

“The constant jokes make me feel crap about myself”: A reflexive thematic analysis of boys’ experiences of appearance-related banter on Instagram.

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“The constant jokes make me feel crap about myself”: A reflexive thematic analysis of boys’
experiences of body talk on Instagram

Abstract

Body talk plays a crucial role in body image development. It is highly gendered, yet few studies have examined body talk among boys. This study aims to understand boys' experiences and perceptions of body talk on Instagram and to explore how these interactions contribute to their body image development. Nine boys aged between 13-17 years ($M = 14.78$; $SD = 1.64$) participated in in-depth, one-to-one qualitative interviews using the scroll-back technique. Reflexive thematic analysis generated three themes: (1) Everything is a joke; building relationships through banter, (2) Boys don't do compliments; masculinity and the appearance culture, and (3) Banter is not always funny; the darker side of banter. Findings encapsulate the complex nature of boys' online body talk, wherein humour – or 'banter' – is a central feature, and highlight how gender norms both influence and are reinforced by social media interactions. Implications and directions for future research are discussed, including strategies for overcoming challenges associated with involving boys in body image studies research.

Keywords: Body talk, Adolescent Boys, Banter, Body Image, Social Media

Public Significance: This study highlights the often-overlooked role of boys' social media interactions in shaping body image, drawing attention to how humour and "banter" can both strengthen friendships and reinforce harmful appearance norms. The findings are important for informing more inclusive body image interventions and support strategies that address boys' experiences, which have historically been underrepresented in research. Ultimately, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how gender norms are perpetuated online and how they impact adolescent wellbeing.

***“The constant jokes make me feel crap about myself”*: A reflexive thematic analysis of boys’ experiences of body talk on Instagram**

Social media is a popular tool for adolescent peer interaction, with 66% of adolescents identifying it as the top way to communicate with friends (Anderson et al., 2023). Highly visual social media platforms, such as Instagram, encourage appearance-focused exchanges (Tiggemann & Barbato, 2018), which may reinforce harmful sociocultural messages surrounding appearance and heighten body image concerns (Wang et al., 2020). Although adolescents communicate across multiple online platforms, Instagram provides a useful context for examining appearance-related interactions because it combines highly visual design features with both public and private modes of peer communication. While research has extensively examined these processes in girls (Bell et al., 2019; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016), studies involving boys remain limited. The present study addresses this gap by exploring boys' experiences of appearance-related interactions on Instagram.

Body Talk in Boys

Approximately one-quarter of adolescent boys in the UK report frequent concerns about their body image (Be Real, 2017). The sociocultural theory of body image highlights how sociocultural agents - including media, peers and family - heavily influence individuals' perceptions of their bodies (Thompson et al., 1999). Peers are particularly influential in shaping adolescents' body image as they provide a reference point for appearance norms and expectations (Jones et al., 2004; Hogue & Mills, 2019). Interactions with peers often focus on appearance, weight, and muscularity, and can be both positive and negative in tone, e.g., compliments, teasing, criticism (Paddock & Bell, 2021). Such interactions are collectively referred to as *body talk* (Bell et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2021; Paddock & Bell, 2021). Body talk typically reinforce societal body and beauty ideals, leading adolescents to feel pressure to conform to the unrealistic standards of ideals and compare themselves with others, which can result in body dissatisfaction (Rodgers et al., 2011; Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014).

Studies have suggested that body talk is more common among girls than boys (Choi et al., 2021). However, such conclusions may be problematic, as the tools commonly used to measure body

