

BE REAL

BODY CONFIDENCE FOR EVERYONE



Somebody Like Me

A report investigating the impact of body image anxiety on young people in the UK.

January 2017

In partnership with

YMCA

Dove
self-esteem
project



BE REAL

BODY CONFIDENCE FOR EVERYONE

The *Be Real Campaign* is a national movement made up of individuals, businesses, charities and public bodies.

The *Be Real Campaign* was formed in response to the *Reflections on body image* report from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Body Image.¹ Chaired by Mary Glendon MP, and co-ordinated by YMCA, the campaign was founded in partnership with Dove and is sponsored by bareMinerals, N Brown, New Look, and Superdrug.

The *Be Real Campaign* focuses on three areas in which it strives to bring about real change:

- **Real Education:** We want to give children and young people a body confident start to life.
- **Real Health:** We want healthy living and general wellbeing to be prioritised over just appearance and weight.
- **Real Diversity:** We want the advertising, fashion, music and media industries to positively reflect what we really look like.

Methodology

This research was undertaken by YMCA on behalf of the *Be Real Campaign*.

The quantitative fieldwork for this research was conducted by EdComs, a specialist education communications agency. The quantitative sample consisted of 2,018 young people aged between 11 and 16 years old from across the UK. In addition to this, 501 teachers from across the UK were also surveyed. The quantitative fieldwork was carried out in May 2016.

To supplement this, YMCA also undertook qualitative research in the form of focus groups held in 12 different locations in the UK, with young people aged between 11 and 16 years old. The focus groups were carried out in November and December 2016.

While recognising that certain groups of young people face specific challenges in this area, this research sought to understand the general impact of body image anxiety on this age group.

Acknowledgements

A 'thank you' goes to all the young people who shared their opinions as part of this research, as well as the local YMCAs across England, Wales and Scotland who helped facilitate this. A special 'thank you' also goes to Lillie Mizera for her help in producing the report.

Executive summary

Young people are facing increasing pressures relating to their appearance. While a focus on the importance of appearance in society is by no means a new phenomenon, many young people today are struggling to escape the constant barrage of messages they receive about how they should look and how they should behave.

Through powerful outlets such as print, television, film and digital media, young people are repeatedly presented with images of the 'ideal' body. The pressures to conform to these 'ideals' are reinforced by their peers and through social media in the ever-connected world in which they now live.

Given the wide range of contributing factors and the differing ways young people can experience issues with body confidence and body image, making positive changes in this area requires a range of approaches.

As part of this research, young people were given the space to discuss and share their experiences. Their views and ideas were then used to create practical solutions that both they and others can take forward to help tackle body image anxiety in the UK.

Young people had a broad understanding of body image

Critically, young people's understandings of body image extended well beyond the narrow concerns of size and shape that are traditionally presented. Instead, for the majority of young people, an importance was placed on the wider image they present to the world.

The majority of young people often worried about the way they look

- ▶ Four in five young people (79%) said how they look is important to them.
- ▶ Nearly two-thirds of young people (63%) said what others think about the way they look is important to them.
- ▶ More than half of young people (52%) said they often worry about the way they look.

The pressures young people faced came primarily from celebrity and media culture, but were reinforced by their peer group

Bombarding young people with images of the 'perfect' body is putting them under undue pressure to match it. Indeed, celebrity culture and the media were commonly cited by young people as the main sources of pressure they experience.

However, the influence of peer groups cannot be underestimated. While often they did not specifically create the appearance 'ideals', for the majority of young people, it was the peer group that underpinned and reinforced these 'ideals' and expectations.

The biggest impact of body image anxiety was young people withdrawing and isolating themselves

The internalisation of these pressures and the resulting concerns about appearance can lead to young people taking measures to change the way they look.

- ▶ More than a third of young people (36%) agreed they would do whatever it took to look good.
- ▶ Almost three in five young people (57%) have, or would consider, going on a diet to change the way they look.
- ▶ One in 10 young people (10%) said they would consider plastic surgery to change the way they look.

However, speaking to young people reveals that the majority are not taking extreme measures to change their appearance. Instead, the inability to escape these pressures is resulting in a sense of hopelessness and leading to young people withdrawing and isolating themselves.

Many young people were not seeking support for their body image anxieties

Young people reported relatively low levels of support-seeking behaviour, something that is likely indicative of the isolation and sense of hopelessness that many with body image anxiety feel.

- ▶ Parents were named as the group young people were most likely (43%) to seek support from.
- ▶ After parents, friends were the group that young people (32%) were most likely to go to for support on body confidence.

Teaching young people about body confidence makes them feel more positive about themselves

- ▶ Three quarters of young people (76%) who learnt about body confidence in school said it made them feel more positive about themselves.

Interventions targeted at young people must be rooted in their experiences and opinions

To help tackle the growing body image anxiety experienced by young people, this research proposes that action be taken to:

- ▶ **Tackle the body image ‘ideals’ presented to young people.**
- ▶ **Reduce the value placed on appearance in society.**
- ▶ **Encourage schools to become settings that promote and foster body confidence among young people.**
- ▶ **Support parents and carers to help promote body confidence among young people.**
- ▶ **Equip young people with the means to tackle the causes of body image anxiety.**

Introduction

Young people are facing increasing pressures relating to their appearance. While a focus on the importance of appearance in society is by no means a new phenomenon, many young people today are struggling to escape the constant barrage of messages they receive about how they should look and how they should behave.

Through powerful outlets such as print, television, film and digital media, young people are repeatedly presented with images of the 'ideal' body. The pressures to conform to these 'ideals' are reinforced by their peers and through social media in the ever-connected world in which they now live.

While concerns about appearance will inevitably vary between individuals, for some young people, they can become all-encompassing, penetrating every aspect of their life.

Body image relates to how people see their body in the context of the world in which they live, and is often thought to comprise of two elements.

Firstly, and most commonly referenced, is **body confidence**, which relates to how satisfied a person is with their appearance. For the purposes of this research, body confidence refers to when someone accepts, appreciates, thinks and behaves positively in relation to their body and appearance.

Secondly, and coupled with body confidence, is **self-objectification**. This relates to the extent to which a person sees themselves through another's eyes, investing their self-worth in how their appearance is judged by others.²

Body image, therefore, encompasses both the internal and the external – a young person's perceptions of themselves, but also the significance they place on the perceptions, or perceived perceptions, of others.

It is these internal and external factors and how they impact upon each other that make body image so complex, and as such, body image anxiety so hard to tackle.

Research in this area has shown that a lack of body confidence can lead to poorer classroom participation and performance, as well as young people opting out of basic life activities like going to the doctor, partaking in physical activity, or even taking part in discussions.³

Fostering body confidence and a positive body image among young people is, therefore, an important aspect of addressing their health and wellbeing and is critical in equipping them with the emotional skills they need to succeed in life.

Given the wide range of contributing factors and the differing ways young people can experience issues with their body confidence and body image, making positive change in this area requires a range of approaches.

Critically, for this to be effective, young people must be involved in formulating this approach.

To help facilitate this, ***Somebody Like Me*** is rooted in the experiences of those young people, who are subjected to pressures on their appearance on a daily basis.

As part of this research, young people were given the space to discuss and share their experiences. Their views and ideas were then used to create practical solutions that both they and others can take forward to help tackle body image anxiety in the UK.

Understandings of body image

Speaking to young people illustrated just how diverse understandings of body image were. These differing understandings were based on young people's experiences and are key to identifying the range of pressures they face.

There was a strong perceived link between body confidence and weight for young people, with 'being overweight' listed as the top issue (13%) a young person would think to discuss if they were talking to a friend about body confidence.

Females were more likely to reference weight and body shape concerns when talking about body confidence with their friends (26%), compared to their male counterparts (17%).

Coupled with body shape, many males reported concerns with height and the expectation that they must be tall and muscular. In cases where they did not meet these expectations, many reported experiencing insecurities.

Critically, however, young people's understandings of body image extended well beyond the narrow concerns of shape and size that are traditionally presented. Instead, for the majority of young people, an importance was placed on the wider image they presented to the world, of which their body shape and size was just one element.

In addition, therefore, many young people referenced elements of their appearance, including hair colour and style, skin tone and make-up, when speaking about their understandings of body image.

The inclusion of these topics in young people's discussions illustrated the importance they placed on them, and demonstrated the sheer breadth of issues they considered to be interrelated with body image.

A strong link was also drawn by young people between clothing and body image. Accordingly for these individuals, their sense of style and the clothes they wear were all considered to be vital components of the image they presented to others, and thus cannot be separated from other concerns.

Differences exist in the concerns presented by males and females, although these were not universal. In general, females were more likely to present a more complex understanding of body image, likely reflective of the greater number of pressures on their appearance.

These additional pressures tended to focus around the cosmetic elements of appearance, including hair style and make-up.

While some of these were reported by males, particularly in regards to hair style, in the majority of cases, these were to a lesser extent than those experienced by females.

Conversely, males were more likely to be dismissive of the notion of body image anxiety, and the idea that they faced pressures relating to their appearance. A large part of this was linked to the fact that body image was seen as something related primarily to females and was, therefore, not something that males tended to speak about.

Indeed, males were twice likely to say that they wouldn't discuss body confidence with their friends (11%) compared to females (5%).

A marked difference in the understandings of body image also existed among different age groups, with older individuals generally reporting both an increased importance placed on appearance and a broader understanding of body image.

This was particularly apparent for females, whose understandings of body image tended to widen as they got older to include elements like make-up and tanning.

