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**“It’s better saying I look fat instead of saying you look fat”: A Qualitative Study of UK
Adolescents’ Understanding of Appearance-Related Interactions on Social Media**

Abstract

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

1 **“It’s better saying I look fat instead of saying you look fat”**: A Qualitative Study of UK
2 **Adolescents’ Understanding of Appearance-Related Interactions on Social Media**

3 Appearance concerns are prominent during adolescence (Calzo et al., 2012); with 52%
4 of 11-16-year olds in the UK reporting dissatisfaction with their appearance (Be Real, 2017).
5 Peer relationships play a pivotal role in the development of adolescent appearance concerns
6 (Ata et al., 2007). Research in offline settings shows that adolescents engage in a range of
7 appearance-related interactions with their peers, both positive and negative (Calogero et al.,
8 2009; Lunde & Frisen, 2011). These interactions serve to reinforce and perpetuate problematic
9 sociocultural messages surrounding appearance and may feed into appearance concerns.
10 Increasingly, adolescent peer interactions occur in social media spaces. Image-based social
11 media sites, such as Instagram and Snapchat, are particularly popular among adolescents. These
12 social media sites feature a high proportion of appearance ideal images and are designed to
13 encourage conversations around such images, thus creating a pervasive platform for
14 appearance-related interactions. While studies have started to document the prevalence of
15 appearance-related interactions online (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018), little research has sought
16 to consider how adolescents understand and experience such interactions. Therefore, the
17 present study uses focus groups to explore adolescents’ shared understandings and experiences
18 of appearance-related interactions on social media.

19 **Adolescent Appearance Concerns**

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

26 process) which leads to increased self-oriented thinking and imaginary audience ideation
27 (Elkind, 1978; Galanaki, 2012), also begin in early adolescence. These changes often manifest
28 as self-consciousness towards the body and appearance (Frankenberger, 2000; Terán et al.,
29 2020). Great value is placed on acceptance and rejection from the peer group during early
30 adolescence, which is often associated with physical attractiveness (Somerville, 2013). Last,
31 adolescents report increased sensitivity to the sociocultural environment (Blakemore & Mills,
32 2014) wherein appearance-related messages are frequently communicated. However, in the UK
33 and other parts of the Western world, sociocultural appearance-related messages are
34 problematic and so contribute to the high levels of appearance concerns reported by adolescents
35 (Rodgers et al., 2015).

36 Sociocultural theory (Thompson et al., 1999) and objectification theory (Fredrickson &
37 Roberts, 1997) account for the role of the sociocultural environment in the development of
38 adolescent appearance concerns. According to the sociocultural theory, appearance concerns
39 emerge due to perceived pressure from sociocultural agents (e.g. parents, media, and peers) to
40 conform to an unattainable and unrealistic appearance ideal (Thompson et al., 1999). In
41 Western society, the ideal is thin and curvy for women, and lean and muscular for men (Dittmar
42 et al., 2000; Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005), coupled with other increasingly complicated markers
43 of physical attractiveness (e.g., clear skin, straight white teeth; Schaefer et al., 2017). Over
44 time, these appearance ideals become internalized by adolescents as personal goals (Hermes &
45 Keel, 2003), and serve as social comparison targets, leading to body dissatisfaction, as
46 adolescents perceive themselves as failing to live up to the unrealistic ideal (Rodgers et al.,
47 2015). In parallel, objectification theory focuses on the way in which physical attractiveness,
48 particularly of women, is overly valued within society. This, coupled with the internalization
49 of the appearance ideal, leads to self-objectification (Van Diest & Perez, 2013) - the tendency
50 to adopt an external viewers' perspective of one's body and treat oneself as an object - which

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

59 **Peer Appearance Interactions**

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

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

76 focused upon, interpreted and then internalized as important. Appearance interactions
77 strengthen personal attitudes, norms and beliefs surrounding the appearance ideal leading to
78 internalization of societal messages about appearance. Research has consistently linked self-
79 reported engagement in appearance interactions with both self-objectification and body ideal
80 internalization, as well as body dissatisfaction (Calogero et al., 2009; Bailey & Ricciardelli,
81 2010). This has led authors to describe these interactions as a form of “appearance training”
82 with peers (Jones, 2004; Lawler & Nixon, 2011), cumulatively creating a micro-level “peer
83 appearance culture” (Jones, 2004) wherein macro-level appearance norms and ideals are
84 communicated, negotiated, shared, modelled and reinforced (Jones & Crawford, 2006).
85 Appearance-related interactions also serve an important supportive function, wherein
86 adolescents provide reassurance to one another based on appearance, strengthening friendships
87 and developing group affirmation (Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). For example, self-
88 disparaging conversations about appearance have been found to strengthen social cohesion
89 among peer groups (Britton et al., 2006; Mills & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2017).

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

101 Sladek & Waldron, 2013). Furthermore, studies have suggested that discussing some aspects
102 of appearance is regarded as social taboo among boys, e.g., expressing feelings of body
103 dissatisfaction in conversation with friends (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006; Whitaker et al.,
104 2019). There is also evidence to suggest that boys may use humour (i.e., banter/teasing) as a
105 way of interacting about appearance with friends (Taylor, 2011). Because of these qualitative
106 differences, it is possible that gender differences in frequency of appearance interactions may
107 be, in part, due to the female-centric nature of measures.

