amy, 13, M2). Popularity within the peer group offline was equated with meeting appearance ideals, whereas deviation from appearance ideals was linked to being unpopular: *"in every school there's them people that aren't that popular and everything and everyone makes fun of them cos they're not good looking"* (Isabelle, 14, G3). This offline popularity was constructed as resulting in more likes and comments on social media: *"it depends on if you're that person or not because if you're in the*

popular group and everyone loves you then you're going to get complimented more" (Charlotte, 14, G3). In this way, positive appearance commentary functioned as a marker of popularity and attractiveness within the broader peer group.

Adolescents also emphasized that appearing attractive was important in order to acquire more positive feedback on sites where feedback is more public and less ephemeral: *"you look pretty and it's like oh more people like it if I'm pretty but if you look ugly they won't"* (Charlotte, 13, G3). This was especially prominent for girls, who associated attractiveness with popularity: *"girls feel like oh I've got to look like this in photos otherwise nobody will like me because I'm not gunna be in that group where everybody looks perfect"* (Emma, 11, G1). That said, some adolescents discussed that even the less popular people still publicly receive compliments on social media "*you see all the girls comments they're always hyping each other up you see about 100 comments on it even could be someone who's not very popular but then say they have two friends those two friends would just hype it up"* (Myles, 14, B3) and that receiving positive comments on social media are a marker of offline friendships.

Comments to others should be positive, but comments about the self should be modest and self-deprecating

Though adolescents described the importance of being positive about other people's appearance on public social media platforms, they discussed how comments about the self should be more modest, including being self-deprecating about their own appearance. Those who gave positive appearance comments to others in public social media channels were perceived in a positive light, and positive comments were positioned as indicative of positive personal attributes, e.g., "*nice people comment nice things"* (Freddie, 12, M1), and *"when you comment nice stuff to each other it shows you're a nice person"* (Charlie, 12, B1). Posters of positive commentary were also perceived as good friends *"some people do it [compliment] over the actual post so some people don't think they're bad friends"* (Charlotte, 14, G3). In this

way, public and permanent positive appearance commentary served as a form of self-presentation; a way of appearing positively to others.

In contrast, they described how negative appearance comments to others on these public and permanent platforms would make you look like a bad person *"there's not many times when people comment something bad on your post cos they'd look bad"* (Ashleigh, 14, G3). Thus, adolescents recognized that despite being highly valued, social media feedback is not always an accurate reflection of an individuals' true thoughts and feelings. However, this disparity not only helped to preserve one's own image by presenting oneself in a desirable way but also helped others by making them feel good about themselves: *"they could be like oh you're so pretty but could be texting someone else saying yeah they're not pretty I'm just saying that to make them feel better"* (Charlie, 12, B1).

While complimenting others was the norm, public positive comments about the self were not: *"it'd be like oh yeah she's happy with the way she looks but then she's proper full of herself which is bad"* (Hayley, 13, G2). It was important to avoid appearing too confident about ones own appearance to avoid being labelled as *"big headed"* or *"cocky"* (McKenzie, 13, G2), especially on highly visual platforms such as Instagram. Therefore, despite investing time and effort trying to appear physically attractive in self-images, adolescents were cautious to appear simultaneously modest and unsure. They tended to address these conflicting feelings in the way they captioned their self-images on more permanent platforms, *"well what usually happens is a girl posts a picture of a selfie and they probably put something like 'felt cute might delete later' and then there's a girl comment like 'you're always cute' and then they'll be like 'oh no I'm not you're the cute one'"* (Daniel, 13, B2). Adolescents recognized that this modesty in the captioning of images will evoke a positive response from others, as the expectation online is that peers will respond positively:

Holly, 11: I think it's a bit stupid cos if you say if your saying to someone 'aw I'm so fat' then what do you expect them to say 'oh yeah I agree with you'

Hannah, 12: go on a diet

Holly, 11: no

Lola, 11: nobody's going to put that

Hannah, 12: you don't actually think they're going to say yeah your fat

Lola, 11: you expect them to say no you're not

Holly, 11: yeah you know what they're going to say. (M1).