The level of importance placed on image and the elements of appearance to which most significance is placed inevitably varies between young people. Understanding these differences is critical to establishing the different pressures they face, and the causes of their body image anxiety.

The prevalence of concerns

The differing understandings of body image presented illustrated that, while widespread, the concerns young people were experiencing with regard to their appearance were neither equal nor universal.

From speaking to young people, it was apparent that the true extent of body image anxiety can be difficult to quantify, given the complex, personal nature of such concerns and the fear of bullying that often accompanies them, which can reduce a young person's willingness to speak out. However, the opinions and experiences of the young people collected as part of this research do provide some indication.

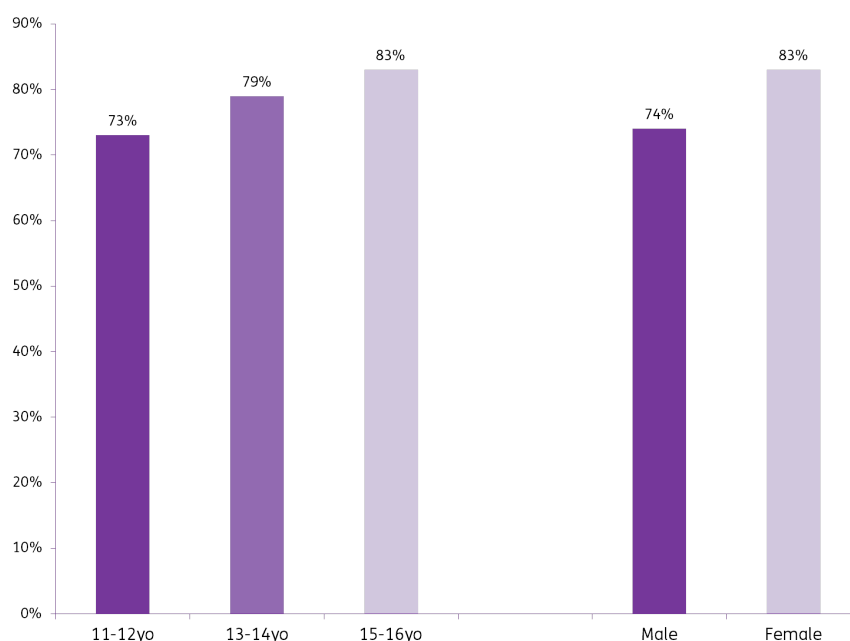
Appearance was important to the vast majority of young people

Four in five young people (79%) said how they look is important to them. While the degree of this importance and the element of their appearance this is placed on will vary between individuals, it is clear that how they look is significant to young people.

"Every girl just has to fit into this perfect mould."
Charlotte, 15, West Midlands

"You want to fit in, you don't want to stand out or you get judged."
Martyna, 13, North East England

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: *How I look is important to me?*
(n=2,018)



While present at all ages, the likelihood of an individual stating that how they look is important to them increased with age.

A distinction also exists between males and females, with females being more likely to agree that the way they look is important to them (83%), compared to their male counterparts (74%).

An importance placed on appearance does not necessarily indicate body image anxiety. However, speaking to young people illustrated that it did increase its probability, as young people were more likely to be susceptible to external pressures as a result.

Indeed, those who reported that the way they look was important to them were more likely to reference weight or body shape concerns when talking to their friends about body confidence (24%), compared to those for whom it was not seen to be important (8%).

In contrast, those young people who reported that the way they look was not important to them were more likely to say that they are confident when talking to their friends about body confidence (18%), compared to those who reported that it was important to them (10%).

Significant numbers of young people cared about what others thought about the way they look

The external pressures young people face to look a certain way are illustrated by the fact that nearly two thirds of young people (63%) said that what others think about the way they look is important to them.

Again, the impact of the importance young people place on what others think is likely to vary between individuals and be dependent on a number of factors. However, it is clear that there is an increased likelihood of body image anxiety when a strong importance is placed on external sources of validation.

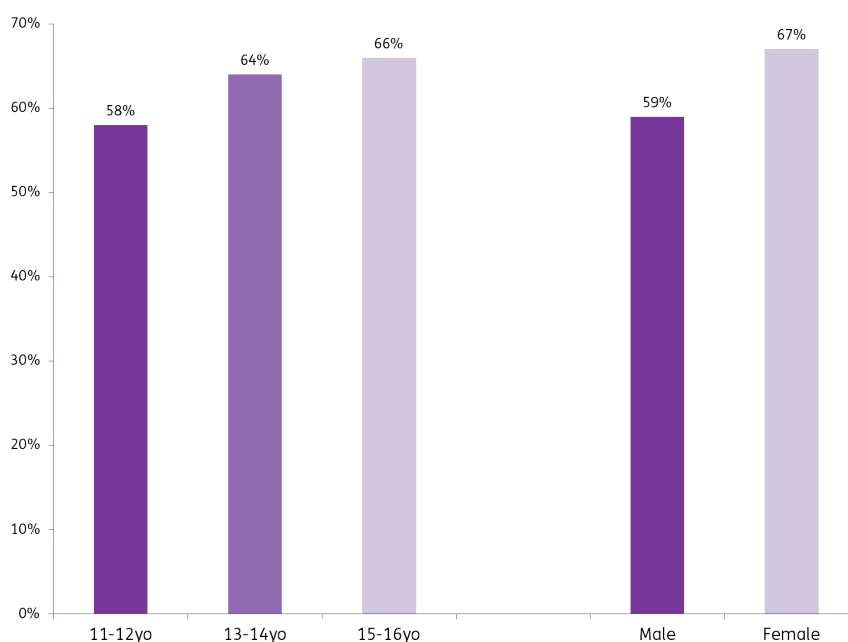
“The pressure is put on because kids today think ‘I’ve got to look good because I’ll be judged so harshly’ and ‘no one will ever be friends with me’.”

Bailey, 13, South East England

“When all your friends are adopting this trend, and even if you can’t do that because maybe you’re restricted, or you don’t like it or whatever, it really affects your confidence.”

Marwa, 15, London

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: What others think of the way I look is important to me? (n=2,018)



When examining the importance young people place on what others think about the way they look, females were more likely to agree (67%) that what others think about the way they look is important to them, compared to males (59%). Again, those in the older age groups were more likely to report that what others think about the way they look is important to them.

The majority of young people often worried about the way they look

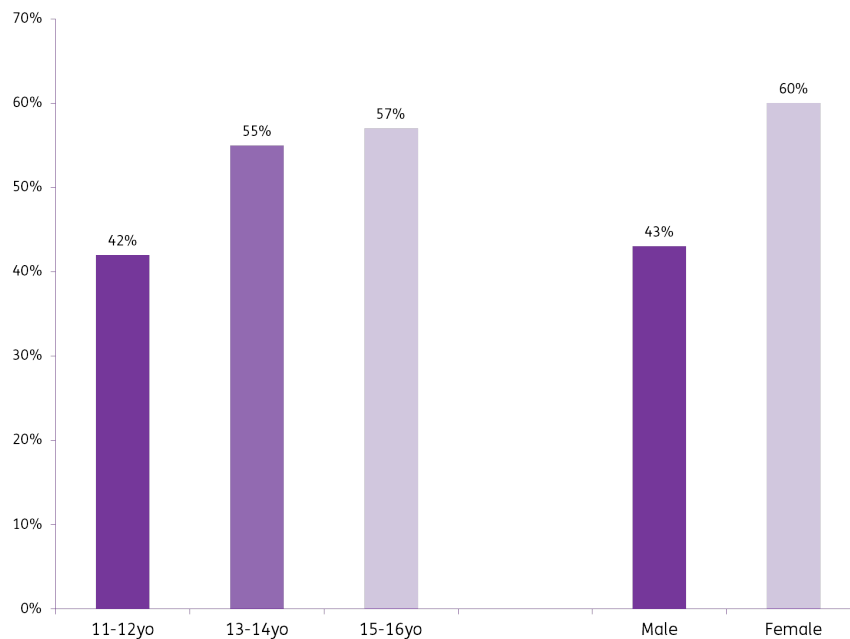
Critically, these concerns were not an infrequent occurrence, with more than half of young people (52%) saying that they often worried about the way they look.

Again, familiar trends emerged, with females being more likely to agree that they often worried about the way they look (60%) compared to males (43%). Additionally, those in the older age groups were more likely to agree that they often worried about the way they look compared to their younger counterparts.

"I think social anxiety can come into to it. I think it's like everyone trying to find a new self every few weeks."
Kevin, 14, Scotland

"It is everywhere. It's something that I think about every day, all the time, what I'm looking like, you know, how I'm dressing and how other people perceive me."
Isabel, 15, East of England

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I often worry about the way I look?
(n=2,018)



The extent and frequency of this worry indicated the prevalence of body image anxieties among young people. For these individuals, the focus on appearance went beyond an infrequent concern and instead, sometimes became something that began to dominate their lives.