1 talk were originally developed for girls (Lindvall Dahlgren et al., 2017; Clarke et al., 2010), and as such
2 may not adequately capture appearance-related conversations among boys, which research has shown
3 to be qualitatively different (Strandbu & Kvalem, 2014). More specifically, young men are more likely
4 to engage in muscle-talk rather than weight-related talk (Engeln et al., 2013), consistent with the
5 centrality of muscularity to male appearance ideals in contrast to female ideals (Fatt et al., 2019).
6 Furthermore, the tone and valence of appearance-related conversations among boys also differ from
7 those of girls. Strandbu and Kvalem (2014) found that boys often engage in teasing and humour when
8 discussing bodies or body image, whereas girls are more likely have serious conversations involving
9 direct and earnest expressions of insecurity. Thus, while boys experience pressure to conform to
10 muscular ideals, they rarely voice dissatisfaction openly, instead using humour to mask deeper concerns.
11 This suggests that boys' body talk may be shaped by masculine norms that discourage vulnerability,
12 reinforcing the idea that masculinity is tied to confidence, physical strength, and a 'strong' muscular
13 physique (de Visser & Smith, 2007). Traditional masculine norms emphasise emotional restraint, self-
14 reliance and toughness which discourage boys from openly expressing appearance-related insecurities
15 or seeking support (Connell, 2005; O'Gorman et al., 2020). As a result, boys may feel pressure to
16 manage body image concerns indirectly, for example through humour, rather than engaging in open
17 discussions about appearance.

18 Research highlights how boys' peer interactions rely heavily on banter - playful teasing, joking
19 and sarcastic commentary - more so than girls' interactions (Chen & Jackson, 2012; Engeln et al., 2013;
20 Jones & Crawford, 2006). Banter is a common way for adolescent boys to build friendships, establish
21 social hierarchies and demonstrate loyalty and trust (Whittle et al., 2019). It typically targets personal
22 characteristics, interests, or behaviours, often making fun at perceived weaknesses or differences
23 (Buglass et al., 2021). However, banter is usually playful rather than malicious, with an unspoken
24 understanding that comments should not be taken seriously. It is often used by boys to navigate social
25 dynamics and provides a socially acceptable way for boys to express closeness, reinforce group norms,
26 and negotiate their position within peer networks (Dyner, 2008; Kowalski, 2000). Crucially, it enables

boys to communicate affection and solidarity indirectly, without overt displays of emotion that might be perceived negative or unmasculine (McQueen, 2017).

Appearance-focused banter is particularly common among adolescent boys (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006), often highlighting deviations from societal appearance ideals through humour. While this allows them to discuss appearance-related topics without threatening traditional masculine norms (Taylor, 2011), it also reinforces these norms by repeatedly drawing attention to perceived flaws (Slater & Tiggemann, 2015). Over time, these peer interactions may subtly and unconsciously shape boys' self-perceptions, reinforcing unrealistic standards and contributing to body dissatisfaction (Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). Appearance-focused banter may therefore serve a dual function. Although it may encourage friendship and group belonging, it also provides a way of performing 'masculinity' by avoiding behaviours that may be perceived as overly emotional or feminine. In doing so, these interactions may reinforce restrictive masculine gender norms while also limiting opportunities for boys to be more open about topics that concern them.

Social Media and Body Talk

While studies of boys' appearance-related interactions on social media are limited, existing research suggesting that online body talk mirrors offline communication. A recent content analysis of Instagram comments found that girls received more positive appearance-related comments than boys, who tended to receive more sarcastic, humorous and serious negative comments about appearance (Burnell et al., 2021). In focus groups, Paddock and Bell (2021) found that boys frequently made humorous negative appearance comments on social media, usually focused on weight (e.g., "fatty"). Collectively, these studies shed light on the different ways in which boys interact with peers about appearance online. While these interactions may appear negative to an outsider - because they poke fun at appearance-related characteristics that deviate from societal ideals - they are often intended and interpreted as humorous within peer groups (Paddock & Bell, 2021).

Instagram is of particular interest when studying body talk because, like other highly visual and public platforms commonly used by adolescents (e.g., TikTok), it centres on the sharing of images and

1 videos that make appearance especially salient (Tiggemann & Barbato, 2018). Instagram also offers
2 both public (e.g., posts and comments) and private (e.g., direct messages) modes of communication
3 allowing adolescents to interact with friends at different levels of visibility. As young people use social
4 media platforms interchangeably, body talk and appearance interactions occur across a range of social
5 media rather than within a single platform. Exploring boys' experiences of appearance interactions on
6 Instagram may provide a useful context for understanding how boys engage in appearance interactions
7 more generally while recognising that these interactions often extend across multiple connected online
8 platforms.