Despite this being the perceived norm on social media, it was also described negatively. Adolescents positioned this modesty as a reassurance-seeking strategy - *'fishing for compliments*' (Lola, 11, M1) – especially among girls, because the images accompanying the caption were clearly staged to emphasize attractiveness: *"I hate it when you see photos online and somebody's put their caption 'aw I'm so ugly' and it's this amazing person…why would you post it I feel like people are just looking for compliments if people put "aw I'm so ugly" on a post* (Chelsea, 12, M2)". Though reassurance seeking is the norm, it was construed negatively as "attention seeking", which was differentiated from a genuine need for support *"if you're saying you're fat you probably want them to say no you're not fat its basically attention seeking"* (Jack, 12, B1). Importantly, the majority of adolescents distanced themselves from having personally engaged in this behavior in the group discussions, instead focusing on their reactions to others engaging in this behavior, never their own experiences; a common strategy in interviews (Talmy, 2011).

Gender differences were discussed in relation to self-deprecation on social media. Girls were perceived as being more likely to make modest appearance comments about weight (e.g. *"feeling fat"* – Emma, 11, G1) as a way of seeking appearance-related reassurances on social media *"it's kind of a stereotype that girls fish for compliments more boys don't just sit there*

and go 'I'm ugly, call me beautiful' but it's a stereotype that girls do" (Freddie, 12, M1). In comparison, boys who made self-deprecating remarks (e.g., *"I feel like such a fatty"* – Monty, 14, M3) were perceived more positively, as a humorous interaction:

> Bobby, 12: Boys are a lot more laugh-y about it the girls are more serious the boys joke about feeling fat but girls are like 'no I'm fat, you're skinny'
>
> Holly, 11: yeah girls diss themselves all the time
>
> Freddie, 12: Yeah I feel like I know that boys and girls all have self-image issues but girls talk about it more boys just have a laugh. (M1)

Negative appearance comments are problematic, but not always intentionally harmful

This final theme encapsulates adolescents' understandings and experiences of negative appearance interactions on social media, particularly how comments indicating deviation from sociocultural appearance ideals (e.g. "you're fat", "you're ugly", referred to as negative comments within this theme) are not always intended to harm. Adolescents described being a viewer of serious negative appearance commentary (e.g. instances of bullying) online, but distanced themselves from engaging in it, possibly due to negative social perceptions surrounding this behavior. For example, they discussed how they would avoid making negative appearance comments on someone's public social media posts by utilizing other strategies, such as not liking an image: *" I think it's a better way to do it you know what I mean instead of just saying oh you're really ugly in that picture it's a better way by not liking it"* (Jack, 12, B1)".

Adolescents discussed viewing serious negative commentary, and described how acquaintances rather than close friends were more likely to post these comments publicly on more visual social media, *"some of your mates can put summat good and then you could have somebody who doesn't like you but they still follow you and just slag you off on your post"* (Jake, 14, M3). Targets of serious negative appearance comments in social media environments

were described as typically occupying a low status in offline peer groups; "*if you're really popular with all the naughty ones … then you've got less chance of somebody being horrible to you because they'll be scared … but like what's it called a low-key nerd … then they might start saying oh erm you look like this you look like that err you're fat you're ugly"* (Chelsea, 13, M2). In addition, adolescents discussed how girls were described as being more likely to receive negative comments if they did not meet appearance ideals, than boys who were granted more flexibility in terms of appearance:

> Sarah, 12: they have to have everything, the right hair makeup and clothes and boys can just do whatever they want but girls have to look good and if they're not then they just bully them for it" (G1).

However, not all ostensibly negative appearance comments were perceived as problematic. Adolescents made a distinction between maliciously intended negative appearance commentary (such as bullying) and more prosocially intended negative appearance commentary (such as banter and teasing). Bullying was characterized as involving repetitive negative appearance comments, usually from several people, and occurring in private through direct messaging streams "*it depends as well how many times they do it if a whole group of friends started commenting and direct messaging you then I guess that would be classed as bullying because they're not leaving you alone … but if it wasn't loads of people and only saying one thing then I wouldn't really class it as bullying because it would only happen once and their not carrying it on"* (Charlotte, 14, G3).

