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Understanding Adolescents Appearance-Related Interactions with Peers on Highly Visual Social Media Platforms

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

York St John University

School of Education, Languages and Psychology

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is their own, except where work which has formed part of jointly authored publications has been included. The contribution of the candidate and the other authors to this work has been explicitly indicated below. The candidate confirms that appropriate credit has been given within the thesis where reference has been made to the work of others.

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I was responsible for the study design and idea, data collection, data analysis and write up of the research paper. The contribution of the other author was shared data analysis and write up.

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Abstract

Adolescents' peer interactions play an important role in the development of personal attitudes, norms and beliefs surrounding appearance and contribute to body image concerns. Appearance-related interactions are abundant on social media, but research is limited. The aim of this thesis was to explore how adolescents understand and experience appearance-related interactions on social media in relation to body image concerns, peer relationships and self-development, and to explore the role of gender. Study 1 used focus groups to explore adolescents' (*Age M* = 12.56; *SD* = 0.97; Girls = *33*) shared understandings of a range of appearance interactions on social media. In Study 2, thirty adolescents (*Age M* = 14.93; *SD* = 1.72; *Girls* = 21) participated in interviews involving the scroll-back technique to better understand their personal experiences of body talk on social media. Seventeen girls (*Age M* = 15.12; *SD* = 1.80) further agreed to share their social media data for content analysis.

Combined, the findings highlight the complexity of adolescents' appearance interactions, which are transformed by the social media environment. Some interactions like body talk are experienced more intensely and frequently compared to their offline counterparts. Positive appearance comments are the norm for girls and serve many functions including popularity marker, sign of affinity, and self-presentational strategy. Negative comments were only the norm for girls if self-directed; self-deprecating comments were used as a self-presentational strategy to convey appearance modesty. Complimenting is less common for boys as it is perceived as contrary to masculine gender norms. Instead, boys tend to engage in appearance-related banter, and this similarly acts as a marker of affiliation, signifier of boy identity and self-presentation strategy. Appearance commentary of all forms reinforced appearance-related expectations for both boys and girls, and as such, contributed body image concerns. These findings have important implications for theory and intervention.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ..... **III**

LIST OF FIGURES ..... **VIII**

LIST OF TABLES ..... **VIII**

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION **1**

1.1. CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION 1
1.2. BODY IMAGE 2
1.3. GENDER, SEXUALITY AND BODY IMAGE 3
1.4. Criticisms of the Role of Gender and Sexuality in the Body Image Literature 8
1.4.1. My Approach: Defining Gender in my Thesis 11
1.5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS 13
1.5.1. The Sociocultural Theory of Body Image 13
1.5.2. Objectification Theory 18
1.6. ADOLESCENTS AND BODY IMAGE 23
1.7. CHAPTER CONCLUSION AND THESIS OUTLINE 26

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW **29**

2.1. CHAPTER TWO INTRODUCTION 29
2.2. PEER APPEARANCE CULTURE 30
2.3. APPEARANCE RELATED INTERACTIONS 31
2.4. ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA 38
2.4.1. Social Media, Identity and Self-Presentation Theory 39
2.4.2. Social Media and the Appearance Culture 41
2.4.3. Social Media and Appearance Interactions: A Transformation Framework 43
2.5. GENDER, SOCIAL MEDIA AND APPEARANCE INTERACTIONS 50
2.6. CHAPTER CONCLUSION 56

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY **58**

3.1. CHAPTER THREE INTRODUCTION 58
3.2. ANALYTICAL APPROACH 59
3.2.1. Ontology and Epistemology in Psychology 59
3.2.2. Critical Realism 61
3.2.3. Mixed Methods 63
3.3. THESIS STUDIES: OVERARCHING DESIGN AND METHODS 66
3.3.1. Method for Study 1 69
3.3.2. Method for Study 2 72
3.4. DATA ANALYSIS 79
3.4.1. Thematic Analysis 79
3.4.2. Content Analysis (CA) 82
3.5. IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC 83
3.6. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS 85
3.7. CHAPTER SUMMARY 87
3.7.1. Overview of Empirical Programme 88

CHAPTER FOUR: STUDY ONE **91**

4.1. CHAPTER FOUR INTRODUCTION 91
4.2. RESULTS 94
4.3. DISCUSSION 103
4.4. CHAPTER CONCLUSION 106

CHAPTER FIVE: STUDY TWO CONTENT ANALYSIS **108**

5.1. CHAPTER FIVE INTRODUCTION 108

5.2. Summary of Chapter Five Method and Analytic Approach 110
5.2.1. Sample *110*
5.2.2. Analytic Approach *111*
5.2.3. Coding Scheme *113*
5.4. Results 120
5.4.1. Images *120*
5.4.2. Captions *120*
5.4.3. Direct Comments *122*
5.4.4. Participants First Reply to Direct Comments *125*
5.5. Discussion 128
5.6. Chapter Conclusion 132

CHAPTER SIX: STUDY TWO THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF GIRLS DATA 133

6.1. Chapter Six Introduction 133
6.2. Summary of Chapter Six Method 136
6.2.1. Sample *136*
6.2.2. Analytic Procedure *137*
6.3. Results 138
6.4. Discussion 148
6.5. Chapter Conclusion 151

CHAPTER SEVEN: STUDY 2 THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF BOYS DATA 153

7.1. Chapter Seven Introduction 153
7.2. Summary of Chapter Seven Method 156
7.2.1. Sample *156*
7.2.2. Analytic Procedure *157*
7.3. Results 158
7.4. Discussion 167
7.5. Chapter Conclusion 170

CHAPTER EIGHT: DISCUSSION 172

8.1. Chapter Eight Introduction 172
8.1.1. Research Question One *173*
8.1.2. Research Question Two *179*
8.1.3. Research Question Three *184*
8.2. Implications of the Research 189
8.3. Reflection on the Methodology 194
8.4. Final Conclusions 198

APPENDICES 243

Appendix 1: Study 1 Focus Group Guide 243
Appendix 2: Study 2 Interview Guide 246

List of Figures

FIGURE 1.1: SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY OF BODY IMAGE (THOMPSON ET AL., 1999)..... 14

FIGURE 2.2: TRANSFORMATION FRAMEWORK ADAPTED FROM NESI ET AL., (2018)..... 47

FIGURE 3.3: EXAMPLE OF THE COMPLIMENTING VIGNETTE USED IN THE FOCUS GROUPS..... 71

FIGURE 3.4: AN EXAMPLE OF THE INSTAGRAM DATA THAT WAS EXTRACTED FROM EACH OF PARTICIPANTS TEN MOST RECENT SELFIES..... 77

List of Tables

TABLE 2.1: SOCIAL MEDIA DESIGN FEATURES WITH DEFINITION AND EXAMPLE OF HOW THIS MAY TRANSFORM APPEARANCE INTERACTIONS 44

TABLE 5.2: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION AND SUMMARY OF INSTAGRAM DATA PROVIDED..... 110

TABLE 5.3: CODING CATEGORIES AND DEFINITIONS FOR IMAGES..... 113

TABLE 5.4: CODING CATEGORIES, DEFINITIONS, AND EXAMPLES FOR CAPTIONS 114

TABLE 5.5: CODING CATEGORIES, DEFINITIONS, AND EXAMPLES FOR DIRECT COMMENTS 116

TABLE 5.6: CODING CATEGORIES, DEFINITIONS, AND EXAMPLES FOR FIRST RESPONSES..... 117

TABLE 5.7: COUNT, PERCENTAGES, AND COHEN'S KAPPA FOR IMAGE CATEGORIES 120

TABLE 5.8: COUNT, PERCENTAGES, AND COHEN'S KAPPA FOR CAPTION CATEGORIES..... 121

TABLE 5.9: COUNT, PERCENTAGES, AND COHEN'S KAPPA FOR DIRECT COMMENT CATEGORIES..... 123

TABLE 5.10: COUNT, PERCENTAGES, AND COHEN'S KAPPA FOR FIRST RESPONSE CATEGORIES 125

TABLE 6.11: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION 136

TABLE 7.12: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION 156

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1.Chapter One Introduction

This introductory chapter defines body image and situates adolescent body image concerns within the broader sociocultural and developmental context. First, this chapter will explore body image as a concept and define negative body image. This chapter will then explore gender, sexuality and body image and define my approach to gender in the thesis. This is an important subsection as it will determine how the subsequent chapters are interpreted and understood in relation to the concept of gender. Next, I will introduce the two key complementary theoretical frameworks and explain how the sociocultural environment contributes to the development of body image concerns. Following on from this, I will explain how and why adolescence is a critical period for the development of body image concerns. Finally, I will provide an overview of my thesis. To summarise, this first chapter will critically consider the role of the sociocultural environment in the development of body image concerns, highlighting the important role in which peers and the media play, thus introducing the focus for the thesis before proving a critical literature review in the next chapter.

1.2. Body Image

Body image is broadly defined as a person's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about his or her body (Grogan, 2021). It encompasses a person's body-related self-perceptions and self-attitudes including a person's thoughts, feelings and behaviours that relate to their body and appearance (Pruzinsky & Cash, 2002). It is an important concept for researchers to understand as it is implicated with serious psychiatric disorders such as body dysmorphic disorder, anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa (Markey, 2010). Body image is multidimensional as it has behavioural, perceptual, and attitudinal aspects (Thompson & van den Berg, 2002). The behavioural aspects involve behaviours that individuals engage with that relate to their appearance such as eating certain foods to lose weight (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2006). The perceptual aspect involves the way in which individuals perceive their own bodies and appearance (Cash & Deagle, 1997). Finally, attitudinal aspects involve an individual evaluative response to their appearance, such as investment with own appearance (Cash, 2000). Within this, the balance of positive and negative behaviours, perceptions and attitudes form the foundations of body image (Fishebin & Ajzen, 1975). Negative body image is defined as a person's negative thoughts and feelings about their own body and general appearance (Grogan, 2021; Cash, Jakatdar & Williams., 2004). It is conceptualised as poor body esteem, body dissatisfaction or body shame. Negative feelings about appearance have become so widespread and common for young girls and women in Western societies that this dissatisfaction with appearance is considered a "normative discontent" (Rodin, Silberstein & Striegel-Moore, 1985; Littleton, 2008; Tantleff-Dunn, Barnes & Larose, 2011). This negative body image occurs when there is a discrepancy between the ideal self and the actual self which then leads an individual to adopt a negative perception of their appearance (Szymanski & Cash, 1995). Negative body image impacts on an individual's day-to-day life (Cash & Fleming, 2002), and it is also associated with a range of deleterious consequences such as lower overall wellbeing

(Meland, Haugland & Breidablik, 2007), low self-esteem (Davison & McCabe, 2006), depression (Ohring, Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 2002), and disordered eating (Westerberg-Jacobson, Edlund & Ghaderi, 2010).

1.3. Gender, Sexuality and Body Image

Before providing an explanation of the theoretical frameworks that underpin and describe how negative body image develops, it is important to first explore the role of gender and sexuality in adolescent body image and appearance concerns. Gender and sexuality have a considerable impact on experiences of body image. Individuals, depending on their gender and sexuality identity, may think, feel, and behave differently in relation to their bodies (Serdula et al., 1993; Thompson, 1996). This section will explore the role of gender and sexuality identity in the concept of body image whilst also explaining the approach, position and definition that I have taken within my thesis.

For adolescents, identity development is a primary psychosocial developmental task (Erikson, 1968). Identity refers to the way we see ourselves, and it is an individual's sense of who they are and how they fit into the world (Lloyd, 2002). Identity is interactional as a combination of peers, parents and society contribute to adolescents' identity construction and negotiation (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). Adolescents must formulate a personal and social identity, which is often based on the social groups they belong to (Waterman, 1999). Gender identity and sexual identity are considered as two of the most important identities that adolescents must negotiate. The development of sexuality is a highly reflexive process with gender identity playing a major role in the development of a sexual identity. Children develop the ability to label people according to gender and use gender labels regularly between the ages of 18 and 24 months (Martin & Ruble, 2010). According to the Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981) children learn about what it means to be a boy or girl from an early age. Gender schemas develop throughout childhood and adolescence leading to the development of self-concept,

which then guides behaviours, perceptions, and opinions. This theory describes the way in which individuals organise their self-concept based upon binary gender categories, which is often referred to as gender conforming where individuals conform to normative expressions of masculinity and femininity (i.e., man versus woman; Bem, 1981; da Silva et al., 2020). During adolescence, there is a decline in gender-related rigidity with some adolescents reflecting an awareness that gender is not binary for everyone which means that some individuals may develop a gender variant identity wherein their gender incorporates aspects of both "stereotypical" masculine and feminine characteristics (Diamond, Pardo & Butterworth, 2011).

Although it is recognised that gender is not binary, stereotypical gender roles may still influence young people to adopt a binary and stereotypical approach to gender (Rudman & Glick, 2021). Gender stereotypes can be defined as certain beliefs, attitudes and attributes that differentiate how women and men are or should be, and frequently relate to traits, physical characteristics, role behaviours and occupations (Leaper, 2015). Stereotypical gender roles are largely involved in the development of adolescent gender identity, specifically surrounding hyperfemininity and hypermasculinity, which are perpetuated in the mass media and social media (see Grau and Zotos, 2016 for a review). Hyperfemininity is defined as an overfocus on the use of physical attributes and sexuality to attract men focusing mostly on physical appearance, based on heteronormative sexuality (Murnen & Byrne, 1991). Hypermasculinity refers to the tendency to engage in macho or dominant behaviour to avoid appearing too feminine (Mosher & Sirkin, 1984). Taken together, these differing gender roles influence the way in which appearance is communicated, received, and then internalized for boys and girls, and may lead to the development and perpetuation of certain gender norms and attitudes (Ward & Grower, 2020; Jones, 2004; McCabe, Ricciardelli & Ridge, 2006). Gender norms are widely accepted social rules about roles, traits and behaviours that are associated with either masculinity or femininity which may or may not contribute to personal gender attitudes (Ryle,

2011). Gender attitudes are defined as an individual's perceptions, beliefs, or endorsement of binary gender norms (e.g., boys should not appear too feminine; Taylor, 2011). These stereotypical gender roles, norms and attitudes that are perpetuated within the mass media (Ward & Grower, 2020; Ward, Hansbrough & Walker, 2005; Ullrich, Becker & Scharf, 2022) may influence the way in which appearance is communicated, received, internalised, and experienced for young people identifying as a boy or girl (McCabe, Ricciardelli & Ridge, 2006). Some adolescents who are less subject to messaging surrounding stereotypical gender roles may have different experiences of appearance and body image concerns (e.g., Romito et al., 2021). However, within the body image literature, gender is widely approached from a binary perspective to explore differences and similarities in how boys and girls experience body image (Brennan, Lalonde & Bain, 2010; Knauss, Paxton & Alsaker, 2007). This research, which is outlined in the subsequent section has consistently shown differences in body image that are associated with the gender categories of boy/man and girl/woman, despite the issues I acknowledge to be inherent within these categories.

Within the body image literature, studies have documented differences in how boys and girls perceive their bodies and appearance, and how they perceive this on a conscious level (Thompson et al., 1999). There are three distinct ways in which people perceive their body image that illustrate considerable differences between men and women: (1) fragmented or functional; (2) third-person or first person; (3) overestimate or underestimate (Murnen & Don, 2012). Previous research has identified differences in the way in which boys and girls talk about and evaluate their own bodies (i.e., fragmented or functional; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2003). In particular, women are suggested to evaluate specific and distinct aspects of appearance (e.g., "I hate my stomach" a fragmented approach) whereas men evaluate their bodies as whole and functional (e.g., "I can lift heavy weights" a functional approach). Similarly, previous research has highlighted differences in how men and women view their bodies from either a third-person

perspective or first-person perspective (Calogero, 2012; Ward, 2016). Research indicates that women are more likely to adopt a third-person perspective on the body compared to men, linking to objectification theory (Calogero, 2012). However, although there are general differences, recent research suggests that similarities between men and women's experiences are occurring in that men are becoming more appearance focused and more likely to adopt a third-person perspective on appearance (Fox & Rooney, 2015). Finally, it is common for women to overestimate the size of their bodies whereas men are more likely to underestimate the size of their bodies with more of a focus on muscle mass (McCreary & Sasse, 2000). There are distinct gender differences in body perception which leads to different experiences and understanding of body image. These are important to explore in more detail, especially in an adolescent sample, but also to explore how the changing sociocultural environment (e.g., more pressure for men to look a certain way; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013) and how stereotypical gender roles impacts upon understandings of body image.

Second, previous research has also identified gender differences and similarities in feelings of body image, such as body dissatisfaction (i.e., an internal emotional and cognitive process which occurs when a person has persistent negative thoughts; Paxton, Eisenberg & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006), body shame (i.e., feeling humiliated or ashamed about your body shape or size; Grabe, Hyde & Lindberg, 2007; McKenney & Bigler, 2016), and appearance anxiety (i.e., fear of being negatively evaluated because of one's appearance; Zimmer-Gembeck, Webb, Farrell & Waters, 2018). Most notably, research has identified that women and girls experience more body dissatisfaction, body shame and appearance anxiety than men and boys (Slater & Tiggemann, 2010). However, these feelings have been on the rise over the past four decades, with some research identifying that men's experiences of body dissatisfaction, body shame and appearance anxiety has serious detrimental consequences on the mental wellbeing of some young boys and men (Carper, Negy, & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010;

Girad, Chabrol & Rodgers, 2018). This may be due to the increase and dominance of an appearance ideal targeted at men that is circulated within western society. Images of men within the mass media place value on muscularity and "good looks" as a way of succeeding in life and being sexually attractive (Frederick et al., 2007). In addition, appearance worries and appearance modifications such as powerlifting, sun-tanning, using beauty products and taking anabolic steroids have become part of a young man's modern life and are particularly prominent in media advertisements – this creates a muscular ideal prominent in Western culture (Edwards, Tod, Molnar, 2014). Thus, while there are increasing similarities in the dissatisfaction experienced by boys/men and girls/women, this dissatisfaction may be focused on different bodily attributes.

Gender differences and similarities are also present in body cognitions and body behaviours. Body cognitions refer to the beliefs and attitudes people have about their bodies which in turn impact on how appearance-related information is processed (Jakatdar, Cash & Engle, 2006). These differences in cognitive functions are related to body schematics and appearance-ideal internalisation. Body schemas are defined as the cognitive frameworks that organise our knowledge in relation to our physical appearance, and this then helps us process and interpret new information (Clark & Tiggemann, 2007). There are gender differences in the types of body schemas men and women adopt, which may also link to the stereotypical gender role schemas that are circulated through the media, parents and peers (Kågesten et al., 2016). Research has suggested that women have more weight-related schemas (e.g., being labelled as 'fat' multiple times means they will be more likely to automatically think of themselves as fat in response to a variety of situations) compared to men, as weight is more often a defining quality of a woman's appearance and identity (Grover et al., 2003). In comparison, men are more likely to be invested in muscularity and so develop body schemas relating to this (Hoffman & Warschburger, 2019; Gray & Ginsburg, 2007; Tod & Edwards, 2013). Body-ideal

internalisation is another body cognition wherein binary gender roles have an impact. For example, research has suggested that women focus on thinness and internalise this as a personal goal, whereas men focus on muscularity, and this is the drive for internalisation in men (Lawler & Nixon, 2011; Ricciardelli, 2012). These different cognitions play a role in the development of appearance concerns in adolescence, but also means that the processes may differ slightly for boys and girls.

Body behaviours refers to how people behave in relation to their bodies. Body behaviours include disordered eating, anabolic steroid use, cosmetic surgery and engaging in behaviours that avoid social situations (i.e., people behave in a certain way to avoid social situations due to feelings of dissatisfaction with their own body; Braun, Park & Gorin, 2016; Voelker, Reel & Greenleaf, 2015). To meet appearance ideals, men and women may engage in behaviours to try and reach these unrealistic ideals in order to feel happier and more content with their body image (Thompson et al., 1999). For women, to meet the curvaceous but thin ideal, this may lead to disordered eating in order to reduce their body weight, whilst also engaging in extreme exercise or cosmetic surgery to enlarge or reshape certain body features (Cunningham et al., 2022). Whereas, for men, to meet the thin but muscular body ideal, this may lead to disordered eating to reduce their weight whilst simultaneously engaging in strategies to gain muscles, such as anabolic steroid use or extreme exercise (Field et al., 2014). Further research is needed to explore the individual and group experiences of body image and how binary gender roles and attitudes plays a role in the development of appearance and body image concerns, which in turn may lead to the engagement with dangerous body shaping strategies (e.g., disordered eating, anabolic steroid use).

1.4.Criticisms of the Role of Gender and Sexuality in the Body Image Literature

In the context of the body image literature, the Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981) is a widely accepted and adopted theory to understand how stereotypical gender roles are

communicated and perpetuated from childhood through to adolescence (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Furthermore, gender roles as a psychological and social construct, comprise of both cognitive structures and societal expectations, norms, and attitudes. In relation to body image, individuals navigate a range of messages surrounding the ideal body that shift with age, sociocultural context and historical era. Body ideal messages are highly gendered, with women typically experiencing more body image concerns relating to a desire for thinness and, as a result, the research has predominantly focused on women's body image. Research has been studying men's body image concerns for more than a decade (e.g., Murray & Touyz, 2012) but this research is less developed than that for women. Furthermore, whilst the body image literature has moved on from only focusing on women's experiences, the research is still entangled with binary gender assumptions which should be recognised and critiqued.