9 **The Present Study: Aims and Research Questions**

10 Previous research (e.g., Bell, 2019; Berne et al., 2014; Paddock & Bell, 2021) provides some
11 insight into how and why boys engage with appearance on social media, but a more detailed
12 examination is needed. In particular, it is important to understand how boys experience body talk and
13 how they perceive the consequences of these interactions for identity, body image and wellbeing.
14 Therefore, this study explores adolescent boys' experiences and understandings of body talk on
15 Instagram in relation to their body image. This research aims to address the following research
16 questions:

17 RQ¹: What are adolescent boys' understandings and experiences of body talk on public
18 Instagram posts?

19 RQ²: What are their perceptions of how this commentary contributes to their body image?

Method

Participants

Nine boys aged between 13 and 17 years ($M = 14.78$; $SD = 1.64$) were recruited from a range of geographical locations in the United Kingdom (both rural and urban areas). Table 1 provides an overview of demographic information. Recruitment was challenging and took place over the course of one year; the study was advertised through multiple mailing lists and social media posts and generated reasonable levels of interest. However, many boys who initially expressed interest in the study, did not consent to participate once they received more information about the study (i.e., one-on-one interview involving social media scroll-back). These difficulties are consistent with those experienced by other researchers (Ryan et al., 2019) and may reflect boys' general reluctance to engage in open conversations about body image, which is considered a social taboo topic (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006). Participants were aged between 13 and 17 years ($M = 14.78$; $SD = 1.64$) and were recruited from a range of geographical locations in the United Kingdom (both rural and urban areas). All participants have been assigned a pseudonym to ensure full anonymity. Ethical approval for this research was obtained through York St John University ethics committee.

Design

Interviews were semi-structured and employed the scroll-back technique (Robards & Lincoln, 2020). The scroll-back technique involves both the interviewer and the participant simultaneously scrolling through the participant's personal social media profile, using the content as a prompt for discussion. In this study, participants were specifically asked to review their own Instagram profiles and select images of themselves to discuss in detail. The discussion focused on the chosen image, its caption, and the interactions that occurred in the comments section. The interviewer responded to participants' choice of image by asking a flexible set of questions about the image, caption, comments and responses (e.g., "can you explain this image to me?", "how did you feel when you received this comment?", "why did you respond in this way?"). In addition to the scroll-back technique, a semi-structured interview schedule was used to guide the conversation (see supplementary materials). This schedule included open-ended questions designed to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences and elaborate on their responses. The interviewer also posed additional questions to explore

broader themes related to appearance-based comments and the nature of banter on social media (e.g., “How do you talk about appearance with friends on social media?”, How do you think who you are friends with plays a role in appearance commentary on social media?”). To ensure the appropriateness and clarity of the questions, the interview schedule was piloted with a 14-year-old adolescent boy. This pilot interview helped refine the questions, ensuring they were age-appropriate, engaging and capable of eliciting meaningful responses.

Procedure

Prior to the interview, written parental and participant consent was obtained. Participants also provided demographic information (age and ethnicity). Interviews were conducted online and lasted between 30-60 minutes.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2023). Consistent with the six phases of RFA outlined by Braun et al., (2023), the first author familiarised themselves with the data before developing initial codes. Both semantic and latent codes were developed to capture surface meanings as well as the underlying conceptualisations. All coding was performed by the first author. A subsample of the interview data was reviewed by the second author – an experienced qualitative researcher - and initial coding ideas were discussed. Throughout the process, the first and second authors met regularly to discuss codes and the coding process. Once all coding was complete, initial themes were developed, discussed collaboratively, and refined to ensure they were representative of the data. Definitions for each theme were then developed. The second author actively encouraged the first author to reflect on potential biases and individual positioning throughout both the coding and theme development phases. These steps were conducted iteratively, with themes refined multiple times as the analysis progressed.