Many of the ostensibly negative appearance-related comments made in public spaces on social media are not always intended to cause harm, particularly if made within the boundaries of friendship groups *"some people comment the sick emoji but you know they're joking cos you're really good friends with them"* (Louise, 12, G1). Relationship to the commenter was described as important when interpreting a negative appearance-related

comment. Many adolescents positioned negative appearance comments as humorous and not harmful especially when posted by a friend *"there's not many times when people comment something bad on your post if it is then it'd be your mates and they're joking they'll put ew and then you'd put oh whatever ... you don't really take offense"* (Leigh, 14, G3)". Emojis were used as indicators of where negative comments were intended as humorous *"that one's definitely banter ... cause they've got the laughing emojis after it just to show they're not being mean they're just trying to have a laugh"* (Daniel, 12, B2). Though a prominent interaction among boys and girls, humorous negative appearance commentary was constructed as more prominent among male friendship groups:

> Theo, 13: I think the lads one they're making fun of them because he's just had a large big mac large fries and a milkshake they're making fun of him being fat
>
> Myles, 14: yeah basically lads just being lads pulling their leg having a bit of fun that's all (B3).

Whether intended maliciously or not, negative comments reflected an endorsement of appearance ideals. Adolescents interpreted appearance comments such as "you're fat; you're ugly" as negative because these comments suggest that a person deviates from the sociocultural norm of attractiveness "*yeah it's just [referring to comments such as "fatty" or "eww"] what you say to be mean or joke about like you're fat you're ugly cause it's bad to be that like in society goes against what people are supposed to look like"* (Simon, 11, B1).

Discussion

Three themes were developed that encapsulate adolescents' shared understandings and experiences of appearance-related interactions on social media. Adolescents positioned positive appearance commentary as the norm, especially if you are popular and attractive (Theme 1). They described how it is important to be positive about others' appearance on social media, but to appear modest and uncertain about your own appearance (Theme 2). Lastly, they emphasized how negative appearance commentary could cause harm when directed at others, but not always, since subverting sociocultural norms through humor could also facilitate social ties (Theme 3). Importantly, the themes reflect adolescents' perceptions of appearance interactions on social media, where boundaries between positive and negative appearance comments are blurred as content, intention, gender and social rules intersect with social media platform design.

On highly visual social media platforms, positive appearance commentary (i.e., compliments) was described as the norm. This finding corroborates existing quantitative research showing that young people report receiving positive comments much more frequently than negative comments (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018), and further extends this research by shedding light on adolescents' understandings of why this happens. Positive appearance comments were constructed as an expected response to appearance ideal images on social media; a product of the highly visual nature of some social media (e.g., Instagram) as well as broader problematic sociocultural messages surrounding the importance of idealized beauty (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Thompson et al., 1999). Furthermore positive appearance commentary was also constructed as serving a self-presentation function; adolescents described how positive appearance comments made the poster appear socially desirable, as well as positively impacting on the receiver. This is an important contribution. Past research has described how adolescents use social media as a site for self-presentation and how adolescents

convey their most desirable self to their peers through images (Bell, 2019). Our findings extend this work by showing how self-presentational concerns also inform commentary in social media spaces.

Negative (i.e., maliciously intended) appearance commentary was described as less common in public social media channels for similar reasons linked to self-presentation. This is consistent with qualitative research on appearance commentary, which found that publicly engaging in maliciously intended acts was typically viewed as an unacceptable behavior within the broader peer group (Burnette et al., 2017). Instead, negative appearance interactions were described as occurring on platforms where users are afforded anonymity (i.e., those with a high level of cue absence, Nesi et al., 2018) as to hide their identity. Alternatively, adolescents described how private channels of communication were used for maliciously intended appearance commentary, in order to avoid scrutiny from the broader peer group. Private social media channels were also used for sexual advances, despite being ostensibly 'positive' to similarly avoid scrutiny from the peer group. Thus, adolescents demonstrated an awareness and consideration of an imagined social media audience beyond the receiver of their appearance commentary, and described navigating the perceived publicness, privacy and permanency of social media channels to ensure a positive self-image was maintained.