Although our understanding of gender as a binary concept has moved on (Cole, 2009; Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016), the Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981) is still relevant within broader developmental psychology as well as providing a relevant theoretical framework to understand how adolescent boys and girls experience and understand body image. Furthermore, it provides a useful theoretical framework as children are mostly assigned gender roles consistent with biological sex at birth (Rudman & Glick, 2021; Shafer & Malhotra, 2011) so understanding how these gender roles influence the development of body image concerns is important. Traditional stereotypical gender roles intensify during adolescence (Halimi et al., 2021), as some (albeit not all) adolescents learn through observation that there are societal gender roles and norms, and thus internalise these and begin to adopt them with gender becoming part of their identity (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Children and adolescents develop in a society wherein they are exposed to numerous gender-stereotyped cultural body ideals for women and men in Western society (Murnen & Don, 2012). For example, children's toys transmit these salient gender stereotypical body ideals for girls and boys. Barbie dolls, targeted

at girls, have thin yet curvy bodies, long hair, full lips and wear revealing clothing (Dittmar, Halliwell & Ive, 2006; Harriger et al., 2019), whereas action figures, targeted at boys, are extremely muscular and have a stern facial expression showing they have 'no fear' (Boyd & Murnen, 2017). Although these toys may represent exaggerated gender body image ideals, these depictions are also transmitted within the mass media, social media and through parents and peers (Murnen & Don, 2012; Ward & Grower, 2020). Adolescents' experiences of interlocking gender roles with highly gendered body ideals means they are subject to unrealistic messaging that exaggerate characteristics associated with femininity and masculinity, which in turn is related to body image concerns (Murray et al., 2013). Therefore, stereotypical gendered schemas, may relate to development of body image concerns for adolescent girls and boys (Calogero & Thompson, 2010). It is also widely accepted that the theoretical frameworks for understanding body image (described below) highlight the ways in which gender may influence and impact body image concerns (e.g., objectification theory; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the problems associated with binary gender assumptions, and an intersectional framework may be particularly useful for understanding sexual and gender minority experiences of body image, whilst also highlighting how societal expectations of binary gender roles influences cis-individuals experiences of body image (Morrison et al., 2020; Richburg & Stewart, 2022). Understood within an intersectionality framework, intersecting societal-level forces shape gender minorities' experiences of body image (Quathamer & Joy, 2021). Sexism is structured within society and perpetuates body image concerns, particularly for women with those experiencing objectification of the body (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Oswald, Franzoi & Frost, 2012). Cisnormativity – which refers to the assumption that an individual's sex assigned at birth always aligns gender identity (Bauer et al., 2009) – emphasises the dominant cultural standards that frame cis bodies as ideal (i.e., body ideals relate to a biologically female or male body). This means that bodies that are not

stereotypical of one's sex assigned at birth are seen as deviant from the culturally accepted body ideal which may increase experiences of body dissatisfaction (Baril & Trevenen, 2014). Heteronormativity is the belief that heterosexuality is the default within Western society (Pyne, 2011) which promotes stereotypical gender presentations of the body. These intersections within society suggest that these macro-level societal forces interact to shape outcomes for all individuals (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991).

In any given study, we can only examine the implications of some of these intersections empirically, and must leave examination of others aside, whilst still recognising they may also be important. The body image literature has started to recognise that it is critical to include attention to these intersections, and research has started to explore experiences of body image in nonbinary individuals (Tabaac, Perrin & Benotsch, 2018), trans men and women (McGuire et al., 2016), and sexual minority cis men and women (Mason et al., 2018; Nowicki et al., 2022). However, this thesis was guided by theory and research that predominantly focuses on cis individuals' experiences of body image. Understood within the lens of developmental psychology, we focus on adolescents who are still developing and so may be heavily influenced by societal messages around heteronormative gender stereotypes (Ward & Grower, 2020). My approach to gender is explained in the following section.

1.4.1. My Approach: Defining Gender in my Thesis

Within gender role research, many researchers would use the term 'sex' to refer to biological distinctions between males and females, whereas 'gender' can be used to refer to cultural distinctions between men and women (Murnen & Don, 2012). In my thesis, I refer to the term *gender* when comparing differences between adolescents identifying as a boy or girl and so typically consider this in relation to gender roles (i.e., behaviour and traits that are "typically" associated with boys and girls). Within my thesis, it is recognized that gender is not simply a "binary" process, despite previous body image research considering male and

female experiences of body image in a very binary way (i.e., sex differences; Hyde et al., 2019). In particular, we use the term *gender* to refer to sociocultural systems that include heteronormative stereotypical norms and expectations for girls and boys (Cole, 2009; Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016), including attitudes relating to femininity and masculinity. It is important to note that the aim of my thesis was not to exclude non-binary adolescents from the research, but rather it was not necessarily pertinent to the research focus to explicitly seek out their views over those identifying as girl or boy.

Whilst this binary approach is how it has been constructed within body image theory and consistent with the literature, I do recognise that there are broader conversations about gender that should be considered when interpreting the findings of my thesis. However, the approach in my thesis is to explore the role of stereotypical gender identities and norms adolescents' body image and highlight that exploring experiences of gender diverse individuals is an avenue for future research (see Chapter 8). It is well-documented within the body image literature that girls are more likely to experience body image concerns (e.g., objectification theory; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Furthermore, although less studied, boys also experience body image concerns, but due to issues surrounding toxic masculinity and salient messaging regarding stereotypical gendered norms surrounding what it means to be a 'boy', research is limited in understanding how boys experience body image (Whitaker et al., 2019; Taylor, 2011). Adolescent boys' and girls' experiences of body image are related to highly gendered body ideals and stereotypes that influence the way in which adolescents behave, think and feel towards their appearance (Tatangelo & Ricciardelli, 2013). Therefore, further discussions surrounding gender difference or similarities are discussed in relation to individuals identifying as boys and girls, focusing on stereotypical gender norms.

1.5. Theoretical Frameworks

Researchers have suggested that the mass media, including social media and peers, promote a highly-appearance focused culture wherein messages surrounding appearance are transmitted (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004; Jones, 2004). These sociocultural influences play a role in the development of body image concerns during adolescence (Thompson et al., 1999). To explore this in more detail, this section will look at two complementary sociocultural theories that describe how the sociocultural environment contributes to negative body image. These theories are: The Sociocultural Theory of Body Image (Thompson et al., 1999), and Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Taken together, these complementary theories provide a comprehensive account of how appearance concerns emerge in adolescence (Dakanalis et al., 2015).

1.5.1. The Sociocultural Theory of Body Image

The sociocultural theory of body image, also known as the tripartite influence model, (Thompson et al., 1999) accounts for the role of the sociocultural environment in the development of adolescent appearance concerns (see Figure 1.1). This theory hypothesises that three sociocultural agents (parents, media, and peers) influence body image via two key mechanisms: body-ideal internalisation and social appearance comparisons. According to this theoretical framework, appearance concerns emerge due to the perceived pressure from sociocultural agents (e.g., parents, media, and peers) to conform to an unattainable and unrealistic appearance ideal (Thompson et al., 1999). The Westernised appearance ideal is defined as thin and curvy for women, and lean and muscular for men (Dittmar et al., 2000; Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005). Both appearance ideals are also coupled with other markers of physical attractiveness such as clear skin, straight white teeth, and big lips (Schaefer et al., 2017). The perceived pressure from these sociocultural agents creates a discrepancy between how a person feels they should look (i.e., like the ideal) and how they perceive they currently

look, and it is this discrepancy that gives rise to body dissatisfaction. Mass media, peers and parents can have a direct and indirect effect on body dissatisfaction. These sources transmit salient messages and over time these appearance ideals become internalised by adolescents as personal goals (Hermes & Keel, 2003), and serve as social comparison targets (Shroff & Thompson, 2006), leading to body dissatisfaction, as adolescents perceive themselves as failing to live up to the unrealistic body ideal (Rodgers et al., 2015). In turn, body dissatisfaction predicts body-changing behaviours such as dieting and exercising which then predicts disordered eating (Thomspon & Stice, 2001). Many cross-sectional, experimental, and longitudinal studies have supported the sociocultural theory as a theoretical framework to explain body image concerns (Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Rodgers, Chabrol, & Paxton, 2011; Rodgers, McLean, & Paxton, 2015; Shagar et al., 2019; Stice & Whitenton, 2002).

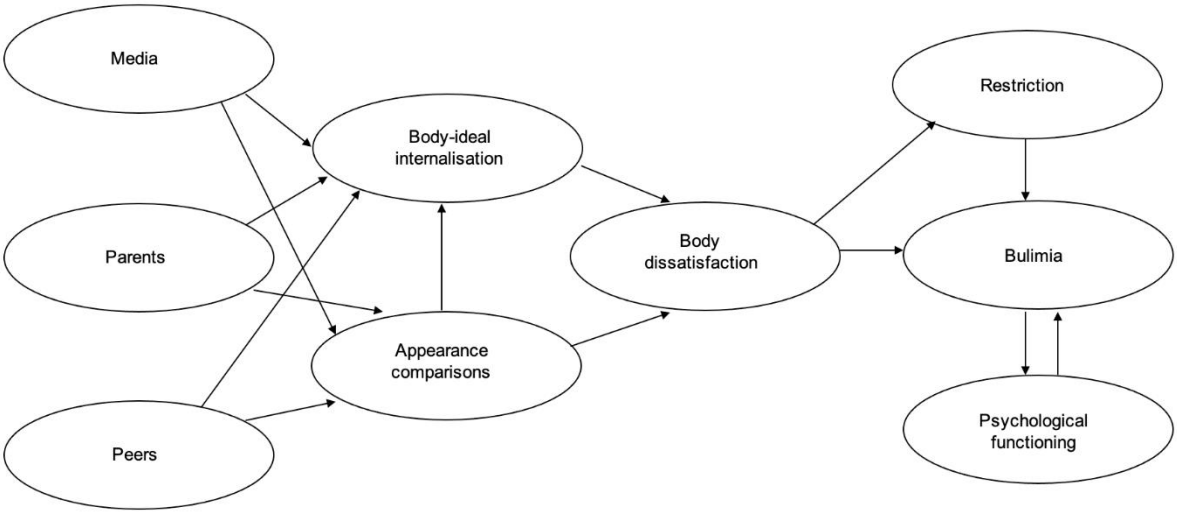

Figure 1.1: Sociocultural Theory of Body Image (Thompson et al., 1999)

Body-ideal internalisation. Body-ideal internalisation, also referred to as 'thin-ideal internalisation', is where an individual adopts the appearance ideal as a personal standard, which they then internalise, and this becomes a personal goal (Thompson & Stice, 2001). This adoption of the appearance ideal as a personal goal is socially reinforced through the mass

media and significant others (Kandel, 1980). For example, peers reinforce the appearance ideal through interactions about appearance that serve to support and perpetuate this ideal (e.g., compliments, body talk, teasing; Jones et al., 2004). Those individuals who internalise the ideal as a personal goal tend to place greater value on their own appearance (Vartanian & Dey, 2013). This internalisation leads individuals to engage with body-shaping strategies (e.g., dieting or exercising) in order to achieve the ideal and bridge the discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal self (Vartanian, 2012). In turn, individuals experience body dissatisfaction from failing to achieve the appearance ideal. This is because the appearance ideal is often highly unrealistic and unachievable (Thomspon & Stice, 2001; Vartanian, 2012).

Survey and experimental research have demonstrated well-established associations between body-ideal internalisation and greater body dissatisfaction in young women and adolescent girls (Dittmar & Howard, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2012; Shahyad et al., 2018). This is further supported by longitudinal research that found body-ideal internalisation to be a predictor of greater body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls after a one-year period (Rodgers, McLean & Paxton, 2015; Stice & Whitenton, 2002). In parallel to the body-ideal internalisation, which commonly focuses on an ideal that encompasses thin, curvy, and low body fat (Flament et al., 2012), muscular-ideal internalisation has been perceived as more relevant to men than women (Ricciardelli, 2012). For instance, research has found that internalisation of the muscular ideal mediates the relationship between sociocultural pressures (i.e., media, peers, and parents) and body dissatisfaction in boys (Karazsia & Crowther, 2009; Hoffman & Warschburger, 2019). For boys, research suggests that those who endorse masculine gender roles are more prone to muscular-ideal internalisation and greater body dissatisfaction (Humphreys & Paxton, 2004; Smolak & Stein, 2006). Although research is limited in understanding boys experience of body-ideal internalisation, current research

suggests that both girls and boys experience body-ideal internalisation as a mediator between sociocultural agents and body dissatisfaction (Thompson et al., 1999).

Social Comparison Theory. Social Comparison Theory (SCT) was introduced by Festigner (1954) who suggested that humans have a drive to process social information by comparing themselves to others to establish similarities or differences to know where they stand within a societal hierarchy. According to the sociocultural theory of body image, body dissatisfaction emerges through the process of comparing one's own appearance to the appearance of others (van den Berg et al., 2002; Thompson et al., 1999). Schemas surrounding appearance ideals are sourced through sociocultural agents, such as the mass media, and these ideals are then internalised, acting as salient targets for appearance comparisons (Keery, Van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004). Festinger (1954) proposes that there are two types of social comparisons: (1) upward comparisons, and (2) downward comparisons. Upward appearance comparisons occur when individuals compare themselves to a perceived superior target (e.g., a body-ideal model). Downward appearance comparisons occur when individuals compare themselves to an inferior target (e.g., someone considered as deviating from the appearance ideal). Upward comparisons are more common in the context of appearance comparisons, and these comparison tendencies are associated with greater body dissatisfaction because this heightened self-evaluation highlights any discrepancies between the actual self and the ideal self (Leahey, Crowther & Mickleson, 2007; Strahan et al., 2006).

Research has shown that women evaluate their own appearance by comparing themselves to a superior target (Leahey, Crowther & Mickleson, 2007). Studies using ecological momentary assessment (EMA) methodology have revealed that appearance comparisons to both media models and peers are associated with body dissatisfaction and engagement in dieting behaviours (Leahey et al., 2007; Leahey & Crowther, 2008; Ridolfi et al., 2011), providing support for the sociocultural model of body image (Thompson et al.,

1999). However, research exploring the role of appearance comparisons in mediating the association between sociocultural agents and body dissatisfaction in boys and men is mixed. Some research has found that appearance comparisons mediate the relationship between media pressures and muscle-building techniques in boys (Smolak, Murnen, & Thompson, 2005). Whereas other studies have found that appearance comparisons do not explain the relationship between sociocultural pressures and body dissatisfaction, and that internalisation of the muscular ideal and pressure from dating partners have more of a direct and indirect mediation (Karazsia & Crowther, 2010; Tylka, 2011) on boys' body dissatisfaction. As a result of this research, an adapted version of the sociocultural theory was created by Tylka (2011). This adapted model omitted appearance comparisons and instead included pressure from dating partners as a mediation effect. That said, this still suggests that further research is needed to explore the ways in which adolescent boys experience body dissatisfaction as it is still largely understudied compared to girls/women.

Role of Sociocultural Agents. Most notably, the sociocultural theory of body image, highlights the way in which media and peers transmit salient appearance messages contributing to the development of body dissatisfaction. Research has found that exposure to media images of thin women and muscular men is associated with increased body dissatisfaction through the internalization of these cultural ideals (Bell & Dittmar, 2011; Knauss, Paxton & Alsaker, 2007; Lawler & Nixon, 2011). Content analyses of media content shows high frequency of thin and muscular models (Brown & Knight, 2015; Jankowski et al., 2014; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018) and experimental, survey and longitudinal studies have revealed how media consumption leads to body-ideal internalisation and appearance comparisons which in turn contributes to body dissatisfaction in both boys and girls (Rodgers et al., 2015; Rodgers et al., 2020; Vuong et al., 2021). In parallel, peer influence is also associated with body dissatisfaction (Jones, 2004). The peer appearance culture is dominant within adolescence (Rodgers et al.,

2011; Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014) and provides an everyday context wherein appearance norms and ideals are communicated, shared, modelled, and reinforced leading to body dissatisfaction (Jones, 2004; Jones & Crawford, 2006). The influence of peers on body image is an important social factor to explore as adolescence marks an increasing amount of time spent with friends and is characterized by increased concern about peer acceptance and rejection, and greater intimacy with friends (Veronneau & Dishion, 2010). It is important to consider the combined influence of peers and media on young people as the role of peers is a lot less understood compared to the media despite both agents working together. The role of peers in the transmission of sociocultural appearance ideals, as well as the intersection between peer and media influence will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

1.5.2. Objectification Theory

Objectification theory offers an alternative, yet complementary explanation of how the sociocultural environment contributes to the development of body image concerns. Within Westernised societies, feminists have argued that women are defined, evaluated, and treated as objects (Bartky, 1990). When women are treated as objects, their body parts are separated out, as if they can represent her as a person, and women become valued for their appearance or sexual function rather than their personhood (Bartky, 1990). This objectification can lead to potential negative consequences, in that they begin to view themselves as an object, internalising an outsider perspective. This is known as self-objectification. Although developed as a framework to explain objectification of women, men are routinely being objectified within society and are also experiencing self-objectification (Davids, Watson & Gere, 2019). Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) provides a theoretical framework for understanding the consequences of living in a culture that routinely objectifies individuals based upon their appearance. According to objectification theory there are two ways in which

objectification occurs: media representations and interpersonal encounters. Each of these objectification mechanisms will be outlined.

Media Objectification. Exposure to sexualised media is virtually impossible to ignore (American Psychological Association, 2007). Images of sexualised women are depicted on television programmes, adverts, magazines, music videos and social media normalising the idea that the purpose of a woman's body is to be looked at, evaluated, commented on, and sexually harassed (Galdi, Maass & Cadinu, 2013). Within the media, women are portrayed as sexual objects in three distinct ways: (1) images that focus only on the body with their faces omitted from the images, (2) images where women are in subordinate roles and value is placed on body parts or sexual function, and (3) images with women posing in revealing clothing exposing large amounts of flesh and body parts (Ward, 2016). In support of this, content analyses have found that women are depicted in sexualised manners in magazines (Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008), music videos (Vanderbosch, Vervloessem & Eggermont, 2013), video games (Burgess, Stermer & Burgess, 2007), and in social media images (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2017; Bell, Cassarly & Dunbar, 2018). This depiction creates a view that women should be valued based upon their body parts or sexual function, which can lead to negative self-perceptions on appearance (Harper & Tiggemann, 2008). Sexualised media consumption has been linked with increased self-objectification wherein individuals internally evaluate the way they look and compare it to the way other bodies and appearances are portrayed within the media (Karsay, Knoll & Matthes, 2018).

Though objectification theory was developed to explain women's experiences of a highly sexualised environment, recent developments suggest that men and young boys also experience objectification (Fox & Rooney, 2015; Moradi & Huang, 2008). Although women are still objectified within the media a lot more than men, there is evidence from content analysis to show that men are also presented in a sexualised manner within popular media

(Hatton & Trautner, 2011). It is important to consider objectification theory as a framework that may be extended to boys and men because of the overemphasis and the importance placed on appearance for boys that has appeared within society in recent years (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013). Recent content analysis research has identified that men are also sexualised in media images on gay and straight men's dating and porn websites (Jankowski et al., 2014) suggesting there may be increased objectification of men within mass media content. Engaging with and exposure to this type of media leads to self-objectification for men (Heath et al., 2016). That is men, as well as women, learn to value themselves based upon their own appearance due to the sexualised nature and overemphasis on appearance that is transmitted through the mass media (Ward, 2016).

Interpersonal Encounters. Objectification theory also highlights how objectification manifests in everyday interpersonal encounters in which girls and women are valued more for their appearance/sexual function than their personhood. Many girls and women face the subtle day-to-day experience of sexualised gazing as they enter a variety of social contexts. Examples of interpersonal sexually objectifying situations that women encounter are gazing or leering from men, sexual comments, wolf-whistling, honking the car horn, and sexual assault (Calogero, 2012; Nussbaum, 1995). Objectifying interpersonal encounters can occur among familiar others or strangers and they often begin at a very young age (Calogero, 2012). It has been reported that approximately 30% of college women have experienced "stranger harassment" (i.e., this is instances of catcalls, wolf-whistles, leering from strangers in the street), and these experiences are associated with increased self-objectification (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). However, it is not only unwanted interpersonal encounters that can be objectifying, everyday appearance interactions and conversations may allude to objectification. For example, a survey study conducted by Calogero, Herbozo and Thompson (2009) found that appearance compliments, although positively intended, are associated with increased self-

objectification among young women. Furthermore, experimental research revealed that women with high self-objectification who received an appearance compliment reported more state level body shame (Tiggemann & Boundy, 2006). Although research has predominantly focused on consumption of objectifying media, some research has highlighted that through these encounters, women start to learn that their physical appearance and sexual function is their most important asset, and so these situations (i.e., receiving a compliment) place immediate attention on a woman's body (Calogero, 2004), leading women to internalise an outsider perspective on appearance (Peterson & Hyde, 2013; Szymanski & Henning, 2007). Further research is needed to explore how and why interpersonal encounters, even those seemingly positive, are associated with self-objectification.

Although women and girls experience more objectifying interpersonal encounters than men, they are still prominent among men and boys (Harris, 2016). Research has identified that men are sometimes subject to unwanted objectifying interpersonal encounters such as unwanted touching and sexual harassment (Bernard et al., 2018; Holland et al., 2016). Statistics have revealed that 41% of men, particularly marginalised men (i.e., sexual minority men), experience objectifying interpersonal encounters (Stop Street Harassment, 2019; Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005). Research has revealed that young men experience objectified interpersonal encounters in the form of sexual harassment when they deviate from traditional masculinity gender roles (Holland et al., 2016). Experiences of sexually objectifying interpersonal encounters are associated with increased self-objectification among men (Teran et al., 2021). Although the research is very limited in understanding men's experiences of objectifying interpersonal encounters, it does suggest that men are subject to some sexualised interpersonal encounters thus requiring further investigation to fully understand these processes.

Consequences of Self-Objectification. The normalisation of sexual objectification in Westernised cultures is problematic. Recurrent daily experiences of sexual objectification

(media representations and interpersonal encounters) can lead girls and boys to internalise this objectifying gaze and to turn it on themselves, which is associated with numerous negative consequences (Calogero, 2012). Furthermore, this leads girls and boys to view themselves from the perspective of an external observer and engage in chronic self-evaluation (Calogero, Tantleff-Dunn & Thompson, 2011). According to objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) frequent experiences of sexual objectification serve to shape self-body relations, such that individuals come to view and treat themselves as an object to be looked at an evaluated upon – this is self-objectification. This perspective on the self can lead to increased self-consciousness through habitual monitoring of the body's outward appearance (Calogero & Thompson, 2009).

Self-objectification can lead to psychological consequences such as body shame, appearance anxiety, and reduced concentration (e.g., Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn & Twenge, 1998; Tiggemann & Williams, 2012). Moreover, increased self-objectification leads to a reduced awareness of internal bodily states and flow experiences (i.e., the ability to fully immerse oneself in an activity; Calogero, 2009) for women (Moradi & Huang, 2008). Research empirically supports objectification theory in that self-objectification, which manifests itself as self-surveillance, leads to increased body shame and disordered eating in both men and women (Calogero, 2009; Daniel & Bridges, 2010). However, research by Davids, Watson, and Gere (2019) found that experiences of sexual objectification in heterosexual men did not predict increased self-objectification or body surveillance contrary to objectification theory. Instead, this study found that gender role conflict (i.e., a psychological state in which the socialised gender roles have negative consequences for a person) was associated with self-objectification. This may suggest that rather than men focusing on attractiveness, it is the emphasis on certain masculine societal gender roles that impact on self-objectification – and it is this that relates to increased body image disturbances among men (Holland et al., 2016). This

requires further investigation as it may be that objectification manifests differently for men compared to women. The accumulation of negative psychological consequences (i.e., appearance anxiety, body shame, thin-ideal internalisation) associated with high self-objectification has been linked to a subset of several mental health issues, including depression and disordered eating among both men and women (Peat & Muehlenkamp, 2011; Parent & Bradstreet, 2017).