Inter-rater reliability was not considered appropriate. Instead, extensive discussions around bias and positionality were used to validate the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Throughout the analysis process, reflexivity remained a key focus. We reflected on how our positionality as authors – shaped by our gender, lived experiences and societal positioning – may have influenced our interpretation of the narratives shared by these adolescent boys. The first author is a white woman in her mid-to-late 20s, an

1 active social media user, and an early-career researcher with experience working with young people.
2 The second author is a white woman, also a social media user, with extensive qualitative research
3 experience. While our outsider perspectives and expertise in male body image research may have
4 provided valuable insight into themes around masculinity, gender norms, and body image, we also
5 acknowledge the potential for bias in our interpretations. To address this, we engaged in regular
6 discussions to critically reflect on our perspectives and ensure the analysis remained firmly grounded
7 in the participants' lived experiences.

Results

Three themes were developed to capture adolescent boys' experiences of appearance-related interactions on Instagram.

1. Everything is a joke, building relationships through banter

Boys framed appearance-related interactions as humorous and essential to friendships, but also as something occurring primarily occurring in private (group chats) not public social media spaces (profile). They classed these exchanges as "banter", seeing them as a natural part of their social bonding and also very different from how girls interact *"it's like taking the mick out of stuff, I think it happens a lot in the friendship groups that I kind of know, but some of my girls that I'm friends with, their friendship group it's all complimenting each other"* (Luke, 15).

Private group chats were discussed as the main setting for these interactions, rather than on public posts *"we mostly interact through the group chat because we don't post that much"* (Luke, 15). They described how most group chats are of a humorous nature *"generally anything that somebody decides to put in the group chat is something that's for humour purposes"* (Lewis, 17). That said, even in public, boys emphasise humour in their interactions in order to maintain social appeal *"when you're commenting like that you know, it's not a direct message, it's public for everyone to see so I think there's a bit more pressure to make it at least humorous to make yourself not look like you're boring"* (Lewis, 17).

Banter on social media extends from offline friendships and follows social rules *"we have quite a humorous relationship in person so yes they were just carrying that on through social media"* (Alex, 17). Boys described how banter should respect and follow social rules. They described how people avoid making jokes about things that other people are sensitive about *"luckily in my friendship groups there's an understanding, and we all know what people do actually care about themselves, and we avoid that for the most part"* (Charlie, 15). Understanding boundaries is a crucial part of these humorous exchanges *"you know what people's limits are and also what things offend them. And also you do it for the reaction when you have a bit of banter it should be fun. If someone is upset about it that's when you stop"* (Jamie, 14).

2. Boys don't do compliments; masculinity and the appearance culture

1 Perceived gender norms shape how boys interact with their friends online. On social media,
2 boys described how giving direct appearance-related compliments to other boys on public Instagram
3 posts is uncommon. While compliments are a normal part of interactions among girls and in mixed-
4 gender settings, boys rarely compliment each other in the same way: *"I receive a lot more compliments*
5 *from girls I'm friends with or whatever, whereas with guys it's just more like either you don't receive*
6 *a comment or it's just them making fun or whatever"* (Luke, 15). Instead, they either avoid commenting
7 or use humour to mask genuine praise: *"there are genuine compliments that do get exchanged but it's*
8 *often behind the layer of irony ... because obviously you have friends constantly calling each other fat*
9 *and things like that in the group chat in a way that nobody finds offensive because that's the dynamic*
10 *that we're all dealing with in the group chat"* (Lewis, 17).

11 Giving compliments to other boys on social media was perceived as socially unacceptable.
12 Many boys feared being ridiculed if they commented something positive or sincere on another boy's
13 post: *"I don't comment on people's posts ... I don't feel the need to do it. I see girls' posts [and]*
14 *normally the comment section is compliments and stuff like that, but I don't think boys can say the same*
15 *thing on another boy's post. You see things like 'beautiful, you look gorgeous' but I don't think a boy*
16 *would say that on another person's post ... [I: why do you think that is] ... probably going to be made*
17 *fun of"* (Jamie, 14). Even within close friendships, serious compliments were seen as unusual and a
18 potential source of teasing: *"I think at least for my friendship group if you're not commenting something*
19 *in a jokey way it can seem- I don't know the word- strange ... you'd have mick taken out of you if you*
20 *commented something serious"* (Charlie, 15).