108 **Peer Appearance Culture and Social Media**

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

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

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

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

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

172 **The Present Study**

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

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

183 RQ₁. What are adolescents' perceptions, understandings and experiences of appearance-
184 related interactions on social media?

185 RQ₂. What gender differences exist in online appearance-related interactions?

186

Method

187 **Participants**

188 Sixty-four participants (*Age M* = 12.56; *SD* = 0.97; *Range* = 11-14; Female *N* = 33,
189 Male *N* = 30, Other *N* = 1) were recruited from a secondary school in Northern England. The
190 school catchment area encompasses a large area of economic deprivation (according to UK
191 Government data; Ministry of Housing, Communities, & Local Government, 2019).
192 Approximately, 94% of participants were white, 3% mixed race, and 2% African Caribbean.
193 All participants used social media, with most reporting that they check their social media
194 accounts every few hours (36%), every hour (22%), and every ten minutes (14%). Most
195 participants reported Instagram as their most used social media site (45.3%), followed by
196 YouTube (26.6%), Snapchat (14.1%), WhatsApp (6.3%), Facebook (4.7%) and Twitter
197 (1.6%).

198 Participants took part in the focus group as part of their citizenship lessons during the
199 normal school day. Focus group allocation was arranged by the head of citizenship curriculum.
200 There were 9 focus groups in total, with 5-8 participants per group. There were 3 male only; 3
201 female only; and 3 mixed gender focus groups. All groups included adolescents of mixed
202 educational abilities. These gender configurations facilitated the exploration of gender
203 dynamics in understandings of appearance interactions. Focus groups lasted between 29.29 -
204 49.23 minutes.

205 **Focus Group Design**

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

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

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

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

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

245 **Procedure**

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

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

266 **Analytic Procedure**

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

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

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

294

Results

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

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

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

314 Jack, 12: Girls care more about their appearance because they all want to look like
315 famous celebrities and have certain hair color certain body weight

316 Simon, 11: I think girls deffo care more about their appearance than boys

317 Charlie, 12: Boys don't really care as much. (B1)

318 Positive appearance commentary tended to involve general statements about
319 appearance (e.g. “beautiful”, “pretty”, or the use of heart eye emoji) rather than explicit
320 comments that referred to body parts or weight and were posted in direct response to images
321 that meet the appearance ideal. They were positively intended and resulted in positive
322 consequences: *“friends would give you positive comments to sort of make you feel good”*
323 (Theo, 13, B3). It functioned as a form of both appearance-related approval: *“it makes you feel*
324 *good about yourself cause you know you’ve posted summat and everyone seems to like it so*
325 *you’re just like aw everyone likes that post I must look good in it* (Ashleigh, 14, G3)” and social
326 approval: *“oh a lot of people think I’m alright you know what I mean like they like me”* (Monty,
327 14, M3). Positive appearance comments (i.e. compliments) were described as more important
328 and more meaningful than likes on sites that allowed such quantifiable feedback *“yeah it’d be*
329 *nicer for them to give one compliment saying “you look nice” it’d make them happy rather*
330 *than a like* (Lucy, 12, M2)”, because they perceived this action as more effortful than ‘liking’
331 the image. Adolescents described employing strategies, such as tagging friends into their self-
332 images, in order to receive more positive appearance comments.

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

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

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

352 Bobby, 12: I don’t think they’re positive

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

354 Bobby, 12: -Go away

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

419 Hannah, 12: go on a diet

420 Holly, 11: no

421 Lola, 11: nobody's going to put that

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

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

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

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

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

442 *and go 'I'm ugly, call me beautiful' but it's a stereotype that girls do"* (Freddie, 12, M1). In
443 comparison, boys who made self-deprecating remarks (e.g., *"I feel like such a fatty"* – Monty,
444 14, M3) were perceived more positively, as a humorous interaction:

445 Bobby, 12: Boys are a lot more laugh-y about it the girls are more serious the boys joke
446 about feeling fat but girls are like 'no I'm fat, you're skinny'

447 Holly, 11: yeah girls diss themselves all the time

448 Freddie, 12: Yeah I feel like I know that boys and girls all have self-image issues but
449 girls talk about it more boys just have a laugh. (M1)

450 ***Negative appearance comments are problematic, but not always intentionally harmful***

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

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

467 were described as typically occupying a low status in offline peer groups; *“if you’re really*
468 *popular with all the naughty ones ... then you’ve got less chance of somebody being horrible*
469 *to you because they’ll be scared ... but like what’s it called a low-key nerd ... then they might*
470 *start saying oh erm you look like this you look like that err you’re fat you’re ugly”* (Chelsea,
471 13, M2). In addition, adolescents discussed how girls were described as being more likely to
472 receive negative comments if they did not meet appearance ideals, than boys who were granted
473 more flexibility in terms of appearance:

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

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

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

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

501 Theo, 13: I think the lads one they’re making fun of them because he’s just had a large
502 big mac large fries and a milkshake they’re making fun of him being fat

503 Myles, 14: yeah basically lads just being lads pulling their leg having a bit of fun that’s
504 all (B3).

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

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Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

602 **Implications**

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

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

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

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

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

644 **Limitations**

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

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

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

669 **Conclusion**

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

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