1.6. Adolescents and Body Image

Experiences of negative body image has been linked with men and women of all ages (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004; Quittkat et al., 2019; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001), but the period of adolescence is a critical time for the development of negative body image. Adolescence is defined as the transition from childhood to adulthood and is characterised by biological, cognitive and social changes that occur during this transitional period (Steinberg, 2014). The period of adolescence is characterised as someone aged between 13-19 years (Steinberg, 2014), with some neuroscientific research considering the period of adolescence to extend to the mid-20s due to ongoing cognitive and biological changes (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). Recent surveys have revealed that in the UK 52% of 11–16-year-olds are concerned about their appearance (Be Real, 2017). Large-scale longitudinal studies have revealed that many adolescents experience an increase in negative body image during the early adolescent years (Bucchianeri et al., 2014; Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer & Paxton, 2006; Frisen, Lunde & Berg, 2015), and this dissatisfaction is then maintained throughout adolescence and into adulthood (Rogers, Webb & Jafari, 2018). Therefore, the adolescent years provide a particularly salient period in which body image concepts, schemas and concerns develop which in turn may lead to the development of serious mental and physical health implications (Markey, 2010).

Puberty, one of the fundamental biological changes during adolescence, is a gradual and sequential process differing from individual-to-individual spanning across the adolescent

years (Dorn & Biro, 2011). Puberty triggers dramatic changes in adolescents' physical appearance; boys will typically grow taller with more muscle mass and less body fat, deeper voice and changes in male genitalia; girls will typically gain weight, develop wider hips, growth of breasts and changes in female genitalia (Rogol et al., 2002). Girls typically move further away from the cultural appearance ideal (i.e., thin and curvy; Dittmar et al, 2000), and research has found puberty to be a predominant risk factor for an adolescent girl's body dissatisfaction (O'Dea & Abraham, 1999). Pre-pubertal boys report greater body and appearance dissatisfaction than post-pubertal boys (O'Dea & Abraham, 1999; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2003). This may be because boys move closer to the cultural ideal (i.e., tall, lean and muscular) during their pubertal changes, so boys who have gone through puberty may feel more satisfied with their appearance as their body adheres more to the appearance ideal (Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005). Furthermore, pubertal development serves to exacerbate sex differences, making them more visually obvious which in turn heightens adolescents' awareness of their bodies, leading to increased interest in romantic relationships (Connolly et al., 2004) and creating a desire to be seen as attractive by others (Truby & Paxton, 2002).

In addition, puberty triggers wider biological changes in brain development and is the onset for many changes in cognitive thinking patterns and social thinking patterns that occur during adolescence (Bell, 2016; Blakemore & Mills, 2014), some of which are associated with body image. Cognitively, adolescence is a period in which information processing skills steadily develop to allow for more complex and logical thinking (Luciana et al., 2005). Understanding adolescents' cognitive abilities is important in the context of body image. Specifically, the development of metacognitive abilities (i.e., the awareness of one's own thought process and the ability to "think about thinking") leads to increased self-oriented thinking and imaginary audience ideation (Elkind, 1978; Vartanian, 2000). This development in metacognitive abilities can manifest itself as increased self-consciousness (Vartanian, 2000),

and has been linked with increased body dissatisfaction (e.g., thinking that everyone else must be thinking about them too, especially in relation to appearance; Zheng, Ni & Luo, 2019). Adolescent bodies are changing and growing at a time when they want to all look the same and conform to an ideal – metacognition may mean they become pre-occupied with their bodies and appearance, and how other people are viewing or thinking about their bodies. This process heightens individual body dissatisfaction which in turn may increase self-consciousness (Vartanian, 2009).

Biological and cognitive developmental changes are key risk factors in the development of body and appearance concerns during adolescence. However, the impact of these changes will vary in severity and are relative to the many sociocultural influences experienced during adolescence. During this developmental period, adolescents have an increased sensitivity to the sociocultural environment, and become more aware of social cues (Blakemore & Mills, 2014; Crone & Dahl 2012, Peper & Dahl 2013). Adolescents begin to spend a lot more time with their peers both in person, as well as virtually on social media (boyd, 2014), and peers become important to adolescents. Friendships become more complex, involving greater intimacy, trust, and reciprocity (Laursen & Hartup, 2002). They spend more time thinking about their peer relationships, and place great value on acceptance and rejection from the peer group. Some survey research has found that peer evaluations impact on adolescents' personal worth and peer rejection signals their unworthiness as an individual (Gruenenfelder-Steiger, Harris & Fend, 2016). An experimental study, wherein adolescents were excluded by other players in an online game called Cyberball, supported survey-based research by showing how young adolescents reported lower overall mood and higher anxiety compared to adults when they were excluded from the game (Sebastian et al., 2010). This shows how there is a need for peer group acceptance whilst simultaneously avoiding peer rejection, which as a result drives certain adolescent behaviour (e.g., engagement in risky behaviours). Peer acceptance is highly desired

by adolescents, and peer approval is often associated with physical attractiveness (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007; Somerville, 2013) which then becomes critical for an adolescent's self-worth (Steinberg, 2011). Peer relationships have been implicated in the development of appearance norms and ideals (Jones, 2004). The previous section highlighted the important role that peers play in the development of appearance concerns (Zimmer-Gembeck & Webb, 2017). Peers have a positive (e.g., sources of intimacy and friendship; Melton, Brehm & Deutsch, 2021) and negative influence (e.g., peer pressure, engagement in risky behaviours; Cattelino et al., 2014) during adolescence, but research suggests this extends to appearance-related beliefs and concerns (Lunde & Frisen, 2011; Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). This highlights the important role peers play in an adolescent's beliefs, perceptions, and behaviours, especially in relation to appearance.

1.7. Chapter Conclusion and Thesis Outline

The central aim of this thesis is to explore adolescents gendered understandings, perceptions, and experiences of appearance-related interactions on social media, and the role that these interactions play in adolescents' body image, peer relationships and self-development. This first chapter has provided important contextual information for my thesis including how I have conceptualised gender throughout, and the relevant theories contextualising the development of body image concerns in adolescence. This review of key theoretical frameworks and relevant literature has demonstrated the importance of body image as a concept within adolescence. This chapter presented two key complementary theoretical frameworks that guide understanding of how body image concerns develop during adolescence: sociocultural theory and objectification theory. These complementary theories are central to this thesis. Through reviewing the theoretical frameworks and relevant literature, peers and media (in particular social media) are two sociocultural agents that play an important role in the development of body concerns. This chapter also highlighted how due to

developmental changes, adolescents have a heightened sensitivity to the information in their social environment and that peers become an important role in influencing their experiences of body image.

The body of the thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter Two provides an in-depth literature review which will provide justification for the overarching aim and research questions of this thesis and situate these within the current body of research. Chapter Three explores my methodological positioning by highlighting how my epistemological and ontological viewpoints have informed the study design and data collection methods. Chapter Three also provides the individual methodology for the empirical chapters and also details the chosen data analysis methods. Chapters Four to Seven present the findings from the empirical research. Chapter Four presents the findings from study one; a qualitative focus group study with 64 adolescents which explored their perceptions and understandings about a range of online appearance interactions. Findings from Chapter Four informed the design for the next study.

Next, Chapter Five, Chapter Six and Chapter Seven present the empirical findings from study two. Study two was a large empirical study that collected qualitative interview data from adolescent girls and boys, as well as social media data. Due to the volume of data and the nature of the research questions, these findings are spread across three chapters. Chapter Five examines 19 adolescent girls' Instagram data through an inductive-deductive content analysis to explore the specific manifestations of appearance commentary and responses, and how adolescent girls interpret this interaction. Chapter Six explores 21 adolescent girls' qualitative interview data to understand how they experience online appearance commentary and how this contributes to their body image. Chapter Seven presents the findings from the qualitative interviews with 9 adolescent boys to explore their understanding and experiences of appearance commentary on Instagram and how this may contribute to their body image. Finally, Chapter Eight presents a general discussion that synthesises the findings across the empirical

programme and situates them within existing literature. This chapter then concludes with a discussion of the research implications for interventions, limitations of the methodology and the directions for future research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1. Chapter Two Introduction

Chapter one has identified the key theoretical frameworks to contextualise this research within the body image field, as well as demonstrating the importance of body image as a concept within adolescence. Furthermore, Chapter One defined the way in which gender has been conceptualise in my thesis. Therefore, this chapter delves deeper into two of the sociocultural agents identified in Chapter 1 as contributing to adolescents' body image concerns: peers and social media. This chapter explores the literature in more detail relating to the role of peers and how peers' impact on body image is mediated by social media. First, this chapter will explain the peer appearance culture and within this section explore the different types of appearance-related interactions that occur within peer groups, and the evidence linking these to body image concerns. Next, this chapter will discuss the role of social media in peer interactions, including a key framework that is crucial in explaining the way in which social media may transform adolescents' interactions. Last, as the previous chapter identified the important role of gender in body image, this chapter will also explore the role of gender in appearance interactions and social media, by exploring the relevant literature. This chapter will end by providing the rationale, overarching thesis aim and the three research questions that my thesis aims to address.

2.2. Peer Appearance Culture

Peer appearance culture is created within peer groups wherein peers explicitly or implicitly, overtly or inadvertently, transmit salient messages surrounding the importance of meeting the culturally accepted appearance ideal (Jones, 2004). This peer appearance culture encompasses a range of interpersonal interactions surrounding appearance including positive interactions (i.e., complimenting, sexual advances; Calogero, Herbozo & Thompson, 2009), negative interactions (i.e., teasing, banter, and bullying; Lunde & Frisen, 2011; Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014), and general conversations about diet and exercise (i.e., body talk; Clark & Tiggemann, 2006). These interactions may also be positively or negatively intended or received. For example, a comment that appears negative on the surface may be intended and received as a humorous interaction (Ging &O'Higgins Norman, 2016). Appearance interactions serve an important supportive function wherein adolescents provide reassurance to one another based on appearance, strengthening friendships and developing group affirmation (Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014).

Previous research has consistently linked self-reported engagement in appearance interactions with both self-objectification and body ideal internalisation as well as body dissatisfaction (Calogero et al., 2009; Bailey & Ricciardelli, 2010). This has led authors to describe these appearance interactions as a form of "appearance training" with peers (Jones, 2004; Lawler & Nixon, 2011) in that these interactions direct attention to appearance concerns, reinforce the value of appearance, and promote the construction of appearance ideals. Peer appearance interactions cumulatively create a micro-level "peer appearance culture" (Jones, 2004) wherein macro-level appearance norms and ideals are communicated, negotiated, shared, modelled and reinforced (Jones & Crawford, 2005). Understood through the lens of sociocultural theory and objectification theory, peers may transmit messages surrounding appearance ideals whilst inadvertently placing great importance on meeting these appearance

ideals over other aspects of personhood. Therefore, peers are influencing the way in which an adolescents think, feels about, or perceives their own body image, suggesting that these interactions may be highly influential in the development of body image and appearance concerns.

2.3. Appearance Related Interactions

Many of adolescents' interactions with peers are appearance focused (Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). Peer appearance-related interactions take many forms and have been conceptualised by researchers in multiple different ways. Previous research exploring appearance interaction has been very mixed. There appears to be a lot of overlap between interactions and there is a lack of research exploring how specific interactions are understood among adolescents. That said, five appearance interactions have been identified within past research: positive appearance commentary, body talk, sexual advances, teasing or banter, and bullying. Each of these interactions, and the evidence linking them to body image concerns, will be outlined below.

Positive Appearance Commentary. Positive appearance comments (i.e., complimenting) refers to positive comments about weight, appearance, or body shape, which are intended to have a positive impact on the recipient (Herbozo, Stevens, Moldovan & Morrell, 2017). Research indicates that positive appearance commentary is experienced more frequently than negative appearance commentary (Bailey & Ricciardelli, 2010; Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2009), however limited research has considered the specific impact of receiving positive appearance comments, especially among adolescents. Furthermore, previous research has explored positive appearance commentary quite broadly and has not attempted to explore the specific types of positive appearance comments received. For example, compliments may be quite generalised, specific to certain body parts or be more sexualised.

Most of the current research examining the links between positive appearance commentary and body image has yielded mixed results and focused predominantly on women's experiences. Cline and Gammage (2017) found receiving positive appearance comments was associated with increased physical activity, and Bailey and Ricciardelli (2010) found receiving positive compliments were associated with lower body dissatisfaction. However, research has also found many negative consequences associated with receiving a positive appearance comment such as body dissatisfaction (Slater & Tiggemann, 2015; Tiggemann & Boundy, 2008). A survey study by Calogero et al., (2009) found that receiving positive appearance comments was associated with more self-objectification which in turn predicted body dissatisfaction in women. That said, this research uses self-report measures and is correlational meaning causal relationships cannot be determined. Experimental research examining appearance compliments is limited and little qualitative research explores how young women and adolescents understand experiences of appearance compliments in relation to body image. Although compliments are intended positively, they may still remind people that appearance is important and that their appearance is there to be evaluated and judged by others. Therefore, positive appearance commentary may act as a reminder of the discrepancies between their own body and the culturally accepted body ideal, which in turn leads to body dissatisfaction (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Thompson et al., 1999). Further research is needed to explore how young people understand and experience positive appearance comments in relation to their body image.

Body Talk. Body talk (also known as fat talk within some of the earlier literature) refers to self-disparaging conversations about the body and appearance that occur among the peer group (Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994). Self-disparaging statements about the body are made in everyday conversation (e.g., "I'm so fat", and in response "no you're not, if you're fat I'm humongous"; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011). These self-deprecating comments about

appearance are considered the norm within Western society (Britton et al., 2006). In more recent literature, the definition of body talk has been adapted and is now defined as interactions that include positive comments about the self (e.g., *"I feel amazing in this*") and others (e.g., *"WOW you look incredible"*) as well as negative comments about the self (e.g., *"I feel so fat in this"*) and others (e.g., *"she looks awful in this"*; Bell et al., 2021; Lin, Flynn & O'Dell, 2021). Within this definition, statements that are considered as body talk are not necessarily negative, they may be positive (i.e., positive comment about the self or others), however they still reinforce a body ideal and are still associated with negative consequences (Nichter, 2000; Tompkins et al., 2009).

Research shows body talk serves several functions such as providing social validation, enabling social control, absolving oneself of guilt, marking group affiliation, and masking other underlying issues (Mills & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2017). Engagement in body talk has been associated with numerous negative consequences among girls and women (Arroyo, 2014; Arroyo & Harwood, 2012; Engeln & Salk, 2016; Jones, Crowther & Ciesla, 2014; Strandbu & Kvalem, 2014). Survey research has revealed that body dissatisfaction mediated the relationship between body talk, body surveillance and appearance comparisons, and body talk had more of an impact on body esteem than the other predictor variables (Arroyo, 2014; Mills & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2017). However, this research is self-report and correlational therefore it is unclear as to whether body talk directly causes body dissatisfaction or whether increased body dissatisfaction leads to more body talk. That said, self-reported measures across a three-week period revealed that body talk frequency predicted lower body satisfaction and higher depression in young women (Arroyo & Harwood, 2014). Furthermore, an ecological momentary assessment study revealed that frequent body talk was associated with more regular body checking and disordered eating (Jones, Crowther & Ciesla, 2014). This research suggests that body talk may reinforce the broader sociocultural pressures to attain to an appearance ideal

and encourages everyone involved in the interaction to focus attention on physical appearance which leads to habitual monitoring of one's own appearance from an outsider perspective. Although this research focuses on girls' body talk boys engage in body talk as well (Strandbu & Kvalem, 2014). Research of young men found that boys engage in muscle-related body talk rather than weight-related body talk, and this is associated with drive for muscularity, disordered eating, and appearance investment (Ahlich, Choquette & Rancourt, 2019; Engeln, Sladek & Waldron, 2013; Velkoff, Gibler, Forrest & Smith, 2019). Further research is needed to explore the differences between how boys and girls experience body talk, and the associations between body talk engagement and body image concerns.

Sexualised Commentary and Sexual Advances. Sexualised comments or advances are defined as comments about appearance that are made in a sexualised nature. Gendered harassment involves receiving unwanted and unwelcome sexualised appearance comments, usually from someone of a different gender (Fineran, 2002). Gendered harassment is the most studied type of harassment (Peterson & Hyde, 2009) but is different to sexual advances and remarks as these can sometimes be welcomed by recipients (Ringrose, 2011). Developmentally, adolescents become increasingly interested in sexuality and begin to have romantic interests (Smith, Urdy & Morris, 1985). Developmental changes during adolescence result in an intensification of sexualisation of the body that becomes obvious to outside observers. Adolescents have little experience expressing sexual attraction and this may often lead them to make sexualised appearance comments (Peterson & Hyde, 2009), but this interaction is understudied, and so further research is needed to fully understand adolescents intention and experience of sexualised commentary.

Experiences of sexualised commentary is associated with self-objectification and disordered eating in adolescents (Lindberg, Grabe & Hyde, 2007; Peterson & Hyde, 2013). As described in Chapter 1 interpersonal sexualised encounters such as harassment or sexualised

appearance comments may have negative consequences for body image (Calogero et al., 2009; Peterson & Hydem 2009). In line with the objectification theory, recurrent experiences of sexual harassment and sexual advances may lead adolescents to internalise an external viewers perspective which in turn explains the increase in self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Lindberg, Grabe & Hyde, 2007). Very little research has explored adolescents' understanding of sexualised appearance comments and associated consequences. Future research should aim to explore the impact of positively intended and welcomed sexual advances among adolescents.

Teasing and Banter. Appearance-related teasing refers to receiving negative feedback about one's appearance that is less directly pejorative and supposedly better natured (Keltner et al., 2001; Mills & Babrow, 2003). Adolescents and young people have become familiar with the term "banter" as a way of framing situations that could be offensive as more playful and friendly interactions (Dynel, 2008; Kowalski, 2000). *Banter* is defined as a humorous interaction that on the surface may seem negative, but it is intended in a positive light-hearted manner, and is between those of equal power, i.e., friends (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008). These interactions rely heavily on non-verbal social cues such as tone, voice, gesture, and facial expression to interpret the interaction as friendly (Dehue et al., 2008). Among adolescents, engagement in teasing and/or banter is a common occurrence within peer interactions (Taylor, 2011), especially among boy peer groups. Past research has identified how banter in boys' peer groups is used to explore social boundaries and is strongly involved in boys' bonding rituals, a means of negotiating status within the peer group, and peer acceptance or rejection (Whittle et al., 2019).

Previous research has revealed that experiences of teasing and banter are often appearance-focused among adolescents, with research predominantly focusing on teasing experiences (Jones & Crawford, 2004). Research suggests that appearance-related teasing is a

salient and distressing experience as it is a way of clearly stating that someone's appearance deviates from the accepted cultural standards of appearance and beauty (Webb, Zimmer-Gembeck & Donovan, 2014). It has been considered one of the biggest risk factors for the development of body image concerns in adolescents (Menzel et al., 2010), and has been associated with increased body dissatisfaction and restrictive eating (Schaefer & Salafia, 2014; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2018). Much of the past research has focused extensively on the effects and impact of teasing and its relationship to bullying, showing that when teasing is hurtful this is considered to be verbal aggression and is conceptualised as a form of bullying (Eder & Nenga, 2006; Jansen et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2009). However, very little research has considered the role of appearance-related banter despite this being a common feature among adolescent peer groups. Further research is needed to explore adolescents' understanding of this interaction and how they differentiate between this interaction being characterised as banter rather than teasing or bullying, as well as exploring the potential consequences of this interaction.

Appearance-Related Bullying. Bullying is defined as a verbal, physical and/or psychological attack or intimidation by an individual or group of bullies (Olweus, 1999). Specifically, there is intent to scare, upset or otherwise harm the target. This also involves the target experiencing fear, upset or other harm, having an imbalance of power favouring the bully or bullies and no provocation by the target and there is repetition of the behaviour over time (Olweus, 1999). Cyberbullying is considered an extension of traditional bullying, and is defined as aggressive, intentional acts carried out using technology (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Furthermore, cyberbullying is no longer bound by space, location, or time as it can occur at any time and in any location (i.e., in the middle of the night at home; Slonje & Smith, 2008). Bullying has been extensively researched and has been linked to a range of deleterious

consequences, such as low mood, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Menesini, 2012; Olenik-Shemesh & Heiman, 2017).

During adolescence, the most common content of bullying interactions is negative commentary about appearance, weight, and body shape (Cassidy, Jackson & Brown, 2009), especially for girls (Ging & O'Higgins Norman, 2016). Specifically, adolescents who fail to meet the cultural standards of appearance and beauty (i.e., characterised by others as: ugly, fat, wears braces, wears glasses etc.) are often victims of bullying and as a result report lower body confidence (Menesini, 2012; Olenik-Shemesh & Heiman, 2017). These negative remarks made in relation to someone's appearance reinforces sociocultural messages surrounding appearance suggesting that those individuals who deviate from the appearance ideal are there to be mocked and humiliated (Fouts & Burgraff, 2000). This is problematic and has serious consequences for the development of body image concerns among adolescents (Menesini, 2012).

Overview: Research Moving Forward

Despite some studies highlighting the frequency of face-to-face appearance interactions among adolescents and their relationship to body image (Calogero et al., 2009; Mills & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2017; Berne, Frisen & Kling, 2014), there is a dearth of knowledge concerning the role of social media in adolescents' experiences of appearance interactions. Social media is a popular tool for adolescent communication with peers and image-focused social media sites (e.g., Instagram) are popular among adolescents (Pew Research Center, 2018). This may mean that many of adolescents' interactions on social media are appearance-focused due to the visual based nature of the platforms they are using. Online environments may also provide a more intense and frequent way for adolescents to engage with different types of appearance interactions. Previous research has indicated that adolescents' social media use (i.e., exposure to ideal images, posting self-images) is associated with increased body image concerns (Butkowski, Dixon, & Weeks, 2019; McLean, Jarman & Rodgers, 2019), but limited research

has explored the role of text-based interactions in the development of appearance concerns. Future research is needed to explore the complex ways in which appearance-interactions are transformed by social media (e.g., Nesi et al., 2018) and how these contribute to the development of appearance concerns. The next section will explore the role of social media and pose a framework for understanding how social media may transform appearance-interactions and adolescents' peer experiences.

2.4. Role of Social Media

The definition of social media is something researchers have debated for many years (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Now, definitions of social media are reliant on 'Web 2.0' and 'User Generated Content'. 'Web 2.0' refers to the way in which the web is designed, as content is no longer static (as in Web 1.0) but instead content is continuously modified by software developers and end-users in a participatory and collaborative way, i.e., it is always changing (Anderson, 2007; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). 'User Generated Content' refers to the various forms of content that is created by users (Daugherty, Eastin & Bright, 2008). Therefore, one definition of social media is a collection of Web 2.0 applications along with User-Generated Content including user profiles, and the connection of profiles into an online "social network" (Obar & Wildman, 2015). Social networking sites are often considered a subset of social media and are typically defined as platforms wherein networks can communicate and interact (Ellison & boyd, 2013).