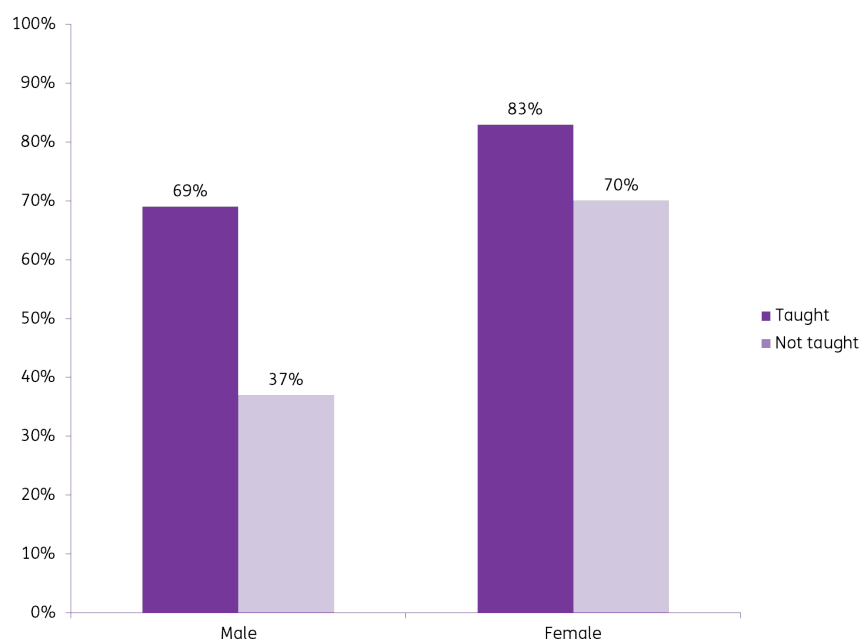
The body confidence issues experienced by young people were recognised by the majority of teachers

The prevalence of body confidence issues among this age group was reinforced by the fact that 57% of teachers believed that body confidence was a concern for the male students in their school, and 77% of teachers believed that body confidence was a concern for the female students in their school.

Recognition of the issue was higher in those schools where body confidence was taught. As such, 83% of teachers in schools where it was taught believed it to be an issue for female students, compared to 70% in those schools where it was not.

The disparity between the two was more pronounced for male students, with 69% of teachers in schools that taught body confidence believing it to be an issue for their male students, compared to 37% in schools that did not.

To what extent do you agree that body confidence is a concern for your male and female students? (n=501)



The causal effect between recognition of the issue and it being taught in schools is hard to prove conclusively. However, given the inherently hidden nature of body image anxiety, it is likely that it goes unnoticed in many cases when it is not directly spoken about in schools.

Rather than heightening the anxieties felt by young people, this research shows that teaching about body confidence can help expose the true scale of the challenges they face in this area.

While not everyone will share their anxieties, speaking about body image in schools helps to normalise the issue, which is likely to have a positive impact on support-seeking behaviour among young people.

The origins of the pressures faced

The prevalence of body image anxiety among young people is likely indicative of the sheer number of expectations that surround their appearance.

While the pressures that originate from these expectations will differ depending on an individual's circumstances and the importance they place on them, this research found that they are often extensive and can originate from a variety of sources.

Gender differentials

As already noted, body image anxiety and low body confidence were not universal, and key differentials existed between males and females. While it is by no means an exclusively female issue, as is so often portrayed, key distinctions do exist between the pressures faced by the two groups.

While nuances occurred, put simply, females were most likely to report the pressures to be thin while still maintaining curves, and males reported pressures to be tall and muscular.

“We were talking [in school] about stereotypes and what people expect certain people to look like. For instance, a girl, they have to have like, a flat stomach or big thighs, but they have to be toned. Boys have to be muscular and everything.”

Paige, 13, Scotland

While different, these body image ideals can be equally damaging for a young person, especially at these early ages when they are still developing and their bodies are changing naturally.

Aside from weight and body shape, females also reported facing additional pressures relating to their appearance, including those surrounding make-up and clothing.

While these will be discussed in full in the next section of the report, it is important here to note the sheer number of derogatory comments that females reported receiving with regards to these aspects of their appearance, and the often conflicting nature of these pressures.

The differing pressures were most apparent when clothing was examined. While, as already noted, both males and females reported facing pressure to wear certain types or brands of clothing to fit in with their peer group, females faced added pressures relating to perceived ‘appropriateness’.

“They are not teaching the boys how to control themselves, they are telling us to stop looking the way we do, which is something we can’t always help. It makes you feel like you’re not good enough and that you’re never going to be able to please everyone.”

Karli, 15, North East England

Such comments likely contribute to body image anxieties by reinforcing damaging gender stereotypes and perpetuating the notion that females must change their appearance based on the needs of males.

Media and celebrity culture

Bombarding young people with images of the ‘perfect’ body is putting them under undue pressure to match this.

Young people reported receiving these images from a variety of sources, including advertising, fashion, music and celebrities.

However, while these sources created the ‘ideals’ that young people often felt they had to meet, they were perpetuated by the media and the importance it commonly placed on appearance.

Indeed, while the influence exerted by these ideals differed depending on levels of exposure and the importance the individual placed on them, celebrity culture and the media were commonly cited by young people as the main sources of the pressure they experience.

“The media nowadays, they don’t show plus size models. Because of the media showing people like Kylie Jenner and ‘Keeping up with the Kardashians’, it’s making girls think they should look like this. This is how it’s portrayed in all the media and magazines and stuff. But not all girls can look like that.”

Andrea, 14, South West England

“It comes from TV and magazines and your stereotypes. You know how you have trends and stuff. People like, put so much pressure on it.”

Hajar, 14, London

“Basically it’s celebrities, isn’t it? When they’re wearing it or modelling it, people think it’s obviously popular and it just goes on from there.”

Aaron, 13, Wales

While some rejected them completely, others cited celebrities as sources of inspiration. The majority of these young people did not seek inspiration from high-end fashion models, but instead from the reality TV stars and celebrities that more frequently surrounded them.

For many young people, it was these celebrities that embodied their idea of ‘perfection’. Particularly for females, this often extended beyond weight and body shape to all elements of appearance, including hair, make-up and clothes.

For these individuals, the notion of the ‘ideal’ body was not enough, as they tried to emulate all aspects of a celebrity’s appearance, amplifying the sense of pressure they felt.

“When you see things, like Geordie Shore, and you see them going out, they always have eyelashes on and fake tan. They’ve proper done themselves up. So everyone else starts doing it. So it’s like, the media and comparing yourself to other people as well.”

Karli, 15, North East England

The importance placed on celebrities was higher among older individuals. At these ages, they are likely to have increased exposure to these ‘ideals’ and a greater say over the measures they take to alter their appearance.

When speaking about celebrity culture, many young people recognised the objectification of people in the public eye and the constant scrutiny they endure over their appearance. They were, however, divided in their view of its impact.

It was felt by some that highlighting an individual’s ‘imperfections’ illustrated that nobody was perfect. In these cases, young people reported taking a more objective view of their own appearance as it showed that the ‘ideals’ they are presented with are impossible to match.

Conversely, young people more commonly felt that the scrutiny celebrities faced reinforced the importance of ‘perfection’, and they often internalised the criticisms, relating them to their own appearance.

“In a way, say you are already getting judged by other people for the way you dress and then you see a celebrity getting judged, you’re going to be a bit less insecure. You’re going to be like, ‘at least I’m not the only one getting judged’.”

Alan, 16, Scotland

“It [body shaming in the media] personally really annoys me. I think when they moan at people for like, being overweight, there are a lot of people who are not celebrities and are ‘worse’ than that, and it kind of makes them feel small. They think ‘if that’s fat, I must be severely overweight’.”

Nathan, 14, East of England

Those young people who completely rejected the appearance-related ‘ideals’ presented by the media tended to be the most confident about their appearance, and were the least likely to report experiences of body image anxiety or low body confidence.

While the pressures arising from sources such as advertising, fashion, music and celebrities vary, it was clear from speaking to young people that constantly bombarding them with images of ‘perfection’ was having a largely detrimental impact on their body confidence, and often fuelled body image anxiety.

Peer groups

The influence of peer groups cannot be underestimated when examining body image anxiety. While often they did not specifically create the appearance ‘ideals’, for the majority of young people, it was the peer group that underpinned and reinforced these ‘ideals’ and expectations.

Certainly, many young people spoke of the judgement and scrutiny they faced from their peer group. While this varied in extremity, the majority of young people were united in spending time worrying about what their peers thought about their appearance.

Notably, again, this pressure did not just focus on physical appearance; many young people spoke of an added pressure to wear certain types or brands of clothing in order to fit in with those around them.

“The main clothes for guys are like, North Face, Nike, you know, that sort of stuff. Brands like Armani and all that, and so if you’re not wearing stuff like that, basically, it’s hard.”
Connor, 15, Scotland

“You can’t just wear a top that’s not a make.”
Georgia, 13, Wales

“I wore a pair of black plimsolls from Topshop and they said, ‘oh, you’re not allowed to wear them because they’re not Vans or Adidas or whatever’.”
Bea, 13, South East England

For many young people, worrying about the judgement of others was seen as an inevitable and inescapable part of growing up, and several admitted to judging others, despite recognising the detrimental effect it could have on their self-esteem.

“Everyone judges people. People who get judged by others for being a certain way, judge the people that judge them for being ‘bitchy’ and ‘popular’ or stuff like that.”
Kyle, 16, East Midlands

“You are never not going to get judged in life for the way you look, it’s just part of life, you need to get around it.”
D’Andre, 15, West Midlands

Reports of bullying relating to appearance were frequent among young people. While these tended to vary in severity, in the vast majority of cases, young people who experienced it reported negative repercussions on their self-esteem.

Most commonly reported were incidences of name-calling, focusing on young people’s weight or size. However, in some cases, these also focused on many of the elements young people associate with body image, such as make-up, hair colour and clothing.

Often, instances of bullying were reciprocated, perpetuating the cycle of negativity and insecurity among young people.