21 Boys acknowledged that social norms around masculinity influenced how they expressed praise
22 to one another. Sincere compliments were often viewed as a violation of these norms and could result
23 in being labelled negatively: *"some people would call you like a 'simp' or whatever it's not positive*
24 *from guys, from girls it would be alright- it would be good I think"* (Luke, 15). Some boys also linked
25 this avoidance of complimenting others to broader societal expectations of masculinity and what it
26 means to be "manly": *"yeah I don't really compliment other boys, [and] same with girls I don't really*
27 *compliment girls too much [I: why do you think that is] I think it's to do with masculinity and that*

1 *culture of kind of men having to be men and if you say it you're probably going to be called gay*" (Jamie,
2 14).

3 Boys connected the use of humour as a way of complimenting to a wider societal pressure that
4 discourages emotional openness among males *"it's like a gender thing, masculine thing, boys don't*
5 *really talk about things like that [talking about appearance] ... I've never had many chats like that. I*
6 *think it would have to be very close friends to have that conversation, but even that's rare"* (Jamie, 14).

7 The reluctance to express feelings extended to broader emotional topics, including mental health and
8 body image concerns, with boys feeling pressure to suppress these conversations: *"Because within the*
9 *boy friendship group that I know about, compared to some of my friends who are girls and their*
10 *friendship group, like the whole talking about mental health or appearance and whatever there's a*
11 *massive stigma around that like, compared to between the genders, you'd be called a girl or summat*
12 *for bringing owt up"* (Luke, 15).

13 **3. Banter is not always funny: the darker side of banter**

14

15 In this theme, boys acknowledged that humour online requires caution as jokes can easily be
16 misunderstood and have more of a negative impact than intended. Without tone, body language of
17 context, comments can be misinterpreted, making it difficult to gauge intent: *"in real life you can read*
18 *body language or how they are talking to you or whatever, whereas online you don't get any of the*
19 *emotion behind the message"* (Luke, 15). Boys describe how jokes online may not be perceived in the
20 way it was intended: *"you can make that mistake of writing something incorrectly, and then you may*
21 *intend it to be one thing but other people see it as another"* (Cameron, 16).

22 The acceptability of certain jokes (e.g., appearance-related) depends on the relationship
23 between those involved. With close friends, making certain jokes – especially about weight – would be
24 more acceptable. However, when coming from someone outside of the friendship group, the same jokes
25 can feel hurtful: *"if you know someone really well and are good friends sometimes people make things*
26 *about someone's weight, but it just depends how well you know someone [I: why?] because if I didn't*
27 *know someone and they said it to me it could make me feel bad about myself, but if I know someone, I*
28 *know they don't mean it in a bad way"* (Jamie, 14). With these types of jokes, boys suggest that a lot of

1 people take it too far online: *"sometimes people take things too far that they wouldn't face to face"*
2 (Alex, 17).

3 Boys discussed how repeated jokes about appearance could have a negative impact over time:
4 *"some of them when they've said anything I just remove them from it... because I just don't want*
5 *anybody to put me down or whatever for just being how I am. Sometimes the constant jokes make me*
6 *feel crap about myself"* (Luke, 15). Rather than creating new insecurities, appearance-related banter
7 was more likely to reinforce existing appearance concerns: *"it depends on whose saying it and what it*
8 *is. So if it's something you might be insecure about beforehand and then they've reiterated that, even if*
9 *it is a joke, you can sort of think well, they've got that thought from the picture or the post which, it can*
10 *like I said, solidify your insecurity...I think it more reaffirms opinions of yourself rather than creates*
11 *them"* (Charlie, 15). Appearance related banter was often described as having a negative impact on the
12 receiver but a positive impact on the commenter *"jokes are negative on the person that it's against most*
13 *of the time. Like for the people giving it it's quite funny, but the banter towards you I think it would be*
14 *more offensive to you"* (Jamie, 14).