Social media use has become increasingly popular over the past decade. There are multiple different social media platforms available across the world. The most common social media platforms, worldwide, are Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Snapchat, TikTok and Twitter (Smart Insights, 2022). Typically, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp are text-based focusing predominantly on communication through text. Whereas, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat and TikTok are largely image and video based.

Globally, there are 4.62 billion regular social media users (Smart Insights, 2022). Within the United Kingdom (UK), 89% of 16–24-year-olds report using all types of social media (Ofcom, 2022). In particular, social media use has become ubiquitous among adolescents (Ofcom, 2022), with approximately 91% of 12–15-year-olds and 97% of 16–17-year-olds using social media in the UK (Ofcom, 2022). Adolescents are avid users of Instagram with 55% and 70% of 12–15-year-olds and 16-17-year-olds, respectively, using this platform regularly (Ofcom, 2019). Similar statistics are also reported across Europe, where over 50% of 9-16-year-olds report using social media regularly (Smahel et al., 2020).

The social media environment may be particularly appealing for adolescents as it provides a new context to navigate complex and critical tasks that are crucial in their socio-cognitive development (Peter & Valkenburg, 2013; Peter, Valkenburg & Schouten 2005; Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011). A key part of adolescent development is the need for more frequent connection with peers. Social media provides constant opportunities for interaction (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2013), meaning peer interactions are a more prominent experience. Previous research has highlighted that social media features, such as the "like", activate neural and biological systems that are associated with social feedback and rewards (Sherman et al., 2016), which is important, as adolescents place great value on peer acceptance and rejection (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007; Somerville, 2013). During adolescence, young people experiment with various aspects of personality and identity (Manago et al., 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2008) and social media allows adolescents to bring these peer-driven developmental tasks into the online environment (Subrhamanyam, Smahel & Greenfield, 2006).

2.4.1. Social Media, Identity and Self-Presentation Theory

During the adolescent years, many young people experiment with their identity (Erikson, 1968) and social media transforms the way in which adolescents engage with identity exploration and formation (boyd, 2014). Self-presentation theory (SPT; Baumeister, 1982;

Goffman, 2021) is often adopted to help explain adolescents' social media behaviours. This theory suggests that individuals engage with critical self-presentations for two key reasons: (1) to portray an idealised version of the self, and (2) to please the audience. This theory has previously been applied to understand adolescents' engagement with image-creation and image-sharing behaviours on social media. In particular, it is suggested that adolescents have a desire to create and share self-images on social media in order to maximise physical attractiveness (Chua & Chang, 2016; Mascheroni et al., 2015). Previous content analyses have highlighted the prevalence of body and appearance ideals within the images posted to social media (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2017; Talbot et al., 2017). Individuals are also encouraged to actively participate within this appearance culture by creating and sharing their own self-images that adhere to the appearance ideal (Terán, Yan & Aubery, 2020). From a developmental perspective, this may be because peer acceptance and rejection during adolescence is largely focused upon appearance (Ata, Ludden & Lally, 2007; Somerville, 2013). Understood within SPT, adolescents may engage in selective self-presentation behaviours when posting to social media in order to receive positive feedback from peers in the form of likes and comments (Bell, 2019; Chua & Chang, 2016). This theoretical perspective is useful in explaining adolescent social media behaviours, particularly in relation to image creation and sharing, and may help explain why adolescents' social media content is highly appearance focused (Mascheroni et al., 2015).

Research exploring self-presentation practices on social media has focused on the way in which adolescents post self-images to social media to present the best version of themselves (Kapidzic & Herring, 2015). Survey research has identified that adolescents engage in selective self-presentation strategies such as choosing, editing, and posting socially desirable self-images on social media and this was related to improved self-esteem when they receive more likes on these images - indicating online popularity (Meeus, Beullens, & Eggermont, 2019).

Adolescents and young adults also engage in objectifying and sexualised self-presentations (e.g., body parts exposed in selfies; Hall, West & McIntyre, 2012; Mascheroni et al., 2015). Research revealed that posting objectified images is associated with higher trait self-objectification and receiving more likes on this type of image (Bell et al., 2018). This suggests that receiving feedback (i.e., likes) is a motivation for selective self-presentation behaviours on social media, such as posting sexualised self-images, despite these behaviours being associated with higher self-objectification and lower self-esteem (Bell et al., 2018; Meeus, Beullens, & Eggermont, 2019). Qualitative research further highlights the way in which adolescents consider the audience perspective when posting images (Yau & Reich, 2019) and how these self-presentation behaviours are strategies for seeking appearance and peer approval (Bell, 2019; Chua & Chang, 2016). This research shows how self-presentation theory can explain adolescents' visual identity expressions on social media, but little research has considered self-presentation in the context of appearance interactions, despite appearance interactions acting as a form of peer approval or disapproval in an offline context (Jones, 2004).

2.4.2. Social Media and the Appearance Culture

As well as social media providing a crucial tool for communication that facilitates peer relationships and identity development (boyd, 2014), social media also plays an important role in the development, maintenance, and perpetuation of an appearance culture. Previous content analyses have highlighted the prevalence of body and appearance ideals within the images posted to social media by analysing the content users post under specific hashtags (e.g., metadata tag that is prefaced using the hash symbol, #, and makes it easier to find information with a specific theme or content) such as #fitspiration, #thinspiration, and #selfie (Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018; Doring, Reif & Poeschl, 2016; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Talbot et al., 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). This research also suggested that social media images often depict women in objectified and sexualised ways. In addition,

another study found that much of the content tagged with #Fitspo across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Tumblr was highly gendered in its representation of women's body ideals (Carotte et al., 2017). Specifically, this study found that women #fitspo images typically contained a woman who adhered to the thin or athletic ideal (e.g., toned) whereas men #fitspo images typically included a man who adhered to the muscular ideal (e.g., muscular). Exposure to this highly appearance focused imagery on social media has been linked with body dissatisfaction (Cohen et al., 2018).

As well as exposure to numerous images portraying an appearance ideal, social media content is also user generated (Kapidzic & Herring, 2015) which may also contribute to an intensified appearance culture. The creation of self-images is considered a form of self-presentation, and individuals are encouraged to actively participate within this appearance culture by creating and sharing their own appearance ideal self-image (Terán et al., 2020). Previous research has identified objectified self-presentations on public social media platforms (Hall et al., 2012; Kapidzic & Herring, 2015). Furthermore, a content analysis of private Instagram profiles has revealed that nearly a third of young women's most recent Instagram posts were self-objectifying (Bell et al., 2018), and this type of image was associated with receiving more likes, which may serve as positive reinforcement, encouraging women to post more objectified images than non-objectified images. These image-creating and sharing practices are especially common among girls (Cohen et al., 2018; Salomon & Brown, 2019), though boys do also report sharing self-images to social media (Boursier et al., 2020; Jarman et al., 2021). In qualitative research across cultures, adolescents have reported striving to create and share images that conform to sociocultural appearance ideals, with the purpose of receiving positive feedback, in the form of likes and comments, from peers (Bell, 2019; Chua & Chang, 2016; Yau & Reich, 2019). Quantitative research, again spanning cultures, has extensively shown how viewing, taking, posting and editing self-images is linked to appearance concerns

among adolescents and young people, especially among girls (de Lenne, 2020; Prieler et al., 2021). Overall, social media imagery plays an important role in perpetuating a prominent appearance culture. However, image creating and sharing are only part of the functionality of social media as many of the text-based interactions occurring through social media channels are highly appearance focused.

2.4.3. Social Media and Appearance Interactions: A Transformation Framework

Prior research, as described earlier in this chapter, has identified that adolescents' peer interactions are heavily appearance-focused, and are associated with the development of body image concerns (Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). However, adolescents are now turning to social media as a primary means of interacting with peers, meaning these appearance interactions need to be considered in the context of social media (Uhls, Ellison & Subrahmanyam, 2017). The transformation framework (see Figure 2.2; Nesi, Choukas-Bradley & Prinstein, 2018) provides an integrative tool for understanding the role of social media from multiple disciplines. This theory may provide an important framework in understanding how social media transforms behaviours and experiences, including identity exploration (i.e., through posting images), and peer communication and interaction. This framework draws on prior frameworks (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015; Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011) and poses that unique design features of the social media environment create a distinct context for adolescent peer experiences. Previous theorists have focused on the "mirroring" effect which adopts the idea that an adolescent's online experiences and interactions reflect their exact offline experiences. Although theorists would expect some similarities (e.g., adolescents who are popular offline are likely to be popular online; Zywica & Danowski, 2008), this mirroring effects means researchers pay little attention to the many differences between the offline and online environment. The mirroring theory does not account for the role of context in shaping

experiences, behaviour and attitudes and therefore excludes the potential transformative role of social media as an interpersonal context for adolescent peer relationships (Nesi et al., 2018).

McFarland and Ployhart (2015) developed the contextual framework to understand the role of social media. This framework argues that certain stimuli featured on social media platforms comprises a specific context that shapes experiences, behaviours, and attitudes. Extending on this, the transformation framework identifies seven crucial design features of social media that come together to transform traditional interpersonal environments into a new, distinct context (Nesi et al., 2018). It is argued that these seven design features should be considered on a continuum for any social media platform or functionality, with some platforms representing higher or lower of each feature. This is what makes certain platforms individualised and transformative for peer experiences and suggests that no two platforms are used in the same way. These seven key design features that contribute to the transformation of peer experiences are: *asynchronicity* (whether communication is synchronous or asynchronous), *permanence* (whether content is ephermeral or persistent), *publicness* (ability to communicate with large groups of people simultaneously), *availability* (ease in which content can be shared and accessed), cue *absence* (how much anonymity is afforded by the platform), *quantifiability* (numerical social metrics such as the "like") and *visualness* (whether the platform emphasizes text, photo or video). Table 2.1 provides an overview of the design features including definitions and examples of how these may relate to the transformation of appearance interactions.

Table 2.1: Social media design features with definition and example of how this may transform appearance interactions

Design features	Definition	Transform appearance interactions
Asynchronicity	Time lapse between aspects of a conversation	Multiple appearance interactions can occur at the same time heightening exposure to appearance messages (these can range from positive to negative). Selective self-presentation in appearance messages.

Availability	The ease with which content can be accessed and shared, regardless of location	Interact about appearance anytime and anywhere. Increases the frequency and access to appearance-related messages.
Cue Absence	The notions of anonymity and social presence via social media sites	Interpretation of appearance comments (use of emojis to interpret a negative humorous comment). The ability to give and receive negative appearance comments anonymously.
Permanence	Extent to which content or messages remain accessible following the original post	Provides the ability to look back through appearance interactions (e.g., scroll back through compliments on an Instagram post or re-examine a negative appearance comment multiple times).
Publicness	Information can be shared with large groups of people simultaneously	Group appearance-related interactions (i.e., group chats). Appearance comments on an Instagram post can be viewed by a large audience.
Quantifiability	Extent to which social media allows for numerical social metrics, e.g., the like function	Quantifying the number of appearance comments received.
Visualness	Extent to which a medium emphasizes photograph or video sharing.	Instagram may increase the frequency of appearance commentary because this is a highly visual medium.

These seven design features create a unique context that is fundamentally different from an adolescent's offline social environment. The transformation framework poses that there are five broad categories of transformation which conceptualise the numerous ways in which social media design features may transform peer experiences. These are:

1. *Frequency or immediacy*. Social media platforms may increase the frequency and immediacy of peer experiences in comparison to the offline environment. The availability, asynchronicity and permanency design features of social media platforms contribute to this.
2. *Amplifying experiences and demands.* Social media may amplify and heighten certain experiences which in turn may increase the intensity of peer experiences. The features of social media may increase expectations of availability and impact

on relationship quality. Availability, publicness and permanence of social media design features influence this.

3. *Altering the qualitative nature.* Social media alters the qualitative nature of peer experiences and behaviours by impacting on the ways in which interactions are perceived or experienced. Quantifiability, cue absence and publicness play a role in this transformation category.
4. *Offering new opportunities for compensatory behaviours.* Social media platforms may transform peer experiences as they allow for new opportunities for compensatory behaviours. This means that experiences that may be possible offline but are experiences that adolescents are less likely to engage with, are more likely to occur in an online environment. Cue absence, asynchronicity and visualness of social media designs contribute to this.
5. *Offering new opportunities for entirely novel behaviours.* Finally, social media offers new opportunities for entirely novel behaviours, or behaviours that could not possibly occur offline (e.g., receive a like), to be created. Here, quantifiability, availability, permanence and visualness play a role in this.

Taken together, there is likely to be overlap within these five broad categories of transformation (Nesi et al., 2018). That said, they offer a starting point for understanding the myriad and complex ways in which peer experiences can be transformed through social media. Importantly, this framework can be applied to a variety of offline behaviours or experiences that we may expect to see online and can be used as a tool to understand the role in which social media plays in these concepts. This is a crucial starting point in determining the complex role that social media plays in an adolescent's life, whether that is positive, negative, or neutral (Nesi et al., 2018).

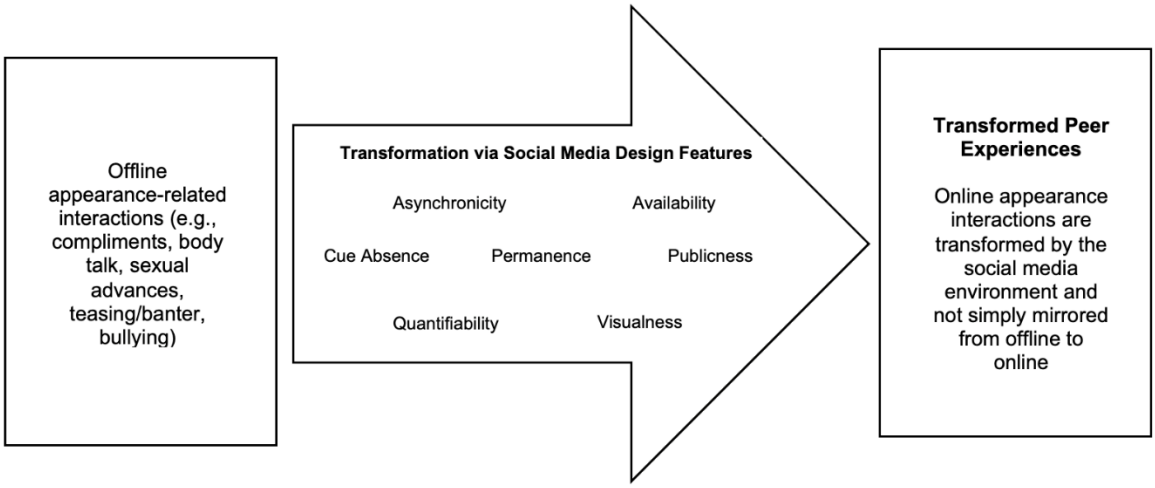

Figure 2.2: Transformation Framework adapted from Nesi et al., (2018).

Under the lens of the transformation framework, researchers can consider the role of social media in adolescents' peer appearance interactions. Understanding these interactions is crucial to developing a more holistic understanding of how social media perpetuates and contributes to body and appearance concerns. For example, in the context of positive appearance commentary, it may be that online compliments may occur more frequently on highly visual, public, and permanent social media platforms. Similar to offline compliments (Calogero et al., 2009) in that they transmit salient messages surrounding the idea of appearance being the most important thing about someone, but instead social media transforms compliments so that these implicit appearance messages are being communicated permanently and frequently on images that adhere to an appearance ideal. Appearance-related bullying may also be transformed by social media as it may occur more on platforms with a high level of cue absence (e.g., where users are afforded anonymity), especially as past research has found negative appearance commentary to be unacceptable to be a perpetrator of (Burnette et al., 2017). Furthermore, the asynchronicity of social media may transform experiences of bullying as users may receive numerous comments from multiple people at the same time, which may increase the intensity of the interaction leading to more serious negative consequences for adolescents. Research has found that bullies navigate the different features of social media sites

to conceal their bullying from a broader audience, using more private or anonymised accounts to engage in victimisation without scrutiny (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). That said, research exploring the five different appearance interactions (i.e., compliments, body talk, sexual advances, teasing or banter, and bullying) on social media is quite limited, especially in the context of the transformation framework.

Recent research has started to document and explore the role of social media in adolescents and young adults' appearance interactions. Several studies have revealed how self-reported engagement in appearance-related commentary (i.e., receiving positive comments or negative comments, and body talk) is associated with body image concerns (Arroyo & Brunner, 2016; Niu et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2015). Self-deprecating remarks, and other forms of body talk (e.g., positive comments such as "you look good" or comparisons such as "I wish I looked like you") are also observed on social media and have been found to be associated with body image concerns (Wang et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2022). Survey research has also revealed that it is common to receive positive appearance commentary (*e.g., "how often do you receive positive comments about your physical features, e.g., "nice hair" "beautiful smile" on Instagram?*) on social media, than negative appearance commentary (e.g., *"How often do you receive negative comments about your body, e.g., "you need to hit the gym" "you're fat") on Instagram?*; Feltman & Szymanski, 2018; Rideout & Fox, 2018). However, the findings of this research should be interpreted cautiously; it is possible that the measures used to assess online appearance commentary are not accurately capturing adolescents' online engagement in this interaction as the measures do not consider the ways in which social media environment transforms them. Instead, the measures have simply been adapted from offline use (e.g., "my friends and I talk about our bodies frequently"; Jones, 2004) to online use (e.g., "on social media, my friends and I talk about our bodies frequently; Wang et al., 2019). This does not take into account the complexities of the social media environment and how certain design

features (e.g., asynchronicity; Nesi et al., 2018) may impact upon adolescents' experiences of online appearance interactions.

Qualitative research has explored adolescents' understanding surrounding online appearance interactions. In some studies, adolescents have described how positive feedback on self-images serves as a form of peer approval, and this is closely linked to their perceptions of presenting an idealised version of the self on social media (Bell, 2019; Chua & Chang, 2016). Commentary on images that adhere to appearance ideals may serve a role in perpetuating the peer appearance culture (Gutierrez et al., 2020; Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). It may be that social media transforms peer appearance interactions in that the highly visual and public nature of certain platforms (e.g., Instagram or TikTok) transmits stronger and more salient appearance messages that are reinforced and internalised by adolescents. Although this research provides some qualitative insights into how adolescents understand appearance commentary on social media, it does not consider the specific ways in which adolescents interactions are transformed by social media. Furthermore, this research focuses on positive appearance commentary (e.g., receiving comments on a self-image), but does not consider the role of social media in a range of appearance interactions (e.g., self-deprecating remarks, banter, or sexual remarks).

To a lesser extent, content analysis research has started to explore social media text data in terms of its appearance-related commentary. Chrisler et al., (2013) conducted a content analysis on Twitter posts that occurred during a Victoria's Secret fashion show and found numerous positive and negative appearance-related remarks, oriented towards both the self- and others. However, this study analysed appearance commentary on a primarily text-based social media platform (Twitter) rather than a highly visual site, such as Instagram. More recently, Burnell et al., (2021) conducted a content analysis exploring college students' receipt of appearance commentary on their most recent Instagram posts, and coded comments as either

positive or negative. They found that positive comments were more commonly received, especially in response to the posting of a self-image. Comments were also found to be gendered; women users received more positive appearance commentary whereas men users received more negative commentary. Overall, receiving appearance commentary was linked to greater social media consciousness and body surveillance (Burnell et al., 2021). However, this study only assessed whether comments received on an Instagram post are positive or negative. As such, future research needs to explore the nuances of appearance commentary, because focusing on the binary positive and negative is overly simplistic and constrained, given the complexities of interaction and social media. Furthermore, Burnell et al., (2021) did not systematically examine the content of replies, which they suggested contained reciprocated compliments thus there is a need for future research to understand how comments are replied to also, and how the appearance-related nature of responses may also contribute to user's body image concerns.

2.5. Gender, Social Media and Appearance Interactions

Adolescents gender development plays a crucial role in their engagement with appearance-related content, including appearance interactions and social media use. In line with the Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981) – see Chapter 1 for a description – stereotypical gender roles are present within social media messages (Gutierrez et al., 2020) and also play out in adolescents' engagement with appearance interactions on social media. For example, previous research has highlighted the gendered nature of social media behaviours. Quantitative and qualitative research has revealed that girls are more image conscious than boys, reporting more time creating and sharing self-images compared to boys (Bell, 2019; Chua & Chang, 2016; Cohen, Newton-John & Slater, 2018). Girls also place more value on receiving feedback on social media in the form of likes and comments (Bell, 2019; Chua & Chang, 2016; Yau & Reich, 2019). In addition, a study investigating appearance-related cyberbullying found

negative remarks online were highly gendered where girls received negative comments regarding weight, whereas boys received negative comments about appearing too feminine (Berne et al., 2014). Adolescents internalise stereotypical gender role messages from society (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008; Stokes, 2007; Tortajada- Giménez, Araüna- Baró, & Martinez- Martinez, 2013) and thus it may be that these gendered roles play out through social media behaviours. Gender differences on social media may be due to the stereotypical gender roles influencing the way in which girl behaviours are different to boy behaviours. Further research is needed to explore the specific manifestations of these gender identities and understand how adolescents perceive and experience gender on social media.

Past research has highlighted the gendered nature of peer appearance interactions in an offline context. Research suggests girls engage in more appearance interactions than boys (Jones, 2004; Lawler & Nixon, 2011) and report receiving more appearance-related commentary (Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). Qualitative research has also found some types of appearance interactions (e.g., body talk centred on weight, i.e., fat talk) that are social norms among girls' adolescent peer groups, rarely occur among adolescent boys (Strandbu & Kvalem, 2014). As such, girls' appearance interactions have been more intensively studied (Jones, 2004; Lawler & Nixon, 2011). This research has tended to be cross-sectional and has typically identified a link between girls' appearance interactions and body dissatisfaction and eating behaviours (e.g., Niu et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2019). Although the research on appearance interactions, both offline and online, suggest these interactions are more frequent in girls, research also suggests that adolescent boys receive more appearance-related criticism from peers (Chen & Jackson, 2012; Engeln, Sladek & Waldron, 2013; Jones & Crawford, 2006). This suggests that adolescent boys' appearance interactions may manifest differently to girls, but the research is extremely limited.