While examples of bullying and name-calling were frequent, a distinction was often drawn between jokes or ‘banter’ and bullying. Many, therefore, felt that ‘banter’ about appearance was acceptable between friends, and that they were clear about the line between ‘harmless’ joking and offence.

“There’s ‘banter’ and then there’s a line very close to ‘banter’ that people cross.”
Rachelle, 15, Scotland

“There is not really a line because you still take it personally.”
Sharna, 16, North East England

In contrast, some of those who had been on the receiving end of such ‘harmless’ jokes reported a negative impact on their self-esteem and body image. While this negative impact may have been unintentional, it is clear that young people were key contributing factors to the pressures and insecurities felt by their peers, often without knowing it.

Relationships

As previously outlined, older individuals were more likely to report caring about what others think about their appearance.

While not universal, a shift was noticeable in the older age groups as they start to become more concerned about what their preferred sex thought about their appearance.

Accordingly, as an increased interest in dating and relationships developed, the source of pressures alter as concerns became more targeted towards what certain individuals thought about their appearance.

This concern affected both males and females, and in some cases, amplified the day-to-day pressures that they experience, leading to greater instances of body image anxiety.

Social media and messaging platforms

The pressures exhibited by the peer group have been exacerbated by the advent of social media and messaging platforms.

Young people’s use of social media and messaging platforms is extensive and includes sites and apps like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp and Snapchat.

While previous generations were distanced from many of the pressures relating to their appearance outside of the school environment, young people today are operating within an ever-connected world. Accordingly, these pressures can be both prolific and all-encompassing as they come to dominate their lives 24/7.

Indeed, the majority of young people cited social media and messaging platforms as a source of pressure and a facilitator of body image anxiety.

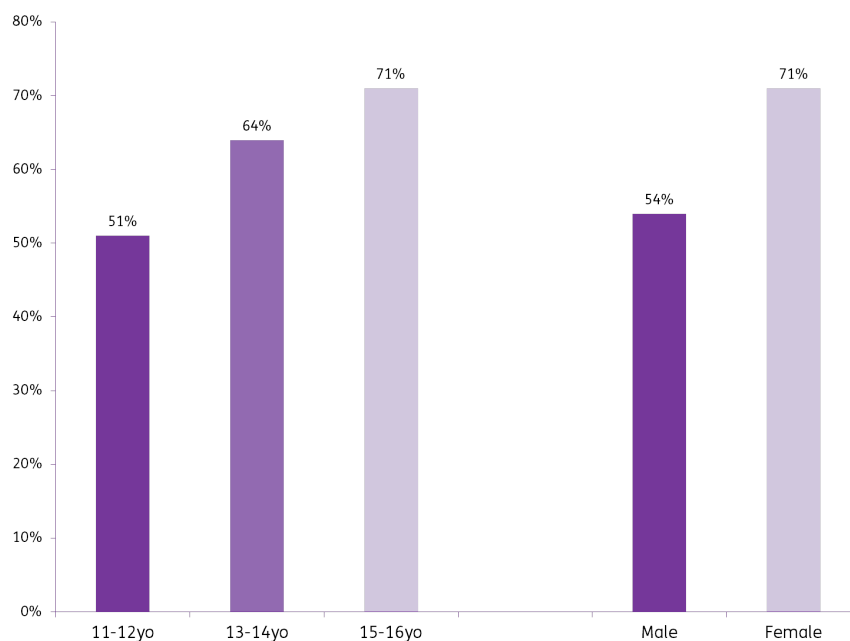
The causes of this pressure from social media and messaging platforms are two-fold.

Firstly, they connect young people to their peers in a way never before experienced. While there are positives to this, these can often be outweighed by the fact that they are constantly contactable, meaning they get little relief from the pressures from their peer group. This can be increasingly pertinent if that young person is the victim of bullying or cyber bullying.

Secondly, the use of social media can encourage a focus on appearance, as young people become consumed by which photos they put online and the image they portray online.

The importance young people place on this aspect of social media and messaging platforms is illustrated by the fact that nearly two thirds of young people (63%) agreed that they made sure they looked as good as possible in the photos they put online.

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I make sure I look as good as possible in the photos I put online? (n=2,018)



The different pressures in this regard are illustrated by the fact that females were more likely to agree that they made sure they looked as good as possible in the photos they put online (71%), compared to males (54%).

In addition, older age groups were more likely to agree that they made sure they looked as good as possible in the photos they put online.

While this desire to look good online can be relatively harmless and does not necessarily indicate a cause for concern, it is indicative of the wider pressures that young people feel to look a certain way to impress their peer group. Furthermore, it also helps to fuel a self-perpetuating cycle in which young people feel pressure to adjust their appearance for the purposes of impressing others on social media and messaging platforms.

While age requirements are put in place, many young people are choosing to ignore these restrictions. The scale of underage social media use is illustrated by the fact that among those young people aged under 13 years old, 78% were using at least one social media network, despite being below the age requirement.⁴

Coupled with this is the frequency with which young people access social media and messaging platforms. While young people would have previously been restricted to using the internet on family computers, the increase in the use of smartphones and other portable devices means that young people can have constant access to it.

On average, children are given their first phone at the age of 11.⁵ While usage will depend on the individual, it is clear that technology has meant that young people now have unparalleled access to social media and messaging platforms. Indeed, young people aged seven to 16 years old are now reported to spend three hours online each day.⁶ While this is not likely to be exclusively on social media and messaging platforms, it does illustrate the dominance of technology and the internet on their lives.

The dominant role that social media and messaging platforms can play in affecting the self-esteem of a young person was also illustrated by the importance many young people placed on the ‘likes’ they got for a photo. Certainly, many young people reported feeling that their ‘like’ count was indicative of their self-worth, with some reporting feeling anxiety when photos do not gain a certain level of praise among their social network contacts.

In some cases, a lack of ‘likes’ leads to young people taking down photos that were not deemed popular enough, and in extreme cases, some young people reported purchasing ‘likes’ so as to appear more popular.

“I buy ‘likes’. I buy 100 ‘likes’ so I don’t feel bad about myself. I just don’t like not having the ‘likes’ and seeing that.”

David, 13, South East England

“If you wanna post a picture, you have to make sure it’s on point, otherwise you won’t post it.”

Martyna, 13, North East England

Linked to this was the use of editing tools on the pictures young people put online. These editing tools tended to range from filters – for example, those used on Snapchat and Instagram – to airbrushing and make-up apps to fundamentally alter appearances.

“I Photoshop every one of my profile pictures, I kid you not. I get rid of my spots, I get rid of my double chin. It genuinely takes me 25 minutes to make a profile picture.”
Josh, 16, Scotland

“Do you know how much make-up my friend puts on and how many hours it takes her to put on just to take a picture and put it on Instagram? I’ll be on the phone to her for three hours and then she takes it off five minutes later.”
Elle, 13, North East England

“You have to get like, the perfect photo, or like, you’ll get a snide comment from someone. You take numerous selfies to get the right one.”
Summer, 16, East Midlands

In some cases, young people’s concerns extended beyond how many ‘likes’ they got for a photo, and instead focused on instances of cyber bullying and the negative comments they received in respect to images they posted. More often, these were from those in their peer group, but in some instances, young people reported receiving abuse from strangers after posting photos of themselves in open platforms online.

This relationship with social media and messaging platforms illustrates a perpetual need for external validation that many young people are experiencing. While this need may be a symptom of existing low body confidence, it likely fuels an on-going battle faced by a young person trying to keep up with appearance ‘ideals’ in order to gain the acceptance of others.

The impact of body image anxiety

The impact of body image anxiety on a young person is dependent on both the extent of the pressures they face and the severity of the resultant anxiety.

While for some young people, this will manifest itself in low-level insecurity, anxiety and social-isolation, in extreme instances, it can result in self-harm.

Whatever the extremity, it is clear that body image anxiety is having a detrimental impact on the health and wellbeing of many young people in the UK.

Internalisation of pressures

As previously set out, pressures to conform with body image 'ideals' surround young people in their daily lives. However, given that the impact of these is not universal, it is clear that the presence of external pressures is not the sole determinant of body image anxiety.

Instead, a key cause is the process of self-objectification, namely, the extent to which a young person bases their self-worth on the judgement of others. Indeed, speaking to young people illustrated that individuals who put a greater emphasis on the opinions, or perceived opinions of others, were more likely to internalise the pressures that surround them.

Internalising these pressures shapes a young person's thoughts, feelings and actions, reducing their body confidence, and can cause them to take measures to change their appearance to satisfy others.

"I get the internal pressure from the external pressure. Hearing other people, I'll be like, 'oh, God', and maybe even subconsciously, I'll take it on board. If some people are like, 'that person is fat' and they are like quite thin, it becomes engrained in me that it is big when it's not. It's just because other people are talking about it negatively."

Isabel, 15, East of England

"When I was younger and was called something negative, it made me want to change like 'oh, I'm not living up to their standard'. But now I'm like, 'that's just your opinion, I'm bothered?'."

Maddie, 15, West Midlands

Alternatively, those individuals who placed little value in the opinions of others were more likely to be able to critically evaluate the pressures they faced. Often this allowed a young person to reject such pressures, a key factor in the maintenance of strong body confidence.

Changing appearances

The internalisation of these pressures and the resulting concerns about appearance can lead to young people taking measures to change the way they look. These measures vary depending on the levels of anxiety, the context in which young people experience it, and the level of control they have over their appearance.

For the majority of young people, the measures taken to change their appearance were relatively minor, and included either cutting or dyeing their hair, or changing the style of clothes they wear.