Self-presentational concerns were also evident in the comments adolescents made about their own appearance on social media. Adolescent girls described appearing modest, self-deprecating and unsure about their own appearance when interacting on social media, e.g., captioning a selfie with a label such as, "feel cute might delete later". This behavior is very similar to body talk, which has been well documented in offline environments, especially among girls (Mills & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2017), and can serve multiple functions, e.g., reassurance-seeking, self-protection, or indicator of belonging (Britton et al., 2006; Mills & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2017). In contrast, boys would show their self-deprecation with humor,

consistent with research showing that men tend to use humor when discussing appearance-related topics that is more consistent with their gender group norms (Taylor, 2011). Appearing negative about the self in this way may be a way of coping with the pressure and high standards (i.e. achieving the sociocultural appearance ideal) that adolescents' feel both when posting a self-image to social media, as well as reflecting competing cultural expectations surrounding appearance modesty (Britton et al., 2006) and gender roles (Strandbu & Kvalem, 2014). Future research should aim to explore these nuances in more depth, using interviews and making use of scroll-back techniques to provide deeper insight into real life experiences.

Appearance-related interactions were constructed as playing an important role in adolescents' peer relationships. Ostensibly positive comments contributed to friendships and peer relationships by boosting the confidence of the receiver and easing appearance-related uncertainties. They also served as a public display or marker of friendship, solidifying these within the broader peer context. Ostensibly negative remarks with humorous intent were also positioned as being part of friendships (i.e. shared inside jokes), particularly among adolescent boys. Combined, these findings highlight the myriad ways in which adolescent friendships facilitate the negotiation of appearance ideals; with this negotiation serving as the basis for the formation of social bonds and intimacy (Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). Beyond friendships, appearance interactions contributed to the establishment of social hierarchies, and social media platform design, particularly the quantifiable nature of certain platforms play an important role here. Frequency of receiving appearance compliments was associated with attractiveness (as defined by conformity to appearance ideals) which in turn is associated with popularity, and so, peer acceptance was perceived as achievable through attainment of the appearance ideal (Lawler & Nixon, 2011). Thus, by posting an image to social media and receiving appearance comments, offline social relationships and hierarchies, are reproduced and reinforced.

Though all adolescents described engaging in appearance-related interactions on social media, the nature of these interactions was gendered. Girls were constructed as more likely to care about appearance, compliment one another's appearance publicly, and make self-disparaging remarks about their appearance on their posts. In contrast, boys were constructed as more likely to engage in humorous interactions related to appearance, and in particular, weight. These views are consistent with past research showing that boys typically use humor when discussing appearance with friends to avoid appearing too "feminine" (Taylor, 2011), and avoid disclosing appearance-related concerns in a serious manner, since these behaviors are perceived as more masculine and consistent with male gender roles (Whitaker et al., 2019). Similar gender differences in appearance interactions have been highlighted in past research (Jones, 2004), and our findings extend this research to highlight how gender differences are also present in these interactions in social media spaces. Thus, while boys and girls are confronted by the same interactional constraints within social media channels, their appearance interactions manifest in different ways, consistent with broader sociocultural expectations surrounding gender.

Implications

Our findings highlight how appearance interactions are not simply mirrored from offline to online, but instead are altered and constrained by social media platform design. These design features – most notably, visualness, publicness, and permanence (Nesi et al., 2018) - contributed to adolescents' experiences and perceptions of appearance-related interactions. In particular, some types of interactions (e.g., positive appearance commentary) were experienced as more frequent and intense, due to their greater visualness publicness and permanency. Thus, our findings lend support for the utility of the transformation framework (Nesi et al., 2018) as a tool for understanding appearance-related interactions in social media spaces. That said, appearance-related interactions still bore some similarities to their offline counterparts. For

example, posts such as “feel cute might delete later” echo the self-deprecating nature of body talk in offline settings (Mills & Fuller- Tyszkiewicz, 2017), but also acknowledge the constraints of the social media platform, which encourage the posting of appearance ideal images. Similarly, gender differences in appearance interactions found in the offline world (e.g., boys use of humor when discussing appearance; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006) persisted into social media environments. Understanding the role of social media site design in adolescent appearance interactions allows researchers to develop a more nuanced approach to understanding the potential impact of these appearance interactions on adolescent body image.