Research has highlighted that boys' interactions are more critical and humorously intended in nature (Chen & Jackson, 2012; Engeln, Sladek & Waldron, 2013; Jones & Crawford, 2006). Appearance interactions among boys may also differ in focus; a study of fat talk in young men found that they were more likely to engage in muscle-talk rather than weight-related talk (Engeln, Sladek & Waldron, 2013). This is supported by other cross-sectional research that found boys engage in muscle talk with peers and that this is associated with eating behaviour and body dissatisfaction (Ahlich et al., 2019; Velkoff et al., 2019). The qualitative differences in how men and women engage in body talk may mean that many of the measures used historically to assess appearance interactions are inadequate, since they have been designed and developed to focus on women's body image (Lindvall Dahlgren et al., 2017) and appearance interactions (e.g., fat talk measures; Clarke, Murnen & Smolak, 2010). This has important implications as it means that studies documenting the increased prevalence of appearance interactions among girls may be based on flawed measurement tools. That said, qualitative focus group research found that boys easily described experiences of peer engagement with body talk, as well as body ideals and the appearance culture, but at the same time they distanced themselves from this interaction (Strandbu & Kvalem, 2014). Thus, in addition to flawed measurement of body talk among boys, there may also be resistance with boys actually 'admitting' they engage in appearance interactions. This may be a particular issue in focus group studies due to the fear of admitting this reducing individual "masculinity credits" (i.e., reducing their adherence to the masculine gender role), as previous health-related research has found (e.g., see de Visser & Smith, 2007). This is also consistent with research that has found discussing appearance is positioned as a social taboo among boys and men (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006; Whitaker et al., 2019). Furthermore, this may be associated with toxic masculinity – which is a type of masculinity that is based on simplified understandings of traditionally masculine characteristics such as violence, physical strength, suppression of

emotion and devaluation of women (Connell, 2005; Posadas, 2017). Adolescent boys may avoid discussing their engagement in appearance interactions as they want to adhere to toxic masculinity traits such as suppressing their emotions to appear "tough". Toxic masculinity beliefs may have serious consequences for boys' mental health, including body image (Parent, Gobble & Rochlen, 2019).

Adolescent boys' adoption of humour (e.g., teasing) may also be understood within this lens of toxic masculinity; as a way of discussing appearance while upholding prevailing ideals of masculinity (e.g., Taylor, 2011). Work that has focused on boys' peer interaction has identified banter as a common feature of adolescent boys' friendship groups (Whittle et al., 2019). Banter is a playful interaction that serves to improve and maintain relationships whilst involving some innocuous aggression (Dynel, 2008; Kowalski, 2000). Using sarcasm and making jokes about appearance with friends may be a way for young boys to talk about appearance with friends (Taylor, 2011). That said, banter is typically considered outside of body image frameworks, despite much of boys' banter being appearance-focused (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006). Therefore, appearance-focused banter may be one type of appearance interaction that is missed by current quantitative measuring tools, despite potentially playing a big role in adolescent boys' peer group interactions.

Research shows that adolescent boys rate social media as the top way to communicate and interact with friends, especially so during the COVID-19 pandemic (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Research also indicates that boys may use social media in less appearance-focused ways than girls. Qualitative studies have documented how girls are more image-conscious than boys in social media environments and spend more time creating and sharing self-images. Girls are also described placing more value on receiving feedback on their appearance on social media (Bell, 2019; Chua & Chang, 2016). It may be that there are gendered social norms at play here in that it is more socially acceptable for girls to interact about appearance (e.g., posting selfies)

compared to boys. Thus, boys may be less reluctant to report engaging in appearance-related social media use, even if they do engage in this in reality.

Research exploring adolescent boys' appearance interactions on social media is limited. As with offline settings, most quantitative research has focused on girls' experiences of online appearance interactions (Niu et al., 2020; Feltman & Szymanski, 2018). Some research has recently made comparisons in boys' and girls' frequency of experiencing online appearance commentary showing no gender differences in the relationship between body talk and body shame (Wang et al., 2019). However, the measures used to capture engagement in online appearance commentary face similar scrutiny to the offline measures as they are designed to assess girls' body image and body talk. A recent content analysis exploring Instagram comments revealed that girls received more positive appearance commentary whereas boys received more sarcastic, humorous and serious negative appearance (Burnell et al., 2021).

In terms of qualitative research, a study of cyberbullying in adolescents found that for both genders, bullying remarks and comments revolved around non-conformity to appearance ideals (Berne et al., 2014). Specifically, this study found that bullying interactions were highly gendered in that girls received comments on fatness, whereas boys received comments on appearing too feminine. This again highlights how the content of appearance interactions may differ between boys and girls, but also how these differences may be associated with adherence to stereotypical gender roles (Murnen & Don, 2012) as well as gendered body and beauty ideals (e.g., thin and curvy for girls, muscular and toned for boys; Dittmar et al., 2000; Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005). Last, there is – to my knowledge – one study that has examined banter among boys in online spaces ("cyberbanter"). This type of interaction is positioned as a frequent occurrence but often misinterpreted by the person who the joke is about (Steer et al., 2020). The nonverbal cues and social context cues afforded by social media platforms was positioned as a cause of the misinterpretation of banter online (Steer et al., 2020). However, this research

does not specifically focus on appearance-related banter, but rather on banter more generally with the analysis not focusing on the content of the jokes. It is clear that more research is needed to understand the complexities of men's body talk online, including banter, as well as exploring how body talk links to body image and broader developmental concerns among adolescent boys. As research is limited in this area, it may be argued that the impact of social media appearance commentary on men's body image is underestimated and understudied because of boy's tendencies to downplay their engagement in appearance commentary due to the stigma associated with this topic (Griffiths et al., 2018). Furthermore, although boys are underrepresented in this research area, there is an increased known prevalence of eating disorders in men which is often correlated with body dissatisfaction and an overfocus on appearance (Mitchison & Mond, 2015). This suggests that further research is needed to explore the role of social media appearance commentary on boys' experiences and understandings of body image.

Gender has a profound impact on how boys and girls perceive, think, feel, and behave towards their bodies and in relation to appearance. The research literature has successfully started to explore the role of gender in relation to body image, with research now identifying the alarming numbers of boys experiencing some form of body dissatisfaction, and the important differences in how body ideals and schemas are processed in relation to the role of gender (Jankowski et al., 2018). That said, research exploring how gender and gender stereotypes shapes appearance interactions on social media is limited. Furthermore, the types of research methodology used to explore the role of gender have predominantly adopted positivist quantitative methods (e.g., questionnaires). Whilst this research identifies important areas for further exploration, appearance-related questionnaires are prioritised for data collection with women and thus the adoption of qualitative methodology may be needed to explore the role of gender in appearance interactions on social media and body image through

understanding individual and group experiences and perceptions. So, whilst this research literature has noted that gender identity influences appearance interaction online, there appears a clear necessity for further investigation into how adolescent boys specifically experience and understand body image within the context of peers and social media, and how this compares to adolescent girls' experiences and understandings, focusing on the role of stereotypical gender roles that are perpetuated throughout society.

2.6. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter presents a literature review exploring the role of peers and how peers' impact on body image is mediated by social media. First, this chapter highlights the role of a peer appearance culture in the adolescent years and how appearance-related interactions are an important part of this wherein appearance norms and ideals are communicated among the peer group. Second, this chapter highlights the role of social media, and how appearance-interactions may be more frequent and intense due to the transformative features of the social media environment. Finally, this chapter explores the role of gender in these appearance interactions and social media behaviour. The literature highlights many gaps regarding adolescents' peer appearance-interactions on social media. As adolescents are using social media as their primary communication tool with peers (Ofcom, 2022), there is a need for a systematic exploration of how social media transforms appearance interactions to develop a more holistic understanding of how peers on social media perpetuate and contribute to body and appearance concerns among adolescents.

The current research literature fails to qualitatively and quantitatively (i.e., extracting and analysing real-life social media data alongside interview data) explore, in detail, adolescent understanding and experiences of appearance-related interactions on social media and how adolescents' manifestations of these interactions contribute to body image. Research does indicate that online appearance interactions are frequent experiences (Feltman & Szymanski,

2018), and a recent content analysis shows that both boys and girls engage with online appearance commentary (Burnell, 2021), but it may be that they experience, interpret and understand it in different ways. Further exploratory research is needed to examine the specific manifestations of this online appearance commentary in order to apply this knowledge to social media literacy and body image interventions. Therefore, the central aim of this thesis is as follows: *to explore adolescents gendered understandings, perceptions, and experiences of appearance-related interactions on social media, and the role that these interactions play in adolescents' body image, peer relationships and self-development.*

This thesis aims to make a novel contribution to the research literature by exploring how social media transforms appearance interactions and how adolescents understand and experience these peer interactions in relation to body image and broader outcomes in order to inform interventions and the direction of future research. This thesis aims to address three key overarching research questions. These are:

(1) What are adolescents' understandings and experiences of appearance-related interactions on social media?

(2) *How does gender shape adolescents' understandings and experiences of appearance interactions on social media?*

(3) *What role do appearance interactions on social media play in adolescents' body image concerns and broader developmental outcomes?*

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

3.1. Chapter Three Introduction

In this methodology chapter, I briefly provide an overview of what ontology and epistemology refers to in psychological research. I then explore my positioning as a researcher and thus the approach that I have taken in my thesis. Throughout, I have also considered how this is different to the approach that has been taken in previous research on the topic of body image and social media. Here, I argue that previous research neglects to consider different ontological and epistemological viewpoints other than realist and positivist standpoints limiting previous understandings of a complex topic. Next, I discuss how my research position has informed my data collection methods and provide an in-depth description of the specific method adopted for Study One and Study Two. The data analytic approach is then outlined describing how I used thematic analysis and content analysis to explore adolescent appearance interactions on social media. Within this chapter, I have also explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on my thesis to be as transparent as possible, and I have also outlined the key ethical considerations faced through this approach. Finally, I end this chapter by providing an overview of the empirical programme.

3.2. Analytical Approach

3.2.1. Ontology and Epistemology in Psychology

To determine an appropriate framework for research practice, epistemological and ontological positioning must be considered. Understanding one's positioning and justification of a research approach is essential as it affords necessary insight into the theoretical decisions made throughout the research process, including choice of method and the assumptions of which results are underpinned. This understanding is crucial with qualitative and mixed method research where unjustified research approaches may invite critiques that suggest qualitative research provides less information in relation to quantitative methods (Davies & Dodd, 2002; Mays & Pope, 2020). Therefore, by understanding the underpinning assumptions, researchers are able to provide critical discussion of the methodological considerations, as well as providing a comprehensive rationale for decisions made and greater transparency in knowledge production which in turn allows for research to be evaluated with value and rigor (Clarke & Ivankova, 2015).

Ontology is defined as the philosophical study of the nature of reality, existence and being. Ontology determines whether we think reality exists entirely separate from human practices and understandings or whether it cannot be separated from this, and so knowledge is always going to reflect individual perspectives and biases (Robson, 2011; Cresswell, 2003). It also refers to the way in which researchers categorise ideas and concepts, and how they relate to each other. Ontology is concerned with the question of what reality is, and what exists in reality, which can both be studied and understood (Moon & Blackman, 2014; Smith, 2012). It is important to determine an ontological stance so that researchers are clear on the way in which reality has been assumed throughout the research process. Ontological variations appear on a continuum, in which there are views that suggest "reality" is entirely independent of a human's knowledge about it (known as realism) to views that pose reality as entirely dependent on the

way humans interpret that knowledge (known as relativism). In psychology, researchers have often struggled to agree on an ontological viewpoint due to the variety of theoretical approaches and a disagreement about the nature of human experiences and reality (Yanchar & Hill, 2003). However, some researchers highlight the importance of having multiple perspectives to explore phenomena through asking and answering different questions using a range of techniques (Al-Ababneh, 2020). Understanding a single phenomenon through multiple lenses is referred to as theoretical pluralism – the post-positivism perspective wherein several methods and viewpoints are needed (Panhwar, Ansari & Shah, 2017).

Epistemology is defined as the philosophical study of knowledge in terms of what makes knowledge valid and how can this knowledge be obtained (Robson, 2011). Epistemology refers to the nature of knowledge and addresses the question of what is possible to know, and so in what ways can researchers determine how meaningful knowledge can be generated, and what it represents (Brown, 2002). Understanding individual epistemological positioning is important for any researcher as it allows us to recognise what can and cannot account for meaningful knowledge and this in turn informs the methodological and analytical approach. Importantly, ontology is not separate from epistemology (Moore, 2005). Knowledge and reality are positioned as operating on two distinct, yet interrelated dimensions, in that reality (existing independent of explanation) and knowledge (various epistemological statements used to describe reality) co-exist. Much of the research within psychology is led by the chosen methodological approach (e.g., quantitative method versus qualitative method) and so fails to situate itself and state the epistemological and ontological positioning (Yanchar & Hill, 2003).

Realism is the ontological position that underpins quantitative research and assumes that there is “a truth” to be revealed which is accessible through research practices (Michell, 2005). Realist ontologies are aligned with positivist epistemology, which suggest that

knowledge about external realities can be observed. Those that adopt these ologies believe knowledge to be governed by universal principles, and so these can be "discovered" using rigorous scientific methods. In contrast, relativism, a position that underpins qualitative methodologies (e.g., discourse analysis) argues that reality is constructed in multiple ways rather than there being a single reality or truth, meaning researchers can never get beyond these constructions (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Relativist ontologies are often aligned with a constructivist epistemology. Constructivist epistemology poses that knowledge is constructed in many ways, with humans playing an active role in the creation of experience and meaning from their individual perception of the world (Burr, 2015). Those with a relativist ontology and a constructivist epistemology believe that there is no such thing as an external reality or "truth" and that knowledge is culturally and historical situated dependent on how an individual's social construction, perception and experience of the world (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003).

3.2.2. Critical Realism

In the middle of this ontological continuum sits critical realism, and this is the approach I adopt as an independent researcher and so is also the approach employed within my thesis. Critical realism is a philosophical theory that has been applied within the social sciences. Critical realism sees knowledge as partially shaped by subjectivity rather than entirely subjective, in that reality exists, but researchers can only ever partially know it (Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000). Whilst the ontological position remains realist, the post-positivist epistemological standpoint acknowledges that external reality can only ever be partially known, never objectively defined (Bhaskar, 1975; Trochim & Donnelly, 2001). Critical realism emphasises the complex nature of the social world and how this plays a role in the construction of knowledge, arguing that the reality posed by positivists is an oversimplification of factors involved (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003). This approach allows researchers to move beyond a rigid approach and can incorporate epistemological insights from positivism and constructivism

without accepting their ontological flaws and rigidity. This is largely due to critical realism overcoming the objectivist/subjectivist and qualitative/quantitative dichotomies because it is methodologically inclusive (de Souza, 2014). Positioning the research within this ontological stance of critical realism allows the researcher free to use a range of different research methods (e.g., mix of quantitative and qualitative), each with differing epistemologies (Scott, 2007).

This approach aligns with my standpoint as a researcher but also with the research aims of my thesis. This thesis employed a mixed-methods approach situated in a critical realist ontology to explore adolescents' appearance interactions on social media and relationships with body image. This methodological and ontological approach allows for the recognition of participants' own knowledge, perception, and experience as reality but also the ability to consider the sociocultural context in which this knowledge about online appearance interactions is situated, and how this constructs knowledge, understanding and feelings of body image. It is important, as the main researcher, to accept and understand my own biases and subjectivity and that this is inevitably a part of the research process – critical realism allows for this (Robson, 2011). Critical realism encourages researchers to be reflexive in regard to how their own views and experiences have impacted upon the research, as well as considering the social context. This is incredibly important as who I am as a researcher may impact upon the research process. For example, I am a white, cis-gender woman, twenty-seven years old who uses social media and is a researcher. These factors impact my ability to be completely objective and so these will influence the research process. Critical realism allows me to not only be aware of these biases and reflect on them throughout, but to acknowledge how they have influenced my research and the interpretation of the findings. Critical realist approaches emphasise both the subjective, socially constructed nature of the world and our knowledge of it (e.g., an adolescent's appearance interactions are constructed by peers and these social interactions), but also emphasises the tangible, material effects of the world upon us (e.g.,

feeling negative about the body due to the sociocultural messages transmitted by the media). Critical realism aims to find an approach that acknowledges both the socially constructed nature of the world and the material "reality" (Robson, 2011), suggesting that there are "multiple realities". By adopting a mixed methods approach through a critical realist lens, I am able to explore multiple realities through utilising different epistemological frameworks to suit different research questions (Shannon-Baker, 2016).

3.2.3. Mixed Methods

Mixed methods research is characterised by a project involving the combined integration of both quantitative and qualitative methods that produce both quantitative and qualitative data (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). This approach provides a more complex and complete picture than either discrete quantitative or qualitative data, deepening the investigation of a specific phenomenon (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). Key characteristics of a mixed methods approach include rigorous data collection methods, type of techniques used to execute both data components (either sequentially or concurrently) among the same participant sample or different samples, and then the integration of both types of data during analysis and discussion (Denscombe, 2008). The mixed methods approach in my research means that my studies are all positioned under one single encompassing ontological stance, critical realism. Outlining my own ontological stance has informed the subsequent design of my mixed methods approach.

Plano Clark (2010) poses three key elements that are important to the success of designing a mixed methods approach: (1) the content area; (2) the purpose of the study; (3) the research questions. First, it is important, as with any research design process, to identify the overall content area through a thorough and up-to-date literature review. This is important to make sure the research uniquely contributes to the content area and is the first step of any research design in order to develop the overall purpose and research questions. Second, the

purpose of the study needs to be determined to outline the study objectives and primary intent of the research (Plano Clark, 2010) which in turn sets the direction for the project. Third, the specific research questions should be formulated as these will then dictate the choice in methodology (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This is particularly pertinent in mixed methods research as well-defined research questions guide a project and helps to set clear boundaries and directions (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

For my thesis, it was clear from the literature review (see Chapter 2) that very little is known about how adolescents interact about appearance online and in turn how these online interactions contribute to body image. For many years, topics such as body image, social media use, and offline appearance interactions have been researched from a realist ontological stance under a positivist epistemological framework, primarily from an empirical methodology (Gillen & Markey, 2019; Ryding & Kuss, 2020; Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). For example, correlation studies aim to show relationships between variables, but these are based on the positivist and realist assumption that there is a single reality and that experiences of body image are similar across a population. Although this has been helpful because it has informed us of patterns and causal relationships, which has been crucial to the development of policies and interventions relating to body image and social media, these approaches also limit understanding of complex phenomena as individuals may experience, understand, and perceive body image and social media use differently depending on social, environmental, and individual cues.

Therefore, a critical realist approach recognises that these positivistic paradigms constitute just one way of understanding the "reality" of adolescents' appearance related interactions on social media. Adolescents' subjective understandings and experiences of this topic have been neglected, and methods for exploring these issues that are built on a mix of assumptions are needed. Critical realism aims to find an approach that acknowledges both the

socially constructed nature of the world and the material "reality" (Robson, 2011), suggesting that there are "multiple realities". By adopting a mixed methods approach through a critical realist lens, I am able to explore multiple realities through utilising different epistemological frameworks to suit different research questions (Shannon-Baker, 2016). The mixed methods approach used in this thesis means that I can explore appearance commentary on Instagram from multiple realities (i.e., an inductive-deductive content analysis of Instagram data), and also combine the knowledge from the one-to-one interviews to explore the potential emergent causal properties in a naturalistic context (Nairn, 2012; Porter & O'Halloran, 2012). By exploring appearance commentary in this way, I am able to explore the observable events that reflect a reality in the way adolescents engage in appearance commentary but also accept that this may change depending on unobservable subjective factors such as individual ideology, mental state and social contexts (Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2010). Thus, a critical realist positioning underpinning my mixed methods approach means the purpose of the research is not to discover a pre-existing truth.

Traditionally mixed methods designs are categorised into two main areas: sequential and concurrent (Castro et al., 2010). Sequential designs are determined when either qualitative or quantitative data collection and analysis is conducted first, sequentially followed by the other data type. Concurrent designs involve the collection of both types of data simultaneously. These have then been categorised into four different approaches to mixed method design: convergent, explanatory, exploratory, and embedded (Plano Clark, 2019). Sequential explanatory design involves quantitative data collection preceding qualitative data collection Sequential exploratory design is where qualitative data is collected first, and then followed by quantitative data collection. Convergent design involves the implementation of both quantitative and qualitative phases of research at the same time. An embedded design involves embedding quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis within a traditional research

design (e.g., randomised control trial). This thesis does not follow a rigid structure and combines sequential exploratory design and convergent design. More specifically, the findings from Study 1 are used to inform Study 2 (i.e., sequential), which gathered two different types of data analysed concurrently (i.e., convergent). The overarching design and detailed methods for both studies are outlined in the next section.

3.3. Thesis Studies: Overarching Design and Methods

Study 1 (presented in Chapter Four) uses a qualitative methodology that openly explored a range of different online appearance interactions; focus groups. Focus groups are a method where data is collected from multiple participants at one time (O. Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick & Mukherjee, 2018). Focus groups were used first to explore adolescents' group perceptions of a range of appearance-interactions on social media. This method provides social interaction among group members, and it can often be within these social interactions where participants can ask each other questions, challenge, agree and disagree (Hollander, 2004). Importantly, utilising focus groups in this first study allowed for the exploration of social norms and group understandings of appearance-related peer interactions, which are naturally co-constructed in nature (e.g., Jones, 2004). Therefore, focus groups allowed us to explore this topic whilst also exploring the interactive and contextual nature of the data (e.g., how adolescents discuss these topics with each other; Hollander, 2004). This method of data collection provides a less intimidating atmosphere than one-to-one interviews which can be important when collecting data with young people (Peterson-Sweeney, 2005), whilst also gaining accounts that are more 'naturalistic' as they represent more of a conversation between focus group members (Wellings, Branigan & Mitchell, 2000). The findings from Study 1 (presented in Chapter 4) informed the design of Study 2 and subsequent findings (presented in Chapters 5, 6, and 7), as although focus groups used in Study 1 allowed for the exploration of group meaning, the group environment observed in a focus group can impact on adolescents'

ability to contribute, with some feeling unable to voice their opinions, especially when they deviate from group norms (Lloyd-Evans, 2006). In the context of this research area, adolescent boys may have felt particularly impacted by masculine group norms, therefore felt unable to discuss topics surrounding appearance, as has been found in previous research (e.g., appearance as a taboo topic; Whitaker et al., 2019). Therefore, to combat this I decided to explore positive appearance-interactions in more detail through one-to-one interviews with a scroll back method.