For the most part, these types of measures were fairly harmless and do not present a cause for concern. However, in some cases, they can be indicative of the wider pressure a young person feels to meet certain appearance 'ideals', and the body image anxieties they are facing.

Indeed, speaking to young people provided examples of incidences when they had either dyed their hair or undertaken tanning after being extensively bullied about these elements of their appearance.

Similarly, young people reported using make-up to alter their appearance. Again, while this was seen as a natural part of life for many, there were a number of incidences where females reported that they only started to use make-up after receiving derogatory comments about their appearance.

Motivations behind make-up use were, therefore, split between those who used it 'for themselves' and those who felt pressured to wear it. In some instances, young people reported being unable to leave the house without it, for fear of judgement from others.

"I'm obsessed with make-up. I only go around people without make-up if I trust them. It gives me confidence."

Tamsin, 13, South West England

"I'm confident when I've got make-up on; when I take it off, I'm not."

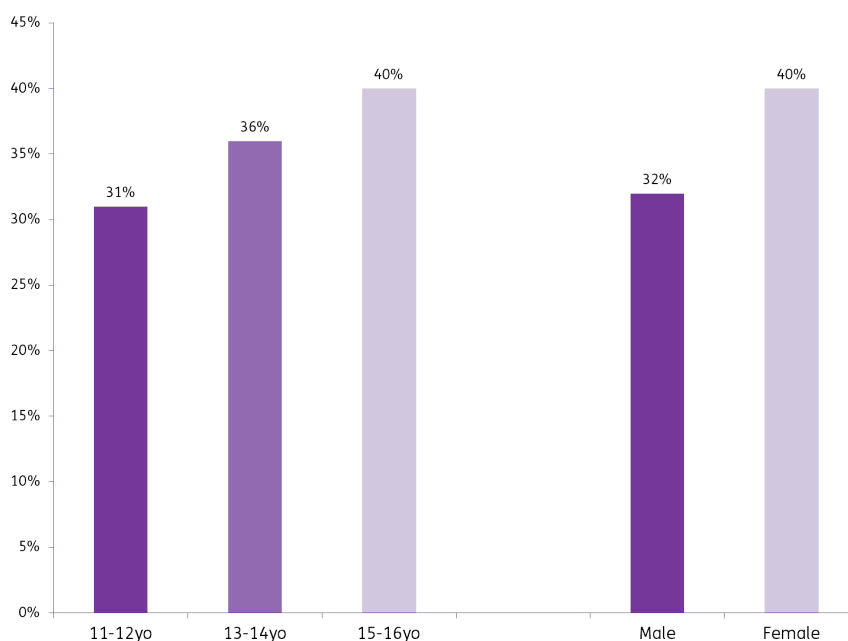
Sonya, 15, West Midlands

It is clear, therefore, that for some, make-up use is linked to wider body image anxieties and insecurities about their appearance.

The damage that body image anxieties can have was illustrated by the fact that more than a third of young people (36%) agreed that they would do whatever it took to look good.

Females were more likely to agree that they would do whatever it takes to look good (40% females, compared to 32% males), and the desire was more prominent in the older age groups.

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I would do whatever it takes to look good? (n=2,018)



While the majority of the measures taken to change their appearance were relatively minor, this research found that in some cases, young people were willing to take more extreme measures.

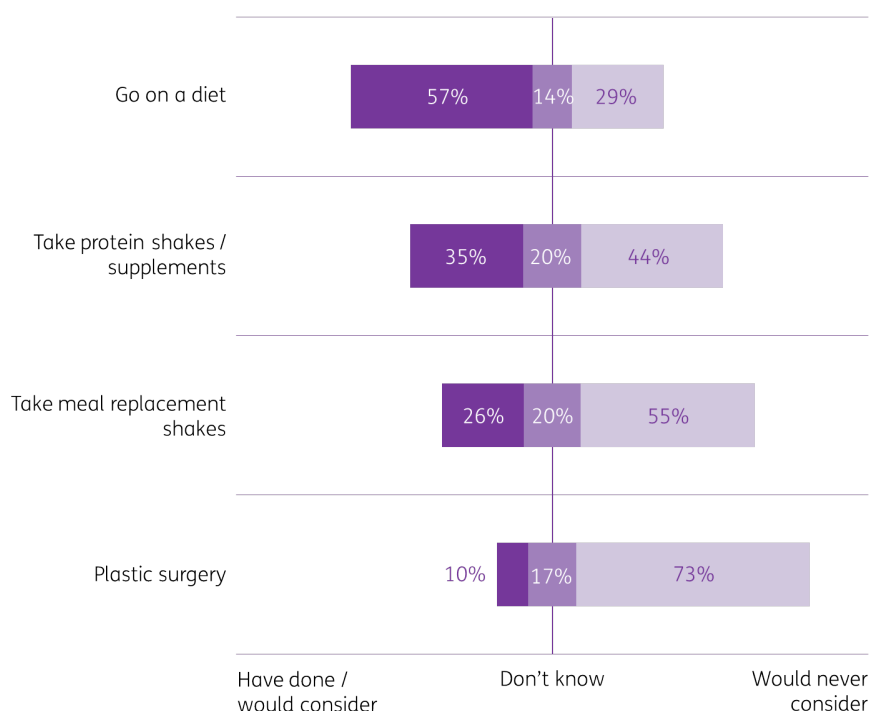
Many young people who spoke of the bullying they received as a result of their weight or body shape stated that they had often felt pressured to diet, or in some cases, had even stopped eating in front of their peers as a result.

"I've been on diet before, calorie control, no junk food, no sugar."
Elle, 13, North East England

*"I got bullied about my weight. It made me feel like s**t. I don't know how else to describe it, but it was just going around my head. I wouldn't eat when I was at school, I'd wait until I got home to eat."*
Summer, 16, East Midlands

The link between body confidence and weight is further illustrated by the fact that almost three in five young people (57%) have dieted, or would consider going on a diet, to change the way they look.

*Which of the following have you done/would you consider if you wanted to change your looks?
(n=2,018)*



While dieting can be beneficial to a young person, if done safely and for health reasons, dieting as a result of pressure from others to look a certain way is likely to be damaging to a young person. This risk is more severe when done at a young age, while an individual is still developing, and without proper guidance.

Young people's desire to change their physical appearance extended beyond just dieting. Indeed, more than a third of young people (35%) said they have taken, or would consider taking, protein shakes and supplements to change the way they look.

The difference in pressures on young people is reflected in males being more likely to have taken, or to have considered taking, protein shakes and supplements to change the way they look (40%), compared to females (31%). This is likely reflective of the muscular body 'ideal' that many males feel pressured to achieve.

While such products are aimed at adults, this illustrates the extent to which young people are aware of their existence and the potential for them to be drawn into using them.

Similarly, more than a quarter of young people (26%) had taken, or would consider taking, meal replacement shakes to change the way they look. Again, meal replacement shakes are an extreme weight loss measure that should only be used in specific cases and under proper medical supervision. However, some individuals as young as 11 years old are viewing them as a viable potential option to change their appearance.

The lengths that some young people would go to in order to change their appearance were further illustrated by the fact that one in 10 young people (10%) said they would consider plastic surgery to change the way they look. While clearly this is not a feasible option at such young ages, it does provide an indication of the extent of the body image anxiety present among young people, and the resultant desire to change appearances.

However, speaking to young people reveals that the majority were not yet taking extreme measures to change their appearance.

While this is partly due to the fact that their age means they were unable to make significant changes to their appearance, it is also due to a recognition that the 'ideals' with which they were presented in the media were simply unattainable. A sense of hopelessness and failure often resided in these individuals as they failed to meet their goals.

Similarly, many young people said that they did not make attempts to change their appearance because any changes they were able to make to themselves were likely to be ineffective in preventing the scrutiny and bullying they experienced from their peer group.

Indeed, many pointed out the contradictory standards that exist, with individuals being bullied for being 'too thin', as well as for being 'overweight'. In this sense, bullying was felt to be an inevitable part of growing up, and that there was nothing they could do to stop it.

Withdrawal and isolation

With little recourse to change, this research found that withdrawal and isolation are key consequences of body image anxiety, along with the sense of hopelessness it engenders in young people.

However, this sense of hopelessness was not just limited to a young person's perception that they are unable to sufficiently alter their appearance. Instead, it was the result of a range of wider factors that could often leave the young person feeling powerless.

Firstly, while there was often recognition that the 'ideals' with which they are presented are unobtainable, young people did not feel able to influence the media and change the 'ideals' that are conveyed.

There was a sense that things would always be this way, as a large proportion of advertising and the media is driven by fostering the insecurities of individuals in order to sell products, and that little consideration is paid to the negative consequences this can have.

Secondly, the powerlessness often extends to their personal lives. There was a recognition that bullying was inevitable and young people felt unable to challenge harmful language and behaviour, due to fear of the negative consequences that would ensue, including further isolation from their peer group.

This inability to challenge bullying, in many cases, was matched with an inability to escape it. Given the advent of social media and messaging platforms, some young people were unable to avoid bullying, as it came to infiltrate every area of their lives.