15 Boys described many instances of uncertainty surrounding intention of a negative comment
16 *"you will have to think a lot of how you say a joke because if you were maybe thinking one thing that*
17 *person may see it differently"* (Cameron, 16). Also, some people used "banter" as an excuse to justify
18 hurtful remarks: *"sometimes when things get a bit serious people say, 'oh we were just joking about' ...*
19 *one time in the group chat they were all taking piss out of my fringe, and so I said 'stop it you're doing*
20 *my head in', and they just said 'oh it's only a joke'. It's annoying you just have to suck it up and take*
21 *it"* (Jamie, 14). Humour was positioned as an integral part of masculinity and speaking out against
22 banter - especially if perceived as hurtful - was perceived as a violation of social norms: *"some when*
23 *they make a joke or whenever I bring it up saying 'that could have hurt that person' or 'I didn't*
24 *appreciate that' and it's like a couple of them just like all gang up and say it was like just a joke don't*
25 *be bothered about it"* (Luke, 15).

Discussion

This study examined how adolescent boys experience and perceive body talk on Instagram. The findings show that boys positioned banter as the most common form of body talk on Instagram, framing it as an important part of friendships (*Theme 1*) and as a socially acceptable form of appearance-based interaction, due to gendered social norms surrounding masculinity (*Theme 2*). They also reflected on the darker side of banter which, despite its prominent role in friendships and gender identity development, can be harmful to individuals, including by exerting a negative influence on body image (*Theme 3*). The findings highlight the gendered nature of adolescent boys' appearance-related interactions, indicating that certain types of interactions (i.e., banter) are central to how they present themselves on social media in ways that align with dominant masculine norms.

Humorous appearance interactions, positioned as banter by boys in this study, on social media were considered the norm for boys. This aligns with previous research showing that boys use humour in face-to-face conversations about appearance with peers (Taylor, 2011), and in peer interactions more generally (Barnes, 2012). It is also consistent with research showing that this behaviour extends to online environments (Burnell et al., 2021). Interestingly, boys in the present study distanced themselves from discussing appearance on social media. They did not perceive banter (e.g., comments such as “fatty”) as being appearance-related, but instead framed it as a form of humorous social interaction. This may explain why quantitative research has found that boys engage in less appearance-related conversation than girls (e.g., Chen & Jackson, 2012; Jones & Crawford, 2006; Jones et al., 2004) and adds weight to the growing need to develop gendered measures to assess these types of communication.

These findings show that humour among boys was positioned as positive and as an extension of offline relationships. Previous research that found banter in boys' peer groups is often used to explore social boundaries and to negotiate status, acceptance and rejection within the peer group (Whittle et al., 2019). This finding aligns with findings by Paddock and Bell (2021), who reported that boys' humorous negative appearance comments (i.e., shared inside jokes) were a big part of friendships. This suggests that, for boys, humorous social media interactions are seen as a tool for building and maintaining friendships through the formation of social bonds and intimacy (Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). Boys also described how banter should respect and follow certain social rules – specifically that trust is

1 important - consistent with previous research on face-to-face banter (Johannessen, 2021). This suggests
2 that banter is an extension of a trusting offline relationship. While it plays an important role in building
3 and maintaining friendships, there are also clear boundaries associated with online banter and so boys
4 reported only engaging in it with trusted peers.

5 Boys linked their humorous interactions to masculine gender norms, describing humour as a
6 socially acceptable way of discussing appearance while maintaining a sense of masculinity (Whitaker
7 et al., 2021). This is relevant to the concept of “toxic masculinity” - a form of masculinity that
8 emphasises characteristics such as violence, physical strength, suppression of emotion and devaluation
9 of women (Connell, 2005; Posadas, 2017). Past research has described conversations about appearance
10 in boys and men as a social taboo (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006; Whitaker et al., 2019) and these
11 findings extend this previous research by highlighting the “stigma” attached to engaging in serious
12 conversations about appearance, including compliments. Boys avoided discussing their engagement in
13 appearance-related interactions because doing so could threaten their adherence to masculine ideals,
14 including the suppression of emotions to appear “tough” (O’Gorman et al., 2020). Compliments were
15 perceived as feminine, and boys were keen to separate themselves from girls’ appearance commentary.
16 Instead, humour was used to distinguish themselves from girls. This mirrors previous health-related
17 research on “masculinity credits”, wherein boys avoid discussing health issues for fear of appearing
18 weak or vulnerable (de Visser & Smith, 2007; Jankowski et al., 2018). By using humour to mock
19 appearance, boys seek to distance themselves from femininity which reinforces traditional gender
20 norms. This process links directly to toxic masculinity, where rejecting or ridiculing femininity upholds
21 gendered power structures that degrade women while reinforcing restricting masculine ideals (Ford,
22 2019). In this way, it may be suggested that boys are hyper-conscious of gendered group norms and the
23 importance of adhering to these on Instagram. As well, although this study focuses only on boys in the
24 UK, similar patterns have been reported in other Western contexts where masculinity is associated with
25 emotional restraint and the avoidance of behaviours perceived as feminine (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014).
26 In this way, it may be suggested that boys are hyper-conscious of gendered group norms and the
27 importance of adhering to these on Instagram. This may suggest that the tendency for boys to rely on