Individual interviews are defined as a "professional conversation" wherein the goal is to get participants to talk about their individual experiences and perspectives in relation to a topic chosen by a researcher (Kvale, 2007; Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Individual interviews used when a deeper understanding of a phenomenon is required (Gill et al., 2008). This method is also more appropriate when the aim is to explore more sensitive topics which may be the case for some adolescents, particularly boys who feel the pressure from when interacting within a focus group (Bourne & Robson, 2015). A social media scroll-back method was adopted during individual interviews with adolescent boys and girls. The scroll-back method is defined as a qualitative research method that works within interviews allowing both researcher and participant to "scroll-back" through their social media accounts (Robards & Lincoln, 2019). This method can be used on different social media sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter and Instagram), but it can also be used to explore ephemeral social media sites (e.g., Snapchat and Instagram stories), as well as having the ability to explore logged history (e.g., views on YouTube or likes on Twitter). This creates an opportunity to navigate, explore and co-analyse with research participants, the role in which social media plays in their experiences and understandings of social phenomenon. There are two key versions of the method: (1) long narrative scroll-back, and (2) short snapshot scroll-back (Robards & Lincoln, 2019; Curtis & Roberts, 2022). The long narrative scroll back involves tracing through social media to provide

a complex overview of individual life histories and personal narratives. This version is often employed as a form of longitudinal qualitative research (Robards & Lincoln, 2017). The short snapshot scroll-back involves identifying visual prompts that may stimulate further discussion regarding a social phenomenon (Roberts et al., 2019), and this is the version that was used within Study 2 as it was used to stimulate discussion but also allowed me the opportunity to extract adolescents' social media data to conduct a content analysis of appearance commentary frequency. This provided visual data and formed part of my analysis presented in Chapter 5 which quantitatively analysed the content of social media data whilst also analysing adolescents' individual interpretation. This allowed for an insight into an adolescent's actual interaction on Instagram, whilst also providing the opportunity for youth voice in the analysis where participants could interpret the data that was captured (Libenburg, Jamal & Ikeda, 2020).

Overview of data collected

In Study 1, I analysed data from 9 focus groups ranging from 29.29 - 49.23 minutes. There were 64 participants in total, and 5-8 participants per group. In Study 2, I analysed data from 30 interviews: 21 with adolescent girls and 9 with adolescent boys. Interviews lasted between 29:43 – 84:22 minutes. I also extracted social media data from 17 adolescent girls. In total, I extracted 85 posts. Nine of these posts were excluded from the final analysis as they were images that excluded the participant or featured irrelevant content. Therefore, the final analysis included 77 images and captions, 630 direct comments and 459 of participants first replies to direct comments. I only extracted girls' social media data as the boys in the study either did not have any data to extract (i.e., no images on their Instagram accounts) or their parents did not consent to this part of the study. This is something that is discussed within Chapter 8 as a discussion point. The method for Study 1 and Study 2 are described in detail in the following sections.

3.3.1. Method for Study 1

Participants

Sixty-four participants (*Age M* = 12.56; *SD* = 0.97; *Range* = 11-14 years) were recruited from a secondary school in Northern England. I asked participants an open-ended question about their gender identity and 33 participants identified as a girl, 30 participants identified as a boy and 1 participant did not want to disclose their gender. The school catchment area encompasses a large area of economic deprivation (according to UK Government data; Ministry of Housing, Communities, & Local Government, 2019). Approximately, 94% of participants were white, 3% mixed race, and 2% African Caribbean. All participants used social media, with most reporting that they check their social media accounts every few hours (36%), every hour (22%), and every ten minutes (14%). Most participants reported Instagram as their most used social media site (45.3%), followed by YouTube (26.6%), Snapchat (14.1%), WhatsApp (6.3%), Facebook (4.7%) and Twitter (1.6%).

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

Focus Group Design

Focus groups were semi-structured with facilitators using both physical stimuli (examples of appearance-related interactions on social media) and a semi-structured questioning guide to stimulate discussion.

Physical Stimuli (vignettes). Ten custom-made vignettes were made to represent five different types of appearance interaction that have been the focus of previous research (i.e., compliments, body talk, sexual advances, teasing/banter and bullying), as they may occur within social media platforms. The vignettes showed different interactions on different platforms (e.g., compliments were shown on Instagram, body talk was shown on Snapchat). There were two versions of each appearance-related interaction that were shown to participants in every focus group: one involving an adolescent boy protagonist, and one involving an adolescent girl protagonist. This allowed for participants to discuss possible gender differences in these interactions. Some of the vignettes included a screenshot of the interaction occurring on different social media (e.g., compliments, body talk and teasing/banter). Other vignettes, (e.g., sexual advances and bullying) involved a short story explaining the interaction that was captured within a blank template of a social media platform. All vignettes were accompanied by text giving participants context regarding the scenario. Prior to the study, 4 adolescents (*Age M* = 12.50, *Girls* = 2) provided verbal feedback on the authenticity of the vignettes, which were amended on the basis of their feedback. See figure 3.3 for an example of the vignettes.

Figure 3.3: Example of the complimenting vignette used in the focus groups.

Focus Group Schedule. To help participants actively engage in the group, an icebreaker was used. This involved asking adolescents to state their participant number, age and the last social media they used. Introductory questions aimed to explore how adolescents' use social media. The schedule then comprised of questions that were used alongside each of the vignettes to help prompt discussion. Questions aimed to ask about how adolescents understand and experience each interaction (e.g., "How do you characterize this interaction?"), how online interaction may differ to offline interaction (e.g., "How likely is this to occur in face-to-face, i.e. offline?") and to explore gender differences (e.g., "Would you expect this to occur more between girls or boys and why?"). There were some questions regarding other functions on social media such as receiving likes, responses to certain types of images, and differences between appearance-related interactions with friends and celebrities. The focus group ended with the researcher providing participants with the opportunity to discuss any other types of online appearance-related interactions that they felt were not covered. Both the questioning schedule and vignettes were piloted with a group of six older adolescents to assess feasibility. Please see appendix 1 for the focus group questioning schedule.

Procedure

Active consent was obtained from the head teacher at the participating school, opt-out consent was gained from parents in advance of study participation, and active consent was gained from participants on the day of the study. Focus groups took place on school grounds during the adolescents' citizenship lessons over a period of one week. In each focus group, participants and the facilitator were seated around a table in a quiet meeting room, with the vignettes placed face down in a pile in front of them. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time and were given the opportunity to ask any questions. Before beginning participants were asked to fill in a small demographic questionnaire regarding age, gender, ethnicity, and general social media use. At the start of the focus group, the facilitator asked participants general questions about their social media use. Participants were then asked to pick up the first two vignettes, which had been paired (i.e., the boy and girl protagonists' version of the same online appearance interaction) and randomly ordered. They were asked to take a few moments to look at them then describe the example. Participants then discussed the interaction and the facilitator asked questions to prompt discussion surrounding how these examples link to adolescents' own experiences and understandings. At the end of the study, participants were thanked for their participation and reminded about their right to withdraw. All focus groups were facilitated by me, a 23-year-old cis-woman postgraduate researcher with five years' experience working with adolescents in a school environment. Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. The study adhered to BPS Ethical Guidelines and received ethical approval from the relevant University Ethics Committee. More information about the ethical process is included in the Ethical Considerations subsection of this Chapter.

3.3.2. Method for Study 2

Participants

An opportunity sample of 21 adolescent girls (*Age M* = 15.05; *SD* = 1.83; *Range* = 12-18 years) and 9 adolescent boys (*Age M* = 14.78; *SD* = 1.64; *Range* = 13-17 years) were recruited through their parents. Parents had responded to advertisements about the study posted on social media (e.g., posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram), university mailing lists, and youth groups mailing lists. Approximately, 90% of participants described themselves as White and 10% described themselves as mixed race (African Caribbean). Due to the online nature of this study, I recruited participants from across a range of geographic locations within England (e.g., Brighton, London, Birmingham, Leeds, York, Newcastle). Online interviews lasted between 29:43 – 84:22 minutes (*M* = 49.01; *SD* = 10.90). All participants have been assigned pseudonyms for anonymity and confidentiality, and this information is presented in Chapters5-7 with the analyses.

Data was collected via online platforms because of the restrictions in place as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Data collection occurred throughout the national and regional lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. The restrictions meant that I could not arrange face-to-face interviews, nor could I access young people through schools, as first planned, due to the immense pressure placed on schools during this period. Recruitment to the online interview was difficult and took a lot longer than first planned which impacted on the overall sample size and demographics. For example, the aim was to recruit more boys, but there were many issues in recruiting boys. Many parents that volunteered their son to participate would later email to say that their son did not like the idea of an online interview. This is something that is discussed in more detail within the general discussion.

Data Collection

Questionnaires

Prior to the interview participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire. In addition to disclosing demographic information (e.g., age, gender identity and ethnicity), participants completed the following two measures:

*Body Talk Frequency***.** Participant's frequency of engaging in and viewing body talk on social media was measured by first providing participants with a definition of body talk. The definition stated the following: ""Body Talk" refers to the comments we make about our own bodies, or other bodies, including appearance comparisons we might make. Body talk can be positive or negative." This had been adapted from the fat talk frequency questionnaire (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011) by Bell et al. (2021). Participants then rated how often they see body talk on social media, and how often they engage in body talk on social media on a five-point likert scale (*1 = Never* to *5 = Very Often*). This scale demonstrated good internal reliability (r = .71) in the present study, and in previous research involving UK-based adolescent samples (Bell et al., 2021).

*Body Satisfaction***.** Body satisfaction was measured using the Body Satisfaction Scale (Bird et al., 2013). Participants responded to six questions that asked participants how satisfied they feel with their body, body shape, appearance, weight, and attractiveness (e.g., *"Do you feel satisfied with your body?" and "Do you feel like an attractive person?"*). Participants rated how satisfied they felt using a five-point likert scale (*1 = Never* to *5 = Always*). This scale demonstrated very good internal reliability (r = .91).

Semi-Structured Interviews

As very little is known about body talk in a highly visual online environment like Instagram, in-depth interviews were used to allow for a detailed exploration of this. They also allow for an in-depth understanding of an individual's personal experiences and perceptions, rather than those that exist at a group level (as in Chapter 4). Interviews were semi-structured with the facilitator using a questioning schedule to ask relevant questions pertinent to the

research questions as well as adopting a “scroll-back” method (Robards & Lincoln, 2020) to capture real life experiences of body talk and use these as prompts for discussion also enabling a more personal feeling to the interview.

Interview Schedule. The questioning schedule was designed to encourage discussion relevant to the research questions, and guide discussion during the scroll-back procedure. Introductory questions aimed to gain a sense of adolescents general Instagram use (e.g., “can you tell me about how you use Instagram?”). The schedule then comprised of questions relevant to the scroll-back method to help prompt discussion. Participants were asked to open their recent Instagram post that was a selfie or an image with them in it. The questions then aimed to ask participants about the post (e.g., “How did you feel when you received that comment?”; “Why did you respond in that way?”; “Can you tell me what you mean by this?”; “Tell me more about this interaction”). Further questions aimed to explore online body talk more generally (e.g., “How are the ways you comment about appearance important to how you portray yourself online?”; “How does it make you feel when you see positive appearance comments either on your self-image or on another person’s post?”; “What impact does this body talk we’ve discussed today have on you?”). The interview ended with me asking the participant whether there was anything else they would like to discuss regarding body talk on Instagram. The questioning schedule was piloted with an adolescent girl aged 15 and an adolescent boy aged 14 to assess the appropriateness of the questions. Please see Appendix 2 for a copy of the interview schedule.

Scroll-Back Technique. The scroll-back method is often used within interviews and refers to a qualitative research method whereby the facilitator and participant simultaneously scroll back through the social media profiles of the participant (Robards & Lincoln, 2020). This method allowed me to explore participants’ digital trace capturing the specific contexts in which body talk is occurring on Instagram posts. It allowed me to capture real life experiences

of body talk and use these as discussion prompts, as well as allowing me to further understand and contextualise how adolescents use this site to present themselves and interact with friends (similar to, Duguay, 2014). As well as allowing me to explore the nuances of body talk on Instagram, this scroll-back technique also helped create a more personal feeling to the interview and allowed the participants to be in control of the discussion, which allowed for more in-depth, open, and personal conversations (Robards & Lincoln, 2017). During the interview, participants scrolled back through their Instagram posts discussing the images, the caption, the likes, and the interaction that occurred in the comments section. Participants were asked to open posts that were selfies or images that included them in it for discussion.

Extraction of Instagram Data

Part of this study also included the option for participants to allow me to extract their Instagram data for a content analysis. More specifically, I requested permission to extract their most recent 10 Instagram posts, which included themselves in the image, along with the caption, comments, and first responses to the comments. I decided to extract their 10 most recent Instagram posts as this is consistent with previous content analysis research (e.g., Bell et al., 2018). Although I intended to extract 10 Instagram posts from each participant, it was clear during data collection that participants did not have 10 posts on their accounts and therefore I extracted as many as possible (this ranged from 3-8 posts per person). To extract Instagram data, I asked each participant to share their screen, via Zoom, at the end of the interview. They were then asked to select each one of their ten most recent Instagram images, and I used the screen-capture software "Screenshot™" installed on MacBook Air to extract the data relevant to each post, which included the posted image, caption, number of likes, every comment made by other users on the post and every response to these comments made by the participant (see Figure 3.4 for an example of an Instagram post). This software extracted the data as jpeg images and were pseudo-anonymised using photo-editing software to cover up any

identifiable information such as usernames and location data. The images posted were not altered as this content was needed for the coding process. Once captured and pseudo-anonymised, all images and data were stored securely on a password protected OneDrive folder that was only accessible by myself and my supervisor. Data was then entered into a spreadsheet. In total, I extracted 85 posts. Nine of these posts were excluded from the analysis as they were images that excluded the participant or featured irrelevant content. Therefore, the final analysis included 77 images and captions, 630 direct comments and 459 of participants first replies to direct comments.

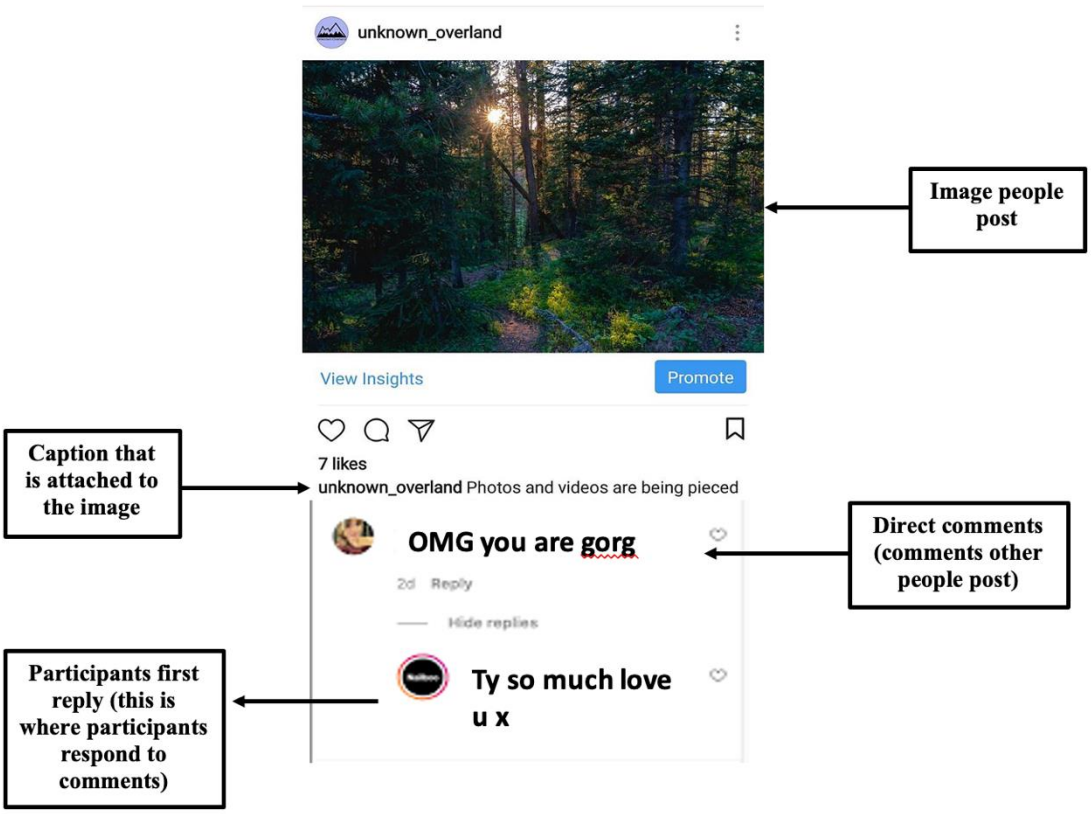

Figure 3.4: An example of the Instagram data that was extracted from each of participants ten most recent selfies.

Procedure and Ethics

Due to the constraints of the Covid-19 pandemic this study was conducted entirely online. For participants aged under 16 (*Range* = 12-15 years; *N* = 18), active consent was obtained from parents of participants first via email. Once consent was provided by parents, I

contacted the participants directly to obtain written consent. For participants aged 16-18 years (N = 12), parents contacted me to say their child was interested in taking part, and the researcher then made direct contact with the participant to obtain written consent. Parents and participants were able to consent to taking part in both the interview and the extraction of social media data or the interview only part of the study. Participants received the details about the study via email, including share screen instructions, Zoom invite and links, and a small demographic questionnaire to fill in prior to the interview on Qualtrics.

At the beginning of the interview, all participants had the research verbally explained to them and they were asked to provide verbal consent. To start with, I asked participants some general questions about their Instagram use. The next step involved participants sharing their screen on Zoom to show their own personal Instagram account to start the scroll-back section of the interview. Once the share screen had been set up, participants were asked to scroll through their Instagram account to choose an image that they would like to discuss. I then asked some questions and we discussed appropriately.

At the end of the study, participants were thanked for their participation and reminded about their right to withdraw. All participants received a £10 Amazon e-voucher, whether they participated in interview only or both parts of the study, as a thank you for taking part. All interviews were facilitated by myself. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. All screen-captures were stored securely. The study adhered to BPS Ethical Guidelines and received ethical approval from the relevant University Ethics Committee. More information about the ethical process is included in the Ethical Considerations subsection of this Chapter.

3.4. Data Analysis

The chosen data analytical approach for my thesis was twofold. To analyse any spoken data from the focus groups (Study 1) and interviews (Study 2) I used a reflexive thematic analysis. To analyse the social media data, I conducted an inductive-deductive content analysis. Both analytic approaches are described in the following sections.

3.4.1. Thematic Analysis

To analyse the data generated in Study 1 and 2, I used a reflexive thematic analysis. Thematic analysis (TA) is defined as a method for developing, identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This thesis aims to adopt a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), wherein the research is creative, reflexive, and subjective, and where researcher subjectivity is seen as a positive influence rather than a threat to knowledge production. Within reflexive TA, a theme is not dependent on quantifiable measures, but instead themes should capture something that is important about the data in relation to the overarching research questions and represents some level of patterned meaning within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2021). For the analyses in my thesis, an inductive approach was adopted where the data is coded without trying to fit into a pre-existing template meaning the analysis is data driven, resulting in themes that link strongly to the data (Byrne, 2022). Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that, when coding and thematising through an inductive approach, the researcher should decide on the level of analysis: semantic or latent. A latent level of analysis was adopted where the researcher starts to identify and examine the underlying ideas, assumptions and ideologies that are shaped into the semantic content of the data. The data was analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process.

First, analysis begun by familiarizing myself with the data (Step 1) through repeated reading and listening of the transcripts. Then, initial codes were developed and applied to the

data (Step 2), including both semantic and latent codes that enabled the understanding of surface meanings, as well as deeper underlying conceptualizations. During this stage, I regularly met with my supervisor, a woman academic with over 15 years' experience of research with adolescents to discuss the coding of extracts. However, all initial coding was performed by me. Once all data were coded, initial themes were developed (Step 3) and then themes were refined and reviewed to check that identified themes adequately represented the data set (Step 4). My supervisor was also involved in this process, and we regularly met to discuss and review theme development in relation to the dataset. Once the themes were reviewed, definitions of the themes were created (Step 5) in order to fully capture the essence of each theme in relation to the data that it captures. Steps 3-5 were conducted iteratively, with theme and theme definitions being modified and refined multiple times.

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

Reflexive thematic analysis is considered as a flexible analytic approach as it is compatible with both positivist and constructionist paradigms (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, it can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches, including critical realism. In this thesis, I conducted a thematic analysis under a critical realist lens. This impacts the assumptions made about the data. Through critical realism, my analyses presented throughout the thesis, acknowledges the way in which individuals make meaning of their

experiences and also the way in which the broader social context influences those meanings, whilst also focusing on the material and other limits of "reality". This analytic approach allows me to explore how adolescents understand appearance interactions online, whilst also exploring ways in which the broader sociocultural appearance culture and peer group norms play a role too. Therefore, within the analysis I accept that experiences are a version of reality but also recognise that research is prone to bias so in this way my findings represent one construction or version of reality (Lawani, 2020). The researcher role in knowledge production plays a big role when conducting a reflexive thematic analysis. Instead of hiding this or aiming to achieve "accurate" or "reliable" coding and analysis, the reflexive thematic analysis adopted in this thesis means that I am aware of my philosophical and theoretical standing throughout the entirety of the analytic process and aimed to be transparent about this through the coding, theme generation and reporting of the research. Within this approach, the themes are actively created by the researcher and themes do not passively emerge from either data or coding – they are not already present waiting to be identified (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). So, although my inductive approach to thematic analysis aims to be data driven, I cannot ignore my own biases and theoretical commitments that may influence the analysis – highlighting the importance of reflexivity in my research approach.

By acknowledging the role of the researcher in the analytic stage of the research, I reject the idea that themes emerged from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Instead, the themes developed in my thesis have been actively generated through my own personal active involvement with the data. This was the first stage of the data analysis as next a team-based approach was adopted whereby the codes and themes were discussed and developed with my supervisory team. Inter-rater reliability was not considered appropriate for the qualitative analysis so any incongruities between researchers were resolved through discussion to validate the final themes (as suggested by Braun & Clarke, 2019), and reject the quantification of

themes. Therefore, I argue that making claims about the prevalence of themes is not fully appropriate within my thesis nor aligns with my overarching approach to data analysis.

3.4.2. Content Analysis (CA)

To analyse the extracted social media data presented in Chapter 5, I adopted a content analysis. Content analysis (CA) is an analytic approach wherein a researcher interprets the meaning or frequency of written and/or visual data into categories or themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Importantly, CA can be adopted to answer superficial questions regarding a phenomenon (e.g., "*What is it?"*) but also addresses more critical questions (e.g., "*What is it about*? *How does it happen? What are the consequences?"*; Sandelowski, 2000). The purpose of a CA is to achieve two main purposes: (1) to uncover how a phenomenon is socially arranged and how it directly or indirectly works, and (2) to describe how participants explain their behaviour and to generate an overarching understanding (Finfgeld-Connett, 2014). The research aims and questions for Chapter 6 aim to achieve a combination of these purposes and so the flexibility of CA makes it a valuable method to explore multiple realities (White & Marsh, 2006), aligning with the critical realist positioning.