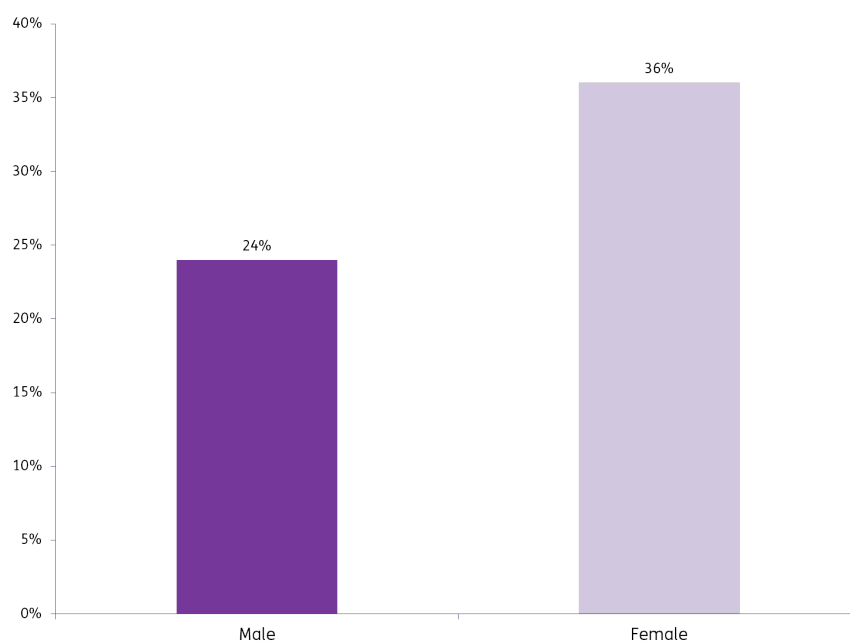
The extent of this bullying, coupled with a feeling of being unable to share anxieties and confide in others, often exacerbated the anxieties that young people felt, and their sense of hopelessness.

This sense of hopelessness and inevitability led to withdrawal and isolation in many. Given that they felt that nothing could be done to change their circumstances, many young people reacted by retreating from their peer group and avoiding certain social situations or activities.

Indeed, 30% of young people agreed that they sometimes avoided taking part in certain activities because they were worried about the way they looked.

Worries about appearance had a bigger impact on the activities undertaken by females, with 36% stating that they sometimes avoided taking part in certain activities because they worried about the way they looked, compared to 24% of males.

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I sometimes avoid taking part in certain activities because I'm worried about the way I look? (n=2,018)



In the school context, young people most commonly reported withdrawing from Physical Education (PE), as they felt embarrassed to undertake such activities in front of their peers, for fear of derogatory comments or teasing, including those surrounding weight and body shape.

“I down right refuse to do PE”

Josh, 16, Scotland

“I think it makes people want to hide away and not face things like school, which then affects their education, the grades they get, and how hard they work at school.”

Nathan, 14, East of England

In some cases, this avoidance of activities and social situations can contribute to a self-perpetuating cycle in which young people isolate themselves from those around them, which can exacerbate feelings of anxiety and insecurity.

This withdrawal from activities and isolation from others also has the additional negative effect of preventing young people from speaking out and seeking help for their anxieties, which in turn prevents them from accessing meaningful support.

A failure to receive the support needed can entrench feelings of isolation, and can amplify the negative impact on their health and wellbeing. This can be more profound in instances where a young person has tried to access support and has been unable to.

In addition, it can also affect their long-term attainment and future prospects if it results in them failing to achieve their full potential in school. This is supported by previous research that found a quarter of girls say unhappiness with their appearance has stopped them from going to school, or giving an opinion in class.⁷

Support available to combat body image anxieties

Given the scale of body image anxieties among young people, and the negative impact they are having, it is important that support is available to help those in need.

However, young people reported relatively low levels of support-seeking behaviour, something that is likely indicative of the isolation that many with body image anxiety feel.

Females were more likely to report speaking to their friends about body image and appearance; however, those who reported serious concerns were not likely to share these with others, preferring instead to keep them secret.

The barriers young people face to seeking support were numerous. Most commonly, young people did not want to speak out about body image anxieties for fear of making themselves vulnerable to others. In such cases, body image anxieties were seen as a weakness, and young people felt that expressing them would merely provide their peers with further ammunition to bully them.

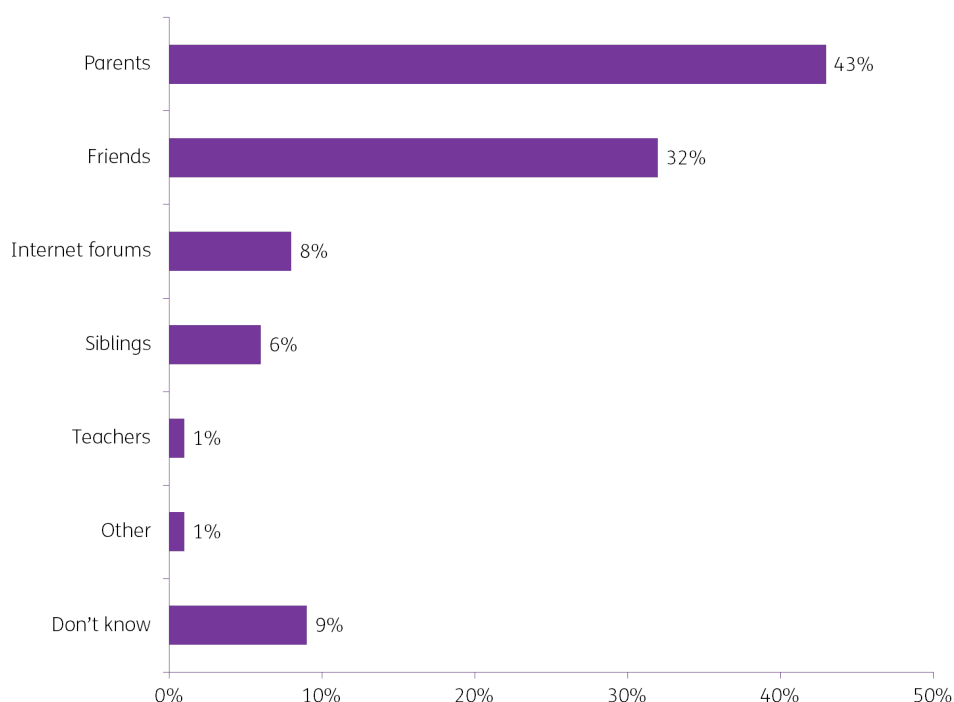
In addition, in cases where bullying occurred, a number of young people reported not wanting to speak out about it for fear of being seen as a 'snitch' or 'grass'. Accordingly, seeking support for body image anxieties was seen as of secondary importance to maintaining relationships within their peer-group.

“With the names people get called, the really bad names, they don’t really want to tell a teacher so the other person doesn’t get into trouble and make it worse. If you get a teacher or your parent involved, sometimes it can make it even worse because they will call you even more names or start like, a fight or something like that.”

Niamh, 14, Scotland

Given the extent of the appearance-related bullying reported by young people, the instinct to keep anxieties secret is perhaps inevitable, but it often proves detrimental to the young person, as they instead internalise their feelings for a sustained period of time.

Where would you be most likely to go for support on body confidence? (n=2,018)



The reluctance to speak out in school for fear of negative repercussions was illustrated by the fact that just 1% of young people said that they would be most likely to speak to a teacher for support with body confidence.

It is clear from speaking to young people that some did not feel that they could speak to teachers confidentially, and that any conversations would result in knowledge of their body image anxieties reaching other teachers and their peer groups.

Although rare, in some cases, young people even reported teachers perpetuating body image anxieties and reinforcing the negative stereotypes and body ideals. In these cases, this was given as a further reason for not seeking help from them.

"I got called fat by my teacher. She said to another teacher 'I think she's a bit fat because she won't do that much running'."
Kenzie, 13, South West England

"I don't trust teachers, obviously no one does because they pass things on."
Angela, 14, Yorkshire and Humber

Parents were named as the group young people would most likely seek support from, with 43% of young people naming them as their preferred choice. Given the young age group, the support provided from parents and carers can be critical, and certainly many young people spoke of the help given by their parents and carers when they shared their body image anxieties.

Given young people's fear that their image concerns would become known to their peers, parents and carers were the natural port of call when seeking confidential support.

However, in a minority of cases, parents and carers were said to perpetuate body image concerns by either ignoring or dismissing them. In many of these, this was not felt to be out of malice but instead due to parents and carers not feeling as if there was an issue with their child's appearance. As such, there was a lack of recognition of the severity of such concerns, and the impact they can have on the life of a young person. The escalation of the pressures faced by young people in recent years is likely to account for at least some of this lack of recognition.

After parents, friends were the group that young people (32%) were most likely to go to for support on body confidence.

Given the prevalence of appearance-related bullying reported, many young people spoke of a reticence to speak to their wider friendship group about their concerns. Instead, they often found solace in one or two close friends.

“Every girl I’ve told something to has always stabbed me in the back. They’ve always gone and told someone, so I don’t trust them.”

Andrea, 14, South West England

“I think it’s because if I tell someone they can like, turn on me or use it as something against me. So I’m like, better not telling anyone and just keeping it to myself so no-one knows.”

Hajar 14, London

“I only speak to my friends about it, I don’t really speak to anyone else, because I only trust my friends.”

Careem, 14, South West England

Many young people spoke of seeking reassurance from their friends for body image concerns rather than formal support. In such cases, young people would ask their friends for approval or validation of certain aspects of their appearance, rather than acknowledging and addressing the root causes of their anxiety and the severity of the issue at hand.

Given the levels of judgement and scrutiny that young people experience, or perceive, from their peer group, this approval-seeking is an inevitable occurrence. However, while it may provide short-term reassurance, it is unlikely to help the underlying causes of body image anxiety.

“I have turned round to my friends when I’ve come into school and I’d been like, ‘does my make-up look OK?’, ‘does my hair look ok?’. They all say ‘yes’ but sometimes I feel as if they’re kidding on.”