1 humour rather than direct appearance-related discussion may reflect broader Western constructions of
2 masculinity.

3 Though appearance-related banter was generally considered positive and important within
4 boys' friendship groups, it is also recognised as contributing to the development and reinforcement of
5 insecurities about appearance and impacting confidence levels. Humorous comments about appearance,
6 although not intended to cause harm, still reflect a collective endorsement of appearance ideals (e.g.,
7 calling someone "fat" as a joke still implies that fat is a negative and that the appearance ideal is to be
8 "skinny"; Fouts & Burgraff, 2000). Thus, this type of banter may have negative consequences for how
9 adolescent boys feel about their appearance (Thompson et al., 1999). Constant exposure to humorous
10 negative appearance comments – often focused on weight or muscle talk - is heightened due to the
11 permanent nature of social media platforms (Nesi et al., 2018), which may increase the salience of
12 sociocultural norms surrounding appearance (Strandbu & Kvalem, 2014). Previous research has
13 identified that exposure to messages surrounding the male ideal is associated with body dissatisfaction
14 in young boys (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004; Taylor, 2011). It is likely that exposure to appearance-
15 related banter on public posts, and privately (since many boys indicated they received such interactions
16 privately) may similarly have a negative impact on body image.

17 Self-presentational processes were also evident in adolescent boys' appearance-related
18 interactions. They described feeling pressure to appear humorous in public Instagram posts and group
19 chats, as they wanted to be perceived positively by their peers (i.e., not seem boring). This supports
20 self-presentational theory (SPT; Baumeister, 1982; Goffman, 2021), which posits that adolescents want
21 to portray the best version of themselves on social media. While past research has primarily focused on
22 how adolescents use self-presentation strategies in the images they post (Terán et al., 2020), these
23 findings extend SPT to the comments sections of social media. The results highlight that for boys, social
24 desirability is closely linked to gender norms – for example, funniness is often associated with
25 masculine gender norms and being 'funny' is often highly desirable among boys; Grogan & Richards,
26 2002. As such, a comments section full of jokes allows them to present a more desirable version of
27 themselves to friends, while also adhering to masculine group norms. This has important implications
28 as it suggests that boys also experience self-presentational concerns associated with masculinity. Rather

than focusing solely on the visual content they share on social media, these findings highlights the role that appearance commentary and gender norms play in shaping boys' online self-presentation.

Implications

The findings from this study highlight the distinct ways in which boys engage with appearance-related content on social media, and how these interactions differ from those of girls. Through the lens of the sociocultural theory, the results show how boys' peer relationships may play a critical role in shaping views on appearance. In particular, boys in this study discussed how they used humour to interact about appearance on social media. While framed as banter, these comments still reinforced appearance ideals – specifically that bodies not conforming to sociocultural standards are worthy of mockery. In this way, humour serves as a powerful vehicle for transmitting societal messages around appearance. Through banter, appearance norms are not only reinforced but reproduced, leading to the internalisation of harmful societal messages about appearance (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006).

It is also important to consider the cultural context of these findings. The prominence of banter in boys' appearance-related interactions may reflect broader norms within British peer culture, where teasing and humorous comments are commonly used to signal friendship and social closeness (Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). However, the gendered dynamics identified in this study, such as the stigmatisation of appearance concern and the association of compliments with femininity are consistent with literature from other Western contexts (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014), suggesting appearance-related discussion among young boys does reflect traditional Western constructions of masculinity. Future research would benefit from exploring whether boys in other cultural contexts engage in similar forms of appearance-related humour on social media, or whether different cultural and social norms surrounding masculinity and humour shape these interactions.