Through a critical realist lens, a content analysis is appropriate as it allows me to explore how emergent causal properties (e.g., appearance related comments and responses) occur in a social situation (e.g., on social media among friends), and how these patterns in a naturalistic setting occur with broad social consequences (Elder-Vass, 2010). Critical realism allows for multiple different types of data to be used in the same study because this perspective allows for the exploration of multiple realities (Nairn, 2012; Porter & O'Halloran, 2012). I was able to explore the social and digital world adolescents are living in to not only understand what was being said but also to interpret the how and explain the why (White & Marsh, 2006; Sandelowski, 2010). In the context of social media and appearance commentary, the understanding of legitimate meaning requires more than quantitative analysis (e.g., subjective

measures of social media use may not be fully accurate and reliable; Johannes, Nguyen, Weinstein & Przybylski, 2021). Through this novel approach to a content analysis, I have accurate and quantifiable data representing frequency of and type of commentary on adolescents' actual social media, which is then combined with qualitative interview data to provide understanding of the context connected to adolescent appearance commentary (Krippendorff, 2018).

In Chapter 5, I analysed the content of girls' images (i.e., type of image posted – self-images, group images etc.), captions (i.e., the title or brief explanation that accompanies the image), comments received (i.e., the type of comment received on an image) and replies (i.e., type of comment posted by the participant in response to a comment on an image). To develop the coding criteria, an inductive-deductive approach was adopted that used a combination of pre-set coding criteria derived from the existing research literature and the interview data, whilst also remaining open to the development of new coding categories (e.g., Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2017; Jankowski et al., 2014). This approach is consistent with my critical realist ontological positioning, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Thus, codes were developed in three ways: (1) based on past research, (2) based on participants description and interpretation of posting and captioning image, giving and receiving comments, and reacting to comments, in the interviews, and (3) based on my perceptions of what was important within the data set. More information about the coding scheme and how it was created and developed is presented in Chapter 5 along with the findings.

3.5. Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a great impact on many facets of everyday life for over three years, now. Right before data collection was about to begin for Study 2, the COVID-19 pandemic began, and the UK government issued a "stay-at-home" order for the UK population. Ultimately my plans for data collection needed to change since I had originally

planned to conduct face-to-face interviews recruiting via schools, youth groups, and university mailing lists. However, due to the new laws surrounding COVID-19 and face-to-face interactions, I adapted Study 2 to be conducted entirely online.

Recruitment strategies also had to be changed. I was still able to recruit some participants through youth groups by advertising the study through online youth groups and sending letters home to parents of the young people who were interested. However, the vast majority of my participants were recruited via social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. There were many advantages to recruiting through these platforms including, greater enrolment, it was easier for participants to take part, and I recruited a more demographically diverse sample (Benedict et al., 2019). Interviews were conducted via Zoom (a web conferencing platform that is used for audio/and or video meetings) instead of face-to-face. As the scroll-back method and extracting social media data were such a crucial part of this research, I submitted an ethics amendment in order to adapt this part of the study to suit data collection occurring online. Participants were asked to share their screen, via Zoom, to scroll-back through their Instagram accounts. Social media data was then extracted through a screen-capturing software on MacBook Air. More detail is provided about this process in Chapter 5.

Overall, due to the methodological changes, data collection was a longer process than planned. Recruiting adolescents via social media platforms was difficult, and there were many more ethical considerations to process compared to an offline study (see section below). Furthermore, even though some adolescents preferred the interview being online, there is research to suggest that discussing sensitive topics (e.g., appearance) may be more difficult to do so through an online platform such as Zoom (Gray, Wong-Wylie, Rempel & Cook, 2020). There were instances where participants' parents would be interested in their child taking part, but then when their child found out it was an interview via Zoom, they withdrew their interest.

In some ways, this may have limited my sample and there may be biases regarding the demographics of participants (Benedict et al., 2019). For example, there may be a self-selecting bias in that those adolescents who feel more comfortable discussing appearance and social media use may be more willing to volunteer when viewing an online advertisement compared to those who are less comfortable with these topics (Greenacre, 2016) This is something that I have considered throughout the thesis and aim to bring into the discussion of each chapter, as well as the final discussion in Chapter 8.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was sought and granted from York St John University's ethics board for both studies. An application was submitted for Study 1 and approved. Then a subsequent submission was made for Study 2. Furthermore, the two studies had unique ethical considerations and so these are discussed below in more detail. Further information regarding procedure, including informed consent can be found in the methods of each chapter.

Study One. Informed consent, confidentiality and right to withdraw were key ethical issues that were maintained throughout this study, and more detail is provided about this in Chapter 4. However, the main ethical concern associated with this study was the nature of the topic. Although the aim of this study was to explore experiences of appearance-related interactions on social media, rather than personal stories or experiences there is still a chance that these topics could be sensitive to some and there is always the chance that some participants may become distressed discussing them, especially in front of their peers. At all times, participants were not encouraged to contribute personal information if they did not want to, and the aim was for the discussion to be representative of a normal school PSHE lesson rather than a psychological interview. Nevertheless, it is always important when researching potentially sensitive topics to remain aware and vigilant of any participant distress and take the appropriate measures if needed (e.g., follow up with the school safeguarding lead). To combat

this, the focus group guide and vignettes were piloted with a group of young people to make sure they were age appropriate and were not likely to cause any harm or distress.

Study Two. This study involved some complex ethical issues due to the online nature of recruitment and data collection, as well as the extraction of adolescents' personal social media data. A key ethical issue was consent. Due to some of the participants being under the age of 16, active parental consent was required for both parts of the study (i.e., interview and extraction of social media data). Recruitment was via online platforms so there was potential that it could be the participants themselves who contacted me to volunteer. However, for participants aged under 16 it was always a parent or guardian who contacted me about their child being interested in taking part. Therefore, after explaining the study to parents, full active consent was provided from them before contacting the participant. Participants would then receive an informative email detailing the interview, the scroll-back method, and the social media data extraction. Participants then needed to provide written consent before a date or time was arranged for the interview. It is important with online research that full parental consent is provided first before contacting someone under the age of 16 (British Psychological Society, 2021).

When using online personal data wherein participants are identifiable confidentiality, privacy and anonymity are key ethical issues to consider (Arigo et al., 2018). To ensure confidentiality and anonymity are maintained data was pseudonymised. All participants were assigned a participant number at the start of the study, which was recorded on the information sheet, consent form, demographic questionnaire, interview recording and transcript, and the screenshotted Instagram data. In the empirical chapters, all participants have been provided pseudonyms (i.e., different names) in order for participants data to be completely anonymous. The screenshotting of adolescents' data needed to be anonymised instantly. Screenshots were anonymised through blurring any usernames, tagged locations, and any other potentially

identifying data. These were then immediately stored in a secured folder. It was important to make sure these were fully anonymised and stored securely to ensure that participants were not at any risk (British Psychological Society, 2021).

Ethical Limitations. Ethical approval was granted for all stages of the research; however, I faced some challenges whilst applying for ethics. As sexuality may influence the way in which adolescents experience and understand appearance interactions, I wanted to ask adolescents, as part of the short demographic questionnaire, to disclose their sexuality. According to the University Ethics Committee this was deemed inappropriate, and I was asked to remove this question from the study thus this is why this was excluded from both studies. During the focus groups and interviews, adolescents would openly talk about their romantic and sexual interests and so where possible I have tried to identify this within the analysis. Moving forward, I think it is important to recognise this as a limitation of the present research, but I have also acknowledged this as a direction for future research in Chapter 8.

3.7. Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have outlined how the ontology and epistemology adopted for this thesis has influenced the data collection method and analytic procedures. Much of the research cited in Chapter 2 adopts a realist and positivistic ontological and epistemological framework to adopt primarily empirical methodologies (e.g., questionnaires; Gillen & Markey, 2019; Ryding & Kuss, 2020; Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). Although this research informs us about the frequency of appearance commentary both offline and online (e.g., Feltman & Szymanski, 2018; Calogero et al., 2009), these approaches have taken a rigid approach to measuring online appearance commentary (e.g., simply adapting an offline measure to use online; Wang et al., 2019) and as a result they have oversimplified complex topics. Therefore, previous research limits understanding of how social media transforms appearance interactions and how these interactions contribute to adolescent appearance concerns. There is a need for a systematic

exploration social media and appearance interactions to develop a more holistic understanding of how peers on social media interact, but also to understand how they perpetuate and contribute to body and appearance concerns among adolescents. The approach adopted in this thesis recognises participants' own knowledge and experiences as a reality, but it also considers the broader sociocultural context in which this knowledge about online appearance interactions is situated, and thus how this constructs adolescents' understandings and feelings of appearance concerns.

3.7.1. Overview of Empirical Programme

Study One is presented in Chapter Four and the findings from Study One contributed to the design and focus of the rest of the thesis (i.e., Study Two presented in Chapters 5-7). Although data was collected simultaneously for Study Two, this study was split into three succinct analyses which is presented separately as three chapters (Chapter 5-7). I decided to split the analysis as overall the data set (77 images and captions, 630 direct comments and 459 of participants first replies to direct comments; 30 interviews) was incredibly large and in order to conduct an in-depth and thorough analysis on all data, I needed to split the analysis. Furthermore, this also aligned more directly to the nature of my overarching research questions. I was interested in examining the content of Instagram data and how this was interpreted (Chapter 5) separate from adolescents' experiences of appearance commentary and body image concerns (Chapter 6 and 7). I also decided to analyse the girl and boy data separately due to the vast differences noted in their experience and understanding. Therefore, to conduct a thorough analysis, these datasets needed to be analysed and presented individually. This aligned with research question 2 of the thesis. Therefore, Study 2 is presented in Chapter Five, Six and Seven. A brief overview of each empirical chapter, it's methodological approach and data analysis is summarised below.

In each chapter, the thesis research questions being explored by the analysis are presented along with a brief introduction. Details of the sample involved in the analysis, as well as the specific analytic technique used, are provided. This is then followed by presentation of the analyses and a short discussion.

Chapter Four: *Study One Focus Groups.* Chapter four presents the data from Study One which adopted a focus group methodology to broadly explore how adolescents perceive and understand a wide range of appearance interactions on social media (e.g., complimenting, body talk, sexual advances, banter or teasing, and cyberbullying. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data and three themes were developed. 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.

Chapter Five: *Study Two Content Analysis of Instagram Data.* Chapter five presents some of the data from Study Two which extracted naturally occurring social media data to examine the content of girls' real-life appearance commentary on Instagram. An inductive-deductive content analysis was used to analyse the data. I also aimed to involve youth voice to provide the interpretation and context to the content that is being analysed thus the interview data from the scroll-back section of the interview was also analysed to help contextualise the content extracted. The findings highlight the highly appearance focused environment created through appearance commentary on Instagram. They also reveal the specific types of comments and responses of which adolescent girls engage with, and how adolescent girls interpret these interactions on Instagram.

Chapter Six: *Study Two Thematic Analysis of Girl Data.* Chapter six presents the girls' interview data from Study Two which aimed to explore and understand girls' experiences of body talk on social media and how these experiences influence girls' body image and broader

developmental outcomes. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data and three themes were developed. The analysis shows the ways in which girls perceive and experience online body talk and how this contributes to a salient appearance culture, which is responsible for enforcing appearance norms and insecurities, whilst also highlighting the important role of gender norms and stereotypes.

Chapter Seven: *Study Two Thematic Analysis of Boy Data.* Chapter seven presents the boys' interview data from Study Two which aimed to explore and understand adolescent boys' experiences and understandings of body talk on Instagram in relation to their body image and broader developmental outcomes. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data and three themes were developed. The findings highlight the gendered nature of adolescent boys' appearance interactions indicating that certain types of interactions (i.e., banter) are crucial to how they present themselves, in adherence to their gender, on social media.

Chapter Four: Study One

***"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**

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4.1. Chapter Four Introduction

This chapter presents the empirical findings from Study One along with a small discussion. Before presenting the findings from this study, I have provided a brief overview of relevant literature and a rationale for the study to fully contextualise the findings. This introduction will also detail the thesis research question that this study aimed to address.

Appearance concerns are prominent during adolescence (Calzo et al., 2012); with 52% of 11-16-year-olds in the UK reporting dissatisfaction with their appearance (Be Real, 2017). Peer relationships play a pivotal role in the development of adolescent appearance concerns (Ata et al., 2007). Research in offline settings shows that adolescents engage in a range of appearance-related interactions with their peers, both positive and negative (Calogero et al., 2009; Lunde & Frisen, 2011). These interactions serve to reinforce and perpetuate problematic sociocultural messages surrounding appearance and may feed into appearance concerns. Increasingly, adolescent peer interactions occur in social media spaces. Image-based social media sites, such as Instagram and Snapchat, are particularly popular among adolescents. These social media sites feature a high proportion of appearance ideal images and are designed to encourage conversations around such images, thus creating a pervasive platform for

appearance-related interactions. Adolescents' appearance-related interactions on social media may take many forms, varying in terms of content, intentions, and reception, in both positive and negative ways. These interactions may be the product of several factors; pervasive sociocultural messaging surrounding appearance, social media platform design (e.g., visualness, permanence, publicness; Nesi et al., 2018), and the adolescents' micro-level peer group and culture (including gender norms). While studies have started to document the prevalence of appearance-related interactions online (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018), little research has considered how adolescents understand and experience these appearance-related interactions in social media settings, and how such interactions function within both their peer relationships and developing body image.

Therefore, using qualitative methods, this chapter presents the findings from Study 1 (method explained in Chapter 3) wherein the central aim to this empirical research was to explore UK adolescents' shared understandings and experiences of these interactions. Using focus groups to elicit shared meaning and understandings, this chapter aims to address the following thesis research questions:

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

RQ_2 *How does gender shape adolescents' understandings and experiences of appearance interactions on social media?*

In particular, this chapter was interested in how adolescents perceive a wide range of appearance interactions on social media (e.g., complimenting, body talk, sexual advances, banter or teasing, and cyberbullying), and how their gender identity influences and shapes this understanding. This chapter presents data from sixty-four adolescents (*Age M* = 12.56; *SD* = 0.97; *Girls* = 33) from a secondary school in Northern England who participated in semi-

structured focus groups. The chapter will present the themes from this data and a small discussion to summarise and interpret the findings.

4.2. Results

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bobby, Boy, 12: -Go away

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

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

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

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

looking" (Isabelle, 14, G3). This offline popularity was constructed as resulting in more likes and comments on social media: *"it depends on if you're that person or not because if you're in the popular group and everyone loves you then you're going to get complimented more"* (Charlotte, 14, G3). In this way, positive appearance commentary functioned as a marker of popularity and attractiveness within the broader peer group.

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

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

Though adolescents described the importance of being positive about other people's appearance on public social media platforms, they discussed how comments about the self should be more modest, including being self-deprecating about their own appearance. Those who gave positive appearance comments to others in public social media channels were perceived in a positive light, and positive comments were positioned as indicative of positive personal attributes, e.g., "*nice people comment nice things"* (Freddie, Boy, 12, M1), and *"when you comment nice stuff to each other it shows you're a nice person"* (Charlie, 12, B1). Posters

of positive commentary were also perceived as good friends *"some people do it [compliment] over the actual post so some people don't think they're bad friends"* (Charlotte, 14, G3). In this way, public and permanent positive appearance commentary served as a form of self-presentation; a way of appearing positively to others.

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

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

in the captioning of images will evoke a positive response from others, as the expectation online is that peers will respond positively:

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

Hannah, Girl, 12: go on a diet

Holly, Girl, 11: no

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

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

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

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

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

Gender differences were discussed in relation to self-deprecation on social media. Girls were perceived as being more likely to make modest appearance comments about weight (e.g.

"feeling fat" – Emma, 11, G1) as a way of seeking appearance-related reassurances on social media *"it's kind of a stereotype that girls fish for compliments more boys don't just sit there and go 'I'm ugly, call me beautiful' but it's a stereotype that girls do"* (Freddie, Boy, 12, M1). In comparison, boys who made self-deprecating remarks (e.g., *"I feel like such a fatty"* – Monty, Boy, 14, M3) were perceived more positively, as a humorous interaction:

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

Negative appearance comments are problematic, but not always intentionally harmful

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

Adolescents discussed viewing serious negative commentary, and described how acquaintances rather than close friends were more likely to post these comments publicly on more visual social media, *"some of your mates can put summat good and then you could have*

somebody who doesn't like you but they still follow you and just slag you off on your post" (Jake, Boy, 14, M3). Targets of serious negative appearance comments in social media environments were described as typically occupying a low status in offline peer groups; "*if you're really popular with all the naughty ones … then you've got less chance of somebody being horrible to you because they'll be scared … but like what's it called a low-key nerd … then they might start saying oh erm you look like this you look like that err you're fat you're ugly"* (Chelsea, Girl, 13, M2). In addition, adolescents discussed how girls were described as being more likely to receive negative comments if they did not meet appearance ideals, than boys who were granted more flexibility in terms of appearance:

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

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

Many of the ostensibly negative appearance-related comments made in public spaces on social media are not always intended to cause harm, particularly if made within the boundaries of friendship groups *"some people comment the sick emoji but you know they're*

joking cos you're really good friends with them" (Louise, 12, G1). Relationship to the commenter was described as important when interpreting a negative appearance-related comment. Many adolescents positioned negative appearance comments as humorous and not harmful especially when posted by a friend *"there's not many times when people comment something bad on your post if it is then it'd be your mates and they're joking they'll put ew and then you'd put oh whatever … you don't really take offense"* (Leigh, 14, G3)". Emojis were used as indicators of where negative comments were intended as humorous *"that one's definitely banter … cause they've got the laughing emojis after it just to show they're not being mean they're just trying to have a laugh"* (Daniel, 12, B2). Though a prominent interaction among boys and girls, humorous negative appearance commentary was constructed as more prominent among boy friendship groups:

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

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

4.3. Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.4. Chapter Conclusion

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

manifest in the online environment, and the potential role these play in the development of appearance concerns in adolescence.

Chapter Five: Study Two Content Analysis

***"OMG you look amazing"*: A Content Analysis and Interpretation of the Text-Based Interactions Surrounding Adolescent Girls' Self-Images on Instagram**

5.1. Chapter Five Introduction

This chapter presents some of the empirical findings from Study Two along with a small discussion. In particular, this chapter presents a content analysis of adolescent girls' Instagram content. Before presenting the findings from this study, I have provided a brief overview of relevant literature and a rationale for the study to fully contextualise the findings. This introduction will also detail the thesis research question that this study aimed to address.

Appearance-related content is ubiquitous across highly visual social media platforms, such as Instagram, from the appearance-ideal saturation of images and videos shared, to the high appearance potency of comments and interactions (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2017; Burnell et al., 2021). Use of these highly visual platforms has been linked to body image concerns in young adults and adolescents (Bell et al., 2018; Cohen et al., 2018). The majority of this research has explored the content of images posted and shared to social media, and the associated consequences of engaging in these behaviours (Bell et al., 2018; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). However, images are only part of the functionality of the highly visual social media platforms like Instagram, as they were designed in a way that encourages users to interact through text about these images (e.g., comment on images, caption images). While some studies have started to document the prevalence of appearance commentary in interactions on social media (Burnell et al., 2021; Feltman & Szymanski, 2018), it has not yet attempted to understand the *content* of appearance interactions that accompany images on Instagram in detail, nor how they are understood by those who post them.

Though research is growing, little is still known about the specific nature of adolescents' appearance commentary on social media, including the comments they receive but also how they respond. The analysis presented in this chapter aims to examine the content of girls' real-life appearance commentary on Instagram, using naturally occurring data taken from adolescents' own Instagram profiles. This analysis aims to use an inductive-deductive content analysis (as per, Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018; Jankowski et al., 2014). That said, understandings of appearance commentary cannot solely be made from a top-down researcher perspective. Instead, I aimed to involve youth voice to provide the interpretation and context to the content that is being analysed (Kirshner, O'Donoghue & McLaughlin, 2005). Therefore, interview data from the scroll back part of Study 2 is used to help contextualise these findings, as during the interview participants scrolled through their Instagram posts and comments providing interpretation on the Instagram content that was extracted. The analysis presented in this chapter aims to address the following thesis research questions:

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

In particular, this chapter aims to explore the content of captions, direct comments, and participants first responses to comments posted on Instagram whilst also understanding adolescent girls' understanding and interpretation of the interactions surrounding self-images on Instagram. This chapter aims to examine girls' Instagram data, only, as the boys in study 2 either had no Instagram posts to capture or their parents did not consent to this part of the study. This is something that I have considered in the overall discussion of my thesis. This chapter will start by summarising the subsample of girls that were involved in this analysis. Then, I will provide a detailed overview of the analytic approach including how I developed the coding criteria. The chapter will then present the results from this part of the analysis and a small discussion to summarise and interpret the findings.

5.2. Summary of Chapter Five Method and Analytic Approach

5.2.1. Sample

17 out of 21 (80.95%) adolescent girls (Age *M* = 15.12; *SD* = 1.80; *Range* = 12-18) recruited for Study 2 agreed to participate by sharing their most recent social media posts (up to a maximum of ten posts plus comments). Although I requested participants ten most recent posts, no participants had ten posts available on their Instagram accounts. The reason for this, is that though participants had posted more than this historically, they had also engaged in a process of self-curation wherein they deleted or archived previous posts. Overall, I extracted a total of 85 posts (*M* = 5.00, *SD* = 1.62, *Range* = 3-8).

Of the girls who participated, viewing body talk on social media was a more common occurrence (*M* = 3.88, *SD* = 1.27) than body talk engagement (*M* = 2.82, *SD* = 1.33) in my sample. In other words, girls were more likely to report viewing body talk frequently than to report engaging in it themselves. Furthermore, almost two thirds of girls (64.7%; *n* = 11) reported frequent viewing of social media body talk (i.e., scale point 4-5), whereas less girls reported frequent engaging in it (41.2%; *n* = 7). That said, engaging in, and viewing body talk on social media were strongly correlated ($r_s = .54$; $p < .05$). However, neither were correlated with body satisfaction (engagement $r_s = -.14$; $p = .59$; viewing $r_s = .04$; $p = .88$; overall body satisfaction *M* = 3.07, *SD* = 0.99), inconsistent with past research (Arroyo & Harwood, 2012; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011). More information about how body talk occurrence was measured is explained in detail in Chapter 3.