Niamh, 14, Scotland

“You know if you get a new top or something, you like, ask for their approval, ‘is it alright?’, ‘do I look OK in this type of thing?’. You seek the approval of them so you know you’re alright.”

Karli, 15, North East England

Speaking to young people, it became clear that in general, females were more likely to seek support for body image anxiety than males. While for some, this was attributed to the fact that they did not experience such concerns, many males spoke of a fear of looking like a ‘wimp’.

This concern among many males was illustrated by the fact that males were more likely to go to their parents for support on body confidence (47%), compared to females (39%). This was often due to parents not being seen to be as judgemental as the peer group.

In contrast, females were more likely to go to their friends for support on body confidence (38%), compared to males (27%). Indeed, a common emerging theme was that it was simply not ‘masculine’ to speak of body image concerns, with males being pressured to maintain a façade of strength with regards to such issues.

This pressure is having a negative impact on young males, and is often prohibiting the support-seeking behaviour that for some is desperately needed. The framing of the issue as one that is traditionally feminine is likely contributing to the barriers that many males face in seeking help for their body image anxieties.

“I find it is quite a big problem, but boys will kind of hide their feelings, they are embarrassed to say something. I think it’s because they’d be seen as a bit ‘wimpy’ and not as ‘manly’, because men are meant to be the tough, strong ones, according to media and stuff.”

Nathan, 14, East of England

The barriers that young people face in seeking support were numerous. While some of these were internal barriers, such as the fear of looking ‘weak’, they are nonetheless important.

Breaking down these barriers requires young people to be provided with an open and safe space in which discussions about body image anxiety, and the pressures they experience, are the norm.

Solutions

As previously mentioned, speaking to young people about the appearance-related pressures they face tended to engender a sense of hopelessness. For many young people, criticisms about an individual's appearance and the negative messages that surround them were a seemingly inevitable and inescapable part of life.

While young people recognised the severity of the issue, the majority felt that things were unlikely to change in any significant way in the immediate future. The sheer scale of the negative messaging young people receive and the scrutiny they endure makes this pessimism understandable.

However, when questioned, young people identified a number of potential solutions to help tackle body image anxiety.

Cultural shift

Young people were clear that tackling body image anxiety requires a fundamental shift in the messages and imagery that the media conveys. In order to bring about this shift, young people called for a greater diversity in the models used and an end to the irresponsible use of airbrushing to fundamentally alter the appearance of individuals.

While it was recognised that some progress in this respect had already occurred, some regarded it as merely tokenistic. As such, while attempts to diversify the models being used had been made, many young people still felt that they did not see pictures of people like them in the media and that images did not reflect the full diversity of the UK population.

“What does annoy me is the plus size models. They say they are trying to create more diversity but really they use people who are really beautiful and still have big boobs and a small waist for their size, and they don't tend to have that much cellulite. Their figures are bigger but still something I'd be really envious of. They are still typically perfect. It's kind of getting there a little bit but it's still isolating loads of people who are like, different sizes.”

Isabel, 15, East of England

“You know like, there are a lot of bigger models coming out now, but I genuinely don't know one big male model. All the new male models are like, stunning, with six packs; typical what a guy should be, like six-foot.”

Josh, 16, Scotland

In addition to seeing images that more accurately reflect themselves, young people called for an end to the body shaming that so often dominates the pages of magazines. A more positive body image stance taken by the media would help to end the situation in which young people witness celebrities being scrutinised for their so-called 'flaws', which many perceived themselves as sharing.

Education

Given the slow progress in shifting the current body image 'ideals', it is clear that additional interventions are needed to increase young people's resilience to these messages from a young age.

Indeed, young people felt that body image anxiety and body confidence should be addressed in schools.

"You need to teach people that they are OK. You need to teach people that perfection isn't real. Instead of teaching kids that 'you should be this thin', 'you should eat like this', and 'if you are not like this, you will be unhappy'."

Charlotte, 15, West Midlands

"Teachers just don't do anything about it."

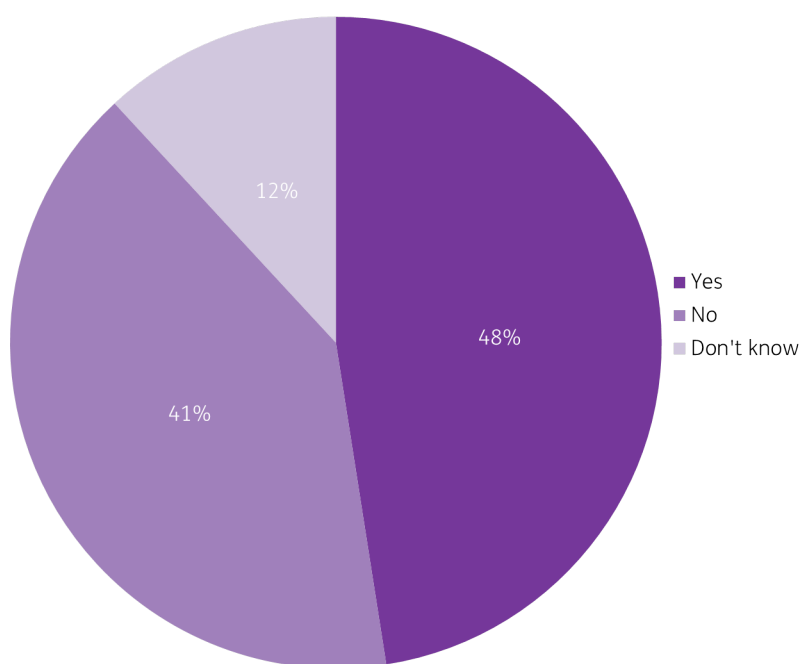
Taylor, 12, Wales

"All they do in school about body image is talk about your skirts and your uniform."

Kenzie, 13, South West England

Despite the recognition of the importance of education at this young age, just under half of young people (48%) said they had learnt about body confidence in school.

Have you ever learnt about body confidence, or having a positive body image at school? (n=2,018)

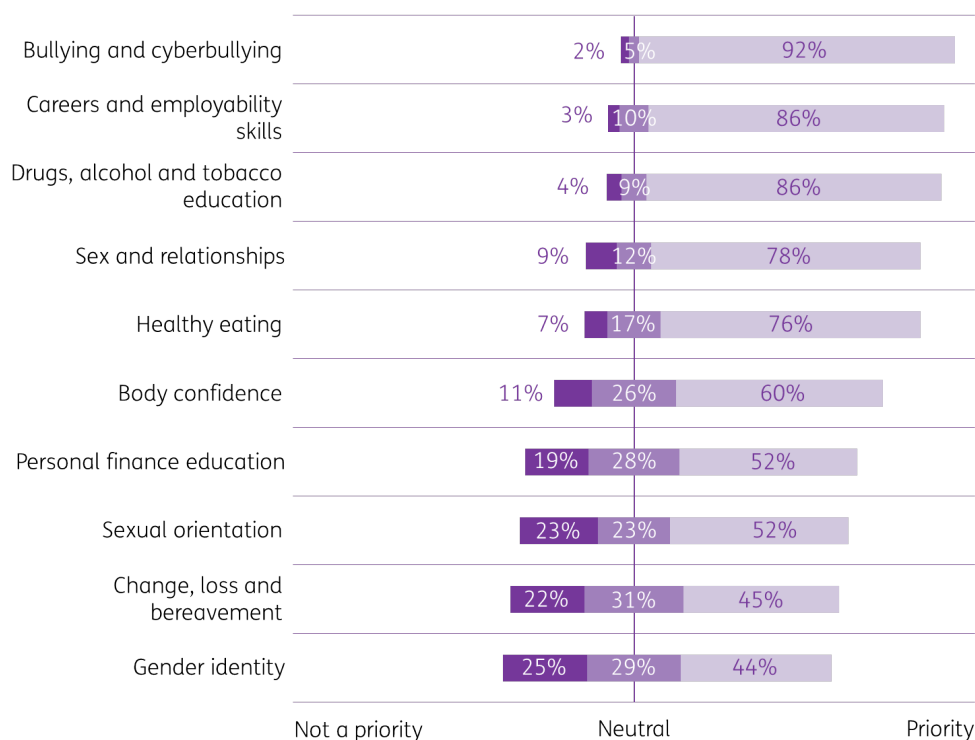


This is compared to three in five teachers (59%) who indicated that their school taught its students about body confidence.

More than three quarters of teachers (77%) agreed that schools had an important role to play in teaching young people about body confidence.

Despite this, body confidence in itself was considered to be a school priority by 60% of teachers. This was considerably lower than those who considered issues like bullying and cyber bullying, careers and employability skills, drugs, alcohol and tobacco education and sex and relationships to be a priority.