By contributing to the understanding of how boys engage with appearance-related interactions on social media, these findings have important implications for social media interventions aimed at promoting digital literacy and positive body image. Previous digital literacy interventions such as the SoMe (Gordon et al., 2021) and the Body Talk in the Digital Age (BTIDA; Bell et al., 2021) have been designed for delivery in mixed-gender classes, with the aim of improving body satisfaction and reducing

appearance-based commentary. Although these interventions were successful for adolescent girls, they did not have many positive effects on boys (Bell et al., 2021; Gordon et al., 2021). Previous research has called for gender-specific interventions and education (e.g., McCabe et al., 2017; Yager et al., 2013) and this research corroborates this as we found stark differences between how boys and girls interact about appearance on social media (e.g., previous research shows girls engage in serious appearance commentary; Bell, 2019; Paddock & Bell, 2021). Moving forward, interventions should specifically address the role of appearance-related humour in boys' online interactions and explore how masculinity influences appearance-related concerns and body image.

Limitations

Due to the online nature of the study, adolescents were recruited from a range of geographic locations, however the sample is small and comprised of predominantly white adolescent boys in the UK. This limits our understanding of how more diverse groups of adolescent boys engage with peers, and whether humour plays a similar role in online appearance interactions in different ethnic groups. As our sample was drawn from the UK, the findings may reflect aspects of British peer culture, particularly the cultural significance of banter in male friendships. Future research should aim to focus on the experiences of more diverse groups of young boys. Another limitation is the potential reluctance of participants to disclose sensitive information related to body image. While previous research suggests that the presence of a female interviewer is not necessarily problematic for young men (Yager et al., 2013), adolescent boys may still feel hesitant to discuss appearance topics with a woman. Although a female interviewer may reduce feelings of judgement (Bottamini & Ste-Marie, 2006), the issues of interviewer gender warrant further consideration. Future research could offer participants the option of choosing the interviewer's gender, as suggested by Grogan and Richards (2002). Interviewer gender may also have influenced recruitment. Some boys may have chosen not to participate because the study was posted by a woman, perceiving it as less relevant to them or feeling reluctant about discussing this topic with a woman researcher. It would therefore be important for future research to include male researchers giving boys the option to be interviewed by either a male or female researcher. Additionally, co-producing recruitment strategies with adolescents could help ensure the process is more inclusive

and engaging for a broader range of participants. Finally, although we engaged reflexively with our outsider positionality, the analysis process did not incorporate the perspectives of boys or young men with lived experience. Future research would benefit from integrating boys more actively into the analytic process, through youth advisory groups or co-analysis workshops, to ensure that emerging themes are grounded in their lived experiences.

Conclusion

The present study explored adolescent boys' understanding and experiences of appearance-related commentary on social media. The findings highlight the role that humour plays in online appearance-related interactions within boys' friendship groups. More specifically, appearance-related humour (or banter) was positioned as central to peer relationships, the establishment of gender norms and gender identity, and a potential source of appearance-related concerns. Future research is needed to further explore the role of humour in shaping body image among young boys, particularly focusing on the potential negative consequences. These findings demonstrate that boys perceive appearance interactions differently from girls, therefore, future research should also prioritise the development of boy-centred measures and interventions aimed at addressing issues surrounding appearance-related interactions and body image concerns.

1 **Statements and Declarations**

2 **Conflict of Interest**

3 No conflict of interest relating to this research.

4 However, it should be noted that this research is part of a PhD thesis. This study has been largely
5 restructured and re-formatted for the purpose of publishing in this journal.

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7 For the purpose of open access, the author has applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY)
8 licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.

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14

15

1 *Table 1: Participant Information*

Pseudonym Name	Age	Ethnicity
Jamie	14	White
Luke	15	White
Daniel	13	White
Charlie	15	White
Lewis	17	White
Cameron	16	White
Nathan	13	White
Zach	13	White
Alex	17	Other

2

3