In highlighting the myriad complex, intricate and interwoven ways in which problematic messages surrounding appearance are transmitted at the micro-level, the findings have important implications for both objectification theory and sociocultural theory. Our findings highlight how messages surrounding the importance of physical appearance and appearance ideals, as well as pressures to adopt an external viewers’ perspective of the body, manifest in both direct and indirect ways in appearance commentary in social media, not just images as documented in past research. For example, compliments, sexual advances and self-disparaging remarks all reinforce the importance of appearance from an external viewer’s perspective, and are all frequent occurrences on social media that can be experienced in a multitude of ways (e.g., they can be viewed, received, or posted). Even negative comments intended as a source of humor reinforce these messages, by legitimizing bodies that deviate from the appearance ideal as something to be mocked (e.g., Fouts & Burgraff, 2000). Crucially, appearance commentary works in tandem with images on social media, suggesting that understanding both is crucial to understanding how sociocultural appearance messages are reinforced and reproduced by these platforms.

In contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the potential role social media plays in adolescents’ body image development, our findings have implications for social media

literacy interventions aimed at promoting body positivity. In particular, we highlight the importance of text-based interactions in adolescents' negotiation, reinforcement and perpetuation of sociocultural messages surrounding appearance. Critical and nuanced awareness of appearance-related interactions need to be integrated into emerging social media literacy programs (e.g., Gordon et al., 2020), with a particular focus on how social media transforms these experiences. These programs also need to consider the gendered nature of appearance interactions and adapt delivery accordingly.

Limitations

This study used focus groups in order to explore adolescents' shared understanding of appearance-related interactions of social media. However, this method is not without limitations. While focus groups are well-suited to eliciting shared meanings, the group environment may have affected adolescent's ability to contribute, with some feeling unable to voice their opinions, especially where they deviate from group norms. To combat this, future research could benefit from supplementing focus groups with follow-up interviews (Tatangelo & Ricciardelli, 2017). Furthermore, the use of vignettes that were created by the research team may have steered discussions and encouraged participants to reflect on certain types of interactions. Alternative prompts, including those created by participants (e.g., asking participants to show examples of their own interactions, such as with the scroll-back method; Robards & Lincoln, 2019) may have encouraged different discussions.

Participants involved in this study were predominantly white, of low socio-economic status, and from the same school in the UK. It is unclear how the norms described in this study reflect the experiences of other groups of adolescents. That said, some social media research have found remarkably similar patterns of use across different cultural groups of adolescents (Livingstone, 2019). However, because the Western beauty ideal particularly values "whiteness" (Craddock, 2016), it is likely that other ethnic groups living in the UK may

experience appearance interactions differently, and future research should consider how ethnic identities intersect with the social media appearance culture. Similarly, future research should explore how sexual identities and age (e.g., older adolescents) intersect with this culture, as this was not considered in our study. In particular, younger adolescents may have greater imaginary audience concerns that older adolescents (Vartanian & Powlishta, 2001), and so it is unclear whether self-presentational concerns would be as salient or manifest in the same ways as described by adolescents in our sample.

Conclusion

The current study explored adolescents' perceptions, understandings and experiences of appearance-related interactions among peers as they manifest within the social media environment. Our findings highlight how adolescents' understandings of appearance commentary go beyond what is superficially positive and negative. Instead, understandings are informed by group and gender norms, self-presentation and relational concerns, and broader sociocultural appearance messages. Importantly, this study demonstrates the more complex ways in which social media design features transform adolescent appearance interactions to both facilitate and perpetuate the peer appearance culture, with commentary running in synchrony with images to communicate and reinforce appearance ideas within peer groups. Further research is needed to understand individual experiences of how appearance interactions manifest in the online environment, and the potential role these play in the development of appearance concerns in adolescence.

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