How much of a priority are the following topics in your school? (n=501)



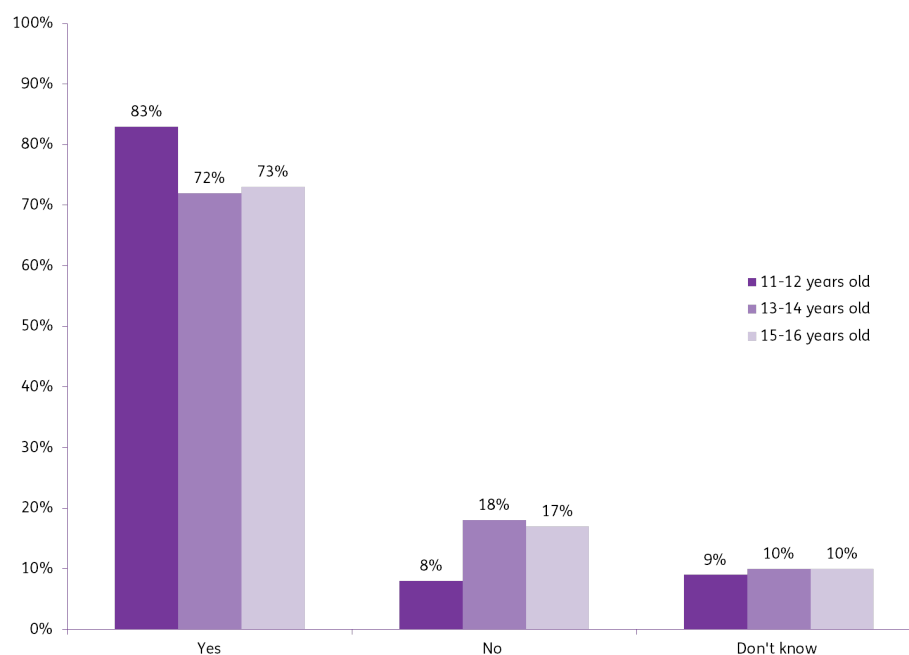
The relatively low priority given to body confidence in schools echoes the experiences of young people, many of whom said that the personal and social education issues they were taught in school tended to focus primarily on issues like drugs and alcohol, and sex and relationships.

“In our school, we don’t really have that much about awareness. Like PSE [Personal Social Education], that’s what we’re meant to be doing, but right now like, my class, all we’ve been doing is alcohol and drugs. We just get taught this over and over again but we never get taught about confidence.”
Niamh, 14, Scotland

While these topics are undoubtedly important, and many links exist between them and body confidence, it is important that body confidence is given the time and attention it deserves. This is particularly pertinent, given that more than two fifths of teachers (42%) agreed that there was not space in the school timetable to teach body confidence.

The beneficial impact this can have is illustrated by the fact that three quarters of young people (76%) who learnt about body confidence in school said it made them feel more positive about themselves.

Did learning about body confidence make you feel more positive about yourself? (n=967)



The impact of this education was most profound among the younger age groups, with 83% of those aged 11 to 12 years old saying that it made them feel more positive about themselves.

The greater levels of positivity reported by young people illustrates both the importance and the effectiveness of early intervention in tackling body image anxiety among young people. Accordingly, if young people are provided with the critical reasoning skills and resilience they need at a young age, body image anxieties are less likely to occur as they get older.

In order for teaching to be effective, however, it needs to be supplemented with a whole-school approach. Certainly, many of the young people who reported learning about body confidence stated that this was only for an hour or two at most, and emphasised the importance of integrating the messages and principles into every aspect of the school environment.

Given that nearly a fifth of teachers (18%) agreed that they did not feel confident talking about body confidence with their students, it is clear that more support is needed for this approach to be successful. Indeed, being provided with more or better resources was deemed the most effective way to encourage teachers to talk about body confidence in schools by 29% of teachers.

Parents and carers

As parents were the group young people were most likely to go to for support, it is important that they are equipped to deal with body image anxieties appropriately and effectively when they arise.

As previously discussed, some young people felt that their concerns were dismissed when they confided in their parents and carers. While again, this is unlikely to have been due to malice but simply down to differing perceptions, it can negatively impact a young person if their concerns are not addressed appropriately once they have taken the significant step of seeking help.

In addition to tackling specific problems and concerns, parents and carers have a wider role to play in promoting body confidence and positive body image among young people, by addressing the language and messaging used within the home with regards to appearance and body shape.

Given the level of disconnect that exists between some parents and carers and their children on this issue, it is important that they are also provided with the tools and resources needed to speak comfortably on the issue.

Young people

The extent of the pressures that are perpetuated by peer groups, and conversely, the key role of friends in providing support, illustrates that young people must be involved in any interventions aimed at tackling body image anxiety.

Societal change can be slow. It is, therefore, also important that young people are empowered to affect change around them by promoting body confidence among their peer group.

Given that friends were named as one of the primary groups that young people go to for support with body image anxieties, it is important that they are also equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to help those in need. This should include the ability to sign-post individuals to appropriate support services.

Furthermore, young people have a role to play in ending the cycle of judgement and scrutiny that they find themselves in with their peer group. This can be done by challenging harmful language and not reciprocating insults and bullying.

Providing young people with the critical reasoning skills to question ‘social norms’ and body image ‘ideals’ allows them to take a more objective view of their own appearance. This in turn can lead them to take a more positive view of their own body image, and encourage them to promote body confidence within their peer group.

Tackling body image anxiety among young people is not a simple task. Instead, it requires a number of interventions that tackle the multitude of pressures that exist. At the highest level, tackling these pressures requires the eradication of the body image ‘ideals’ and the negative appearance-related messaging that is presented by the media and perpetuated by individuals.

Given that this shift will take time, it is important that immediate action is also taken through interventions to increase the resilience of young people. This resilience will likely make them less susceptible to internalising the negativity that so often surrounds them, and discourage them from perpetuating this negativity by body shaming others.

Conclusions and recommendations

Body image anxiety is having a profoundly negative effect on a significant number of young people in the UK.

While the presentation of body image ‘ideals’ to young people is by no means a new phenomenon, the sheer scale of the pressures they now face to meet these means they are becoming ever ingrained in their psyche.

The result is large numbers of young people who base their self-worth on the judgements, or perceived judgements, of others. This is foreseeable, given the context of a society that increasingly portrays the notion that an individual’s value is based solely on their appearance.

While many young people are able to reject these pressures, those who cannot often suffer in silence, too afraid to share their insecurities with others.

A sense of hopelessness often dominates these individuals. They feel unable to speak out about their concerns and anxieties because they feel they are an inevitable part of growing up, and that nothing can be done to stop them; that the pressures will always exist and so will the self-doubt that accompanies them.

While action must be taken to tackle the harmful messages regarding appearance that young people are presented with in every aspect of their daily lives, it is clear that this change is going to take time.

Therefore, in addition to tackling harmful messaging, young people must be equipped with the skills and knowledge to question the ‘norms’ with which they are presented if body image anxiety is to be tackled in any meaningful way.

Critically, interventions targeted at young people must be rooted in their experiences and opinions, as highlighted throughout the report.

Accordingly, to help tackle the growing body image anxiety experienced by young people, this research proposes that action be taken to:

Tackle the body image ‘ideals’ presented to young people

Tackling body image anxiety requires the responsible portrayal of body images by the advertising, fashion, media and music industries, as well as by other relevant organisations.

It is vital that young people are presented with a range of images that accurately reflect the diversity of the UK population, so that young people see somebody like them.

Reduce the value placed on appearance in society

While action must be taken to ensure that young people are presented with a diverse range of images, it is also important that messaging does not reinforce the notion that an individual’s self-worth is solely defined by their appearance.

Instead, a focus should be placed on the achievements of individuals and other positive characteristics rather than merely their appearance.

Encourage schools to become settings that promote and foster body confidence among young people

Recognising societal change is likely to be slow, however, immediate action should be taken to increase young people’s resilience.

As this research has shown, teaching young people about body image in school can equip them with the tools they need at a young age to critically evaluate the messages they receive, in many cases enabling them to feel more confident about themselves.

While lessons on body image will go some way to tackling insecurities, these must be supplemented with a whole-school approach, in which body confidence messages are ingrained into all aspects of school life.

To help facilitate this, teachers and support staff must be provided with the tools and training they need to ensure they are confident in supporting young people and speaking with them about body image.

Support parents and carers to help promote body confidence among young people

Given the key role that parents and carers play in the life of a young person, and the number of young people for whom they are the preferred support mechanism on this issue, it is clear that parents and carers are vital in tackling body image anxiety among young people.

However, given the scale of the disconnect that can often exist on this issue, parents and carers must be properly supported to effectively help young people when they are in need.

Equip young people with the means to tackle the causes of body image anxiety

Tackling body image anxiety requires addressing the sense of hopelessness that so often resides among young people.

Feeling pressured to look a certain way is not an inevitable part of growing up, and young people must be equipped with the means to tackle the notion that it is, and place less value on the importance of their appearance.

Too often, young people are drawn into a self-perpetuating cycle in which actions are taken to purposefully make others feel bad about themselves. Whether through face-to-face bullying or actions taken online, the use of negative language has come to dominate the lives of so many.

Empowering young people helps to end this cycle, enabling them to question and tackle harmful language among their peer group, are key to helping to foster body confidence among all young people.

Notes

- ¹ YMCA, *All Party Parliamentary Group on Body Image: Reflections on body image*, May 2012
- ² Government Equalities Office, *Body Confidence: Findings from the British Social Attitudes Survey*, October 2014
- ³ YMCA, *All Party Parliamentary Group on Body Image: Reflections on body image*, May 2012
- ⁴ BBC, 'Safer Internet Day: Young ignore social media age limit', February 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-35524429>, accessed 05 December 2016
- ⁵ uSwitch.com, 'More than a million British kids get first mobile phone by the time they're five', August 2013, <https://www.uswitch.com/media-centre/2013/08/more-than-a-million-british-kids-get-first-mobile-phone-by-the-time-theyre-five/>, accessed 05 December 2016
- ⁶ Childwise, *CHILDWISE Monitor 2015*, January 2016
- ⁷ Dove, *The Real Truth About Beauty: Dove Global Study*, 2011

BE REAL
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