Table 5.2: Participant Demographic Information and Summary of Instagram Data Provided

Pseudonym Name	**Age**	**Ethnicity**	**Posts**	**Likes (sum)**	**Likes (average per post)**	**Comments (sum)**	**Comments (average per post)**
Jasmine	12	White	7	247	35.29	25	3.57
Jodie	13	White	6	113	18.83	18	3.00

Lucy	14	White	3	172	57.33	17	5.67
Chelsea	15	White	8	578	72.25	49	6.13
Zoe	17	White	6	-	-	1	0.2
Isla	18	White	5	1129	225.80	48	9.60
Shannon	16	White	6	864	144.00	49	8.17
Carly	13	White	3	165	55.00	12	4.00
Mya	18	White	7	883	126.14	36	5.14
Hannah	17	White	4	605	151.25	11	2.75
Lila	15	White	4	475	118.75	99	24.75
Darcie	16	White	6	285	47.5	25	4.17
Alex	14	Mixed race	4	-	-	46	11.5
Emily	13	White	3	207	69.00	61	20.33
Kayleigh	15	White	6	360	60.00	72	12.00
Holly	15	White	3	525	175.00	52	17.33
Lily	16	White	4	-	-	11	2.75

5.2.2. Analytic Approach

Content Analysis. I employed an inductive-deductive quantitative content analysis to analyse the content of girls' Instagram interactions (Krippendorff, 2004; Merriam, 2009). To do this, I analysed the content of girls' images (i.e., type of image posted – self-images, group images etc.), captions (i.e., the title or brief explanation that accompanies the image), comments received (i.e., the type of comment received on an image) and replies (i.e., type of comment posted by the participant in response to a comment on an image). Due to the volume of data extracted, the analysis focused on direct comments (i.e., the initial first comment posted by someone) and first replies to direct comments posted on **self-images that included the participant only** (e.g., a selfie, a group image). I focused on the comments and replies to these

images because of the appearance-related nature of the interactions in the comments section. Images that excluded the participant or featured irrelevant content, typically elicited no response or non-appearance related comments (e.g., “cool dog”), and so captions, comments and responses on these types of images were not included in the analysis. Different coding criteria were developed for each type of data extracted (1) Images (2) Captions, (3) Direct Comments and (4) Participants First Reply to Comments.

Coding Criteria. To develop the coding criteria, an inductive-deductive approach was adopted that used a combination of pre-set coding criteria derived from the existing research literature and the interview data, whilst also remaining open to the development of new coding categories (e.g., Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2017; Jankowski et al., 2014). This approach is consistent with my critical realist ontological positioning, as discussed in Chapter 3. Thus, codes were developed in three ways: (1) based on past research, (2) based on participants description and interpretation of posting and captioning image, giving and receiving comments, and reacting to comments, in the interviews, and (3) based on my perceptions of what was important within the data set.

First, existing research was examined to identify a list of potential codes that could be used as an initial framework for coding. This research included studies that have previously coded social media images (e.g., Bell et al., 2018; Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2017), explored compliments in the context of language application (e.g., Rees-Miller, 2011) and also studies looking at offline body talk (e.g., Salk & Englen-Maddox, 2011). I identified the body talk research as important for the development of the coding framework, as Chapter 4 found that interactions similar to offline body talk were a part of adolescent appearance commentary on social media, so it seemed important to code for these types of interactions in this study. Then codes were discussed between the research team and adapted for the social media environment. The next step involved initial coding of the data. Here, new codes were developed if it was felt

that they were apparent in the data. For example, for the first response to a direct comment, I noticed within the dataset that it was quite common for no response to be received, and so this was developed as a code. Furthermore, as no research has explored the content of *captions* tagged images, a new coding criterion was developed for this entirely, based upon initial reading of the data. As appearance-focused content was the focus, I developed codes to represent this (e.g., appearance-related or non-appearance-related). Last, I performed a template analysis of the interview transcripts (see description of this process below). While this was intended to help with the interpretation of the content analysis, it also highlighted elements of the data that should be included as possible codes in the coding scheme.

In the section that follows, I set out more precise detail of how the coding criteria for each feature of the dataset was developed.

5.2.3. Coding Scheme

Images. First, the images were coded using categories used in past research (e.g., selfie, group image, other; Bell et al., 2018). Thus, this resulted in the development of three categories (1) *Selfie,* (2) *Groupie,* (3) *Multiple Images in One Post*. See Table 5.3 for detailed coding criteria.

Table 5.3: Coding categories and definitions for Images

Category	Definition
Selfie	Image of the participant (taken by the self or others).
Groupie	Images that include multiple people in a picture, including the participant (e.g., a picture of participant with group of friends)
Multiple Images in one post	Posts to Instagram that include multiple pictures (e.g., multiple selfies and groupies). The participant is in the images.

Captions. To my knowledge, no research has explored caption content on Instagram, so there were no pre-existing content analyses to draw coding criteria form. That said, the qualitative work in Chapter 4 suggested that some girls make appearance-related remarks in

the captions to seek out appearance commentary (e.g., “not sure about this, might delete”), so I developed an appearance-related and a non-appearance-related caption category to reflect this. Furthermore, captions were conceptualised as an initiation of body talk as previous offline body talk research has suggested that body talk is initiated through self-disparaging remarks (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011). Thus, subcategories were created for the appearance-related category: a self-deprecating, positive appearance remarks and neutral appearance remarks. Then, consistent with my inductive-deductive approach, I examined the data set to identify any other prominent categories (e.g., use of an emoji only). This process resulted in the development of four categories: (1) *Non-Appearance Related Text*, (2) *Appearance Related Text*, (3) *Emoji Only*, (4) *No Caption*. There was nothing additional in the interview data that suggested a need to add further categories. See Table 5.4 for detailed coding criteria and examples.

Table 5.4: Coding categories, definitions, and examples for Captions

Category	Definition	Example
Non-Appearance Related	Captions that do not reference appearance, usually a generalised description of the image.	*“I love the snow 🌨”* *“bruh how is it new yr already”* *“Better days in Barcelona”*
Appearance Related	Captions that explicitly refer to the appearance of the participant. Subcategories include: (a) positive comment, (b) neutral comment that is neither positive nor negative (e.g., pink hair) (c) self-disparaging comment	(a) Positive: *“I feel pretty on my bday ☺”* (b) General appearance: *“pink hair x”* (c) Self-disparaging: “*anyone that has clear skin is obviously a witch”*
Emoji Only	Captions containing emojis only.	“✨✨” or “🌞🌴💖”
No Caption	Instances where no captions are included.	

Direct Comments. First, codes were developed based on existing research that explored the gendered nature of compliments and identified different types of compliments (Rees-Miller, 2011). This research classified compliments into four basic categories: appearance, performance, possessions, and personality. These categories were used as coding criteria for direct comments. Then consistent with the inductive-deductive approach, I remained open to new coding categories when examining the social media and audio data. As the research questions are concerned with appearance, I designed an appearance comment category which involved numerous subcategories relating specifically to appearance comments. Moving to interview data, girls described how generalised appearance compliments and specific appearance compliments could be interpreted differently, and so these were included as subcategories. Comments such as "OMG WOW" were coded as a generalised positive appearance comment, because although these are not compliments such as "gorgeous" or "pretty", they are still positioned as a compliment on appearance "*even just saying wow or you know it just kind of makes you feel good about your appearance"* (Jodie, 13). Furthermore, past research indicates that weight-related compliments or compliments that are focused on a specific aspect of appearance are common to receive (Calogero et al., 2007), so these were also included as subcategories to the appearance-related category. Some commenters were comparing their appearance to that of the posters (e.g., *"wish I was you"*) which alluded to a self-disparaging tone in that commenters are implicitly acknowledging that they think they look worse than the posters (Salk & Englen-Maddox, 2011), so this was also included as a subcategory of the appearance-related category. Many comments featured just emojis (e.g., a love heart eye emoji), which girls described as a way of complimenting someone on social media, so this was also included as a subcategory of appearance comments.

There were other common comments within the data set that warranted a separate non-appearance category, such as those telling someone to "have a nice time" linked to experiences,

and many comments indicated affection such as “love my bestie”. Finally, some group images included self-disparaging comments left by someone in the image, therefore I created a category to represent this. Therefore, this approach resulted in the development of the following categories and subcategories: (1) Appearance Comments*: (a) Appearance-Weight, (b) Appearance-Specific, (c) Appearance-General, (d) Appearance Comparison, (e) Self-Disparaging and Comparison, (f) Emoji Only,* (2) Non-Appearance Comments: *(a) Performance, (b) Possession, (c) Personality, (d) Experience, (e) Affection, (*f) *Other.* See Table 5.5 for detailed coding criteria and examples.

Table 5.5: Coding categories, definitions, and examples for Direct Comments

Category	Definition	Example
Appearance Comments		
• Appearance Weight	Comment containing a compliment that focuses on someone’s weight.	*“You look so skinny in this”*
• Appearance Specific	Comment containing a compliment that focuses on a specific aspect of appearance such as the face or body.	*“Your hair 😍😍😍”*
• Appearance General	Comment containing a generalised appearance compliment.	*“Omg you are gorgeous”*
• Self-Deprecating and Comparison	Comment that shows comparison to the person in the image or self-deprecating about own appearance through comparison.	*“girl can we swap 😕😔”*
• Emoji Only	Comment containing an emoji only.	😍😍😍😍😍😍😍
Non-Appearance Comments		
• Performance	Comment containing a compliment that focuses on someone’s general skill or ability.	*“How on Earth are you doing ur liner so perfectly?? Ugh 🔥”*
• Possession	Comment containing a compliment that focuses on any tangible object in the image.	*“that’s a nice mirror”*
• Personality	Comment containing a compliment that focuses on a personal quality.	*“ur so edgy wtf these r amazing”*

• Experience	Comment that focuses on the experience in the image.	*"hope ur having the bestttt time ❤️"*
• Affection	Comment that shows affection to the person in the image	*"Omg I miss you so much 😍😍😍😍💗💗💗"*
• Other	Comments that contain content that do not fit into the other categories.	*"lmao we look so guilty in the chips one"*

Participants First Reply to Comments. Study 1 (presented in chapter 4) found that some appearance-related interactions on social media echo similarities to body talk I observe in an offline environment; therefore, I adapted the coding criteria created by Salk & Engeln-Maddox (2011) to reflect the online environment. Denial (*e.g., explicitly denying a compliment*), empathy (e.*g., someone responding to a self-disparaging comment saying they feel the same way*) and probing (*e.g., questioning why a self-disparaging commenter feels that way*) were all codes that may be evident in an online environment and so these were included as codes. Previous body talk research (e.g., Mills, Mort & Trawley, 2019) has also identified the prevalence of reciprocation in body talk utterances, so this was developed as a category. I also remained open to new coding categories that were apparent within the data set and more appropriate for the context of social media, such as use of emoji, responding with gratitude and showing affection, all of which participants discussed as common responses in the scroll-back interview part of the study. Thus, this approach resulted in the development of the following categories: (1) *Denial, (2) Empathy, (3) Probing,* (4) *Reciprocate,* (5) *Emoji Only,* (6) *Gratitude,* (7) *Affection,* (8) *No Response,* (9) *Other.* See Table 5.6 for detailed coding criteria and examples.

Table 5.6: Coding categories, definitions, and examples for First Responses

Category	Definition	Example
Denial	Responses containing explicit denial of the compliment or that involve stopping or shutting it down.	*"omg shush"*

Empathy	Responses to self-disparaging comments containing statements that indicate that they feel the same way.	*"I feel that way too sometimes"*
Probing	Responses to self-disparaging remarks which question why a commenter feels that way.	*"why would you say that?"*
Reciprocate	Responses that involve reciprocating the comment/compliment or responding with another compliment.	*"says u 🤩' "don't act like you' aren't too 🤩"*
Emoji Only	Responses containing an emoji only.	"🥰😸"
Gratitude	Responses containing expression of gratitude or that show acceptance of the compliment.	*"omg thankyou" "I like my trousers too"*
Affection	Responses containing an expression of love or affection. Also, responses that express interest in catching up.	*"I love u" "miss u"*
No Response	Instances where no response was provided by the participant	
Other	Responses that do not fit into the other categories.	*"art in its finest form"*

Coding Process. All finalised codes were discussed in detail with my supervisory team and edited where appropriate. I initially coded the data set, and then a 75% random subsample was coded by an independent researcher within the university. The data were coded blindly to assess inter-rater reliability and agreement between codes. Cohen's kappa showed high inter-rater reliability between the two coders for images (K = .90 - 1.0, see Table 5.7), captions (K = 1.0, see Table 5.8), direct comments (K = .71 - 1.0, see Table 5.9) and participants first responses (K = .75 - 1.0, see Table 5.10). The frequency, count and Cohen's kappa value for all coding categories for each section are presented in Tables 5.7-5.10 within the results section.

Template Analysis

As described in Chapter 5, adolescents participated in one-to-one interviews which involved a scroll-back technique. This is where adolescents discussed and interpreted the images, captions, comments, and responses that were captured for the content analysis. To

analyse adolescent interpretation and understanding of the captured data I performed a template analysis (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley & King, 2015) on the scroll-back part of the interview data. This approach involved the development of a coding template which then summarises key themes that are identified as important and representative within the data set, which is then further applied to the data. Within this part of the analysis, I started with a priori themes developed from a subset of the data (five interviews). I identified these - in advance - as relevant to the whole data set and overarching research questions. These initial themes were then organised into meaningful and hierarchical clusters, which then defined the initial coding template. This led to the development of three themes which were, (1) initiating body talk; images and captions, (2) commentary on self-images, and (3) replying to comments. I then coded the data accordingly to this template. This template analysis was conducted before the formal content analysis as it helped identify any points of interest for the content analysis, and helped with the development of the coding criteria described in the previous section. The themes are presented in the next subsection along with the findings from the content analysis to provide girls' interpretation of the coded data.

5.4. Results

In total, I extracted 85 posts. Nine of these posts were excluded from the analysis as they were images that excluded the participant or featured irrelevant content. Therefore, the final analysis included 77 images and captions, 630 direct comments and 459 of participants first replies to direct comments.

5.4.1. Images

79.2% of images included a selfie (*n* = 61). Groupies were less common (15.6%; *n* = 12). 5.2% of posts included multiple pictures of both selfies and groupies (*n* = 4). See Table 5.7 for count, percentage, and Cohen's Kappa for each category.

Table 5.7: Count, percentages, and Cohen's Kappa for Image categories

Category	Count	Percent	Cohen's Kappa
Selfie	61	79.2%	.97
Groupie	12	15.6%	.90
Multiple Images in One Post	4	5.2%	1.0

5.4.2. Captions

Very few image captions were appearance-related (9.5%; *n* = 8). Of the appearance-related captions, only one caption was an adolescent being positive about their own appearance (e.g., *"I feel pretty on my bday* 😊"), and one was self-deprecating in nature (e.g., *"anyone that has clear skin is obviously a witch*"). The other appearance-related captions were more general statements that were neither positive nor negative (e.g., *"gotta make the most of this fringe before I can't do anything with it*", *"contacts in today I look so different"*). 43 captions were non-appearance related (50.6%) thus the most common type of caption (e.g., "*photo shoot at the park", "so much love for last night", "you're killing me </3"*), followed by captions that

included an emoji only (29.4%; *n* = 25). Posts with no captions were less common (10.6%; *n* = 9). See Table 5.8 for count, percentage, and Cohen's Kappa for each coding category.

Table 5.8: Count, percentages, and Cohen's Kappa for Caption categories

Category	Count	Percentage	Cohen's Kappa
Non-Appearance Related	36	47.4%	1.0
Appearance-Related	8	9.4%	
● positive comment	1	1.18%	1.0
● neutral comment that is neither positive nor negative (e.g., pink hair)	6	7.06%	1.0
● self-disparaging comment	1	1.18%	1.0
Emoji Only	25	29.4%	1.0
No Caption	7	9.2%	1.0

Theme 1: Initiating Body Talk: Images and Captions

There were differing views about the importance of captions on the images posted to social media. For example some girls described how captions were not that important to them and were mainly used as a way of explaining the image *"I don't really usually put captions on my thing unless I want to explain it like I don't really know I just don't usually put captions cause it just doesn't matter to me"* (Alex, 14) and *"I do sometimes see people posting stuff with the caption like I don't know what to caption this or you know like just pretend that I've written something cool and stuff like that so I think maybe other people do feel a bit of pressure but I don't think that anyone really expects me to have something really you know sort of thought provoking or insightful as my caption so I don't feel any pressure to put anything like that"*

(Isla, 18). That said, some girls suggest that the caption is a way of highlighting something in the image to the audience, *"well I've got a caption if like a couple months ago about just I'd dyed my hair pink well not like permanently and I put pink hair so it's like normally like little things I would post about like certain particular appearance things"* (Carly, 13).

However, although some girls considered the caption as having little importance, some girls contradicted this and described how it was very important to caption an image correctly: "*it's like you have to like validate yourself by saying something cool like as a caption"* (Holly, 15). The captions may play an important self-presentation role for some girls, especially girls who feel more self-conscious *"I don't think the caption is necessarily the most important part but I don't really put a lot of thought into it, I don't think it's more just trying to be I guess relatable cause sometimes I feel a little embarrassed about posting selfies because I've sort of grew up being 'oh I'm never going to be one of those girls' cause it was quite judgey but then I started doing it more and I enjoy it because it feels nice to sort of be confident but then the caption feels like I need to try and humanise it a bit like be weird or something"* (Darcie, 16). In this way, the captions interact with the images and play an important self-presentational role when posting an image to social media, as the caption and image work together to initiate interaction about appearance (i.e., in the form of comments and responses).

5.4.3. Direct Comments

Overall, there were 630 direct comments analysed in the data set. Appearance comments were the most common (79.2%; n = 499). Of the subcategories, generalised positive appearance comments (e.g., "omg you are gorgeous" "ur unreal") were most common (61.1%; n = 385). Emojis were the second most common type of comment (e.g., "😍😍"; 16.7%; n = 105). However, few of the comments were self-deprecating (1.8%; n = 11). Specific appearance-related comments were rare (0.5%; n = 4), and none of the comments were weight-related. Comments showing affection to the poster were also a common type of direct comment

(8.3%; *n* = 52). Comments coded as other were common with 7.6% (*n* = 48) of comments were coded as other (i.e., classified as not fitting into the other categories). Non-appearance related comments were less prevalent. There were few comments about performance (1.1%; *n* = 7), experience (1.1%; *n* = 7), personality (1%; *n* = 6), and possessions (0.8%; *n* = 5). See Table 5.9 for category counts, percentages, and Cohen's Kappa.

Table 5.9: Count, percentages, and Cohen's Kappa for Direct Comment categories

Category	Count	Percentage	Cohen's Kappa
Appearance Comments	499	79.2%	N/A
• Appearance Weight	0	0%	n/a
• Appearance Specific	4	0.6%	1.0
• Appearance General	385	61.1%	.88
• Self-deprecating and Comparisons	11	1.8%	.86
• Emoji Only	105	16.7%	.98
Non-Appearance Comments	125	20.8%	N/A
• Performance	7	1.1%	.80
• Possession	5	0.8%	1.0
• Personality	6	1%	1.0
• Experience	7	1.1%	.75
• Affection	52	8.3%	.88
• Other	48	7.6%	.71

Theme 2: Commentary on Images

Girls expressed ambivalent feelings towards receiving general vs. specific appearance-related comments. Specific appearance-related comments had the ability to make the receiver question other aspects of your appearance *"yeah like I like get like you're eyes are nice and stuff and I'm like well what about the rest of my face"* (Rebecca, 16), whereas some girls find these generalised comments have less meaning: *"you always get general erm comments that are like "you're gorgeous" or "you're pretty" or "wow" and I'm like meh I think I appreciate it and everything but it's like you're either it's just very generalised and not meaningful it's not personal its more just words"* (Chelsea, 15). They further describe how commenting with a specific appearance compliment (e.g., "your eyes") may highlight this feature to the poster in a negative way *"I don't tend to comment on quite specific things especially with appearance because it's so difficult to change and if you're complimenting specific things, it might make them notice those things more and it could actually have a negative effect"* (Lily, 16). Therefore, this may help explain why generalised appearance comments are more common on girls' Instagram posts compared to specific appearance comments.

Interestingly, appearance comparisons were positioned as a compliment on the participants' appearance by participants *"this comment "can I be you" I don't know it made me feel good about myself, but it does make her seem not as confident"* (Lila, 15). However, it is often positioned by girls as a humorous interaction *"obviously like about the whole hating yourself comment thing obviously Zoe put that but erm she doesn't mean it in like a serious way like it's not funny but it's like we I said to her like 'oh no you look fine Zoe what do you mean' ... and the one's that Zoe posted I just remember I didn't like myself in them but I just let her post them anyways*" (Hannah, 17).

All emojis were positively appearance focused or emojis to show affection, for example the heart eye emoji was interpreted as a compliment *"and you know how they put the love heart eyes it's kind of just making you feel good about yourself* (Alex, 14). There was no evidence of

receiving ostensibly negative emojis. Interestingly, they discussed how there are certain ways to compliment certain types of friends, with use of emoji being common with people you know less well, suggesting an emoji only comment is still an appearance-related compliment: *"if I'm not so close with them and they're like online friend then I'd probably just erm comment erm the heart eye emojis"* (Lucy, 14).

Although less common, there were still comments that were about performance (e.g., "you are so good at makeup") or experience (e.g., "have a good time"), and some girls described preferring these types of comments rather than appearance-related comments: "*I think I'd prefer the comments about the post or the activity that we'd been doing or something like that because I don't really like the idea of people focusing on my body in these sorts of pictures because I don't I'm not really that bothered about my body or anything so I don't know why others should draw attention to it so I much prefer the more general vibes of the post because I know I already like that aspect of it*" (Lily, 16).

5.4.4. Participants First Reply to Direct Comments

Overall, I analysed 459 first replies. There were 170 no responses (27%), but of these 76 comments (44.71%) had a "like" from the participant. Of the first replies analysed, 21% included a thank you for the comment (n = 132), and 20.2% included an expression of love and affection (n = 127). Reciprocating the comment was also a common first reply (11%; n = 69). 10.6% of initial responses included only an emoji as the reply (n = 67), and 7.9% of replies were coded as other (n = 50), meaning they did not fit into the other categories. Less common responses included explicit denial of the direct comment (2.4%; n = 15). No responses were coded as empathy or probing in this data set. See Table 5.10 for category counts, percentages, and Cohen's Kappa.

Table 5.10: Count, percentages, and Cohen's Kappa for First Response categories

Category	Count	Percentages	Cohen's Kappa

Denial	15	2.4%	.75
Empathy	0	0	1.0
Probing	0	0	1.0
Reciprocate	69	11%	.82
Emoji Only	67	10.6%	.94
Gratitude	132	21%	.81
Affection	127	20.2%	.81
No Response	170	27%	1.0
Other	50	7.9%	.75

Theme 3: Replying to Comments

Many participants who had not replied to a comment discussed "liking" the comment as a way of showing appreciation "*sometimes I'll reply but I feel like a like is just enough, I don't have to go through every single one to say thanks they know that I'm thankful"* (Hannah, 17). Despite a thank you response being a frequent occurrence girls positioned this as potentially making you look bad to others *"I think if online if I had just replied to that comment saying "thanks" like I know it's not rude but to me that could come across rude*" (Mya, 18), and also like you are expecting compliments "*say I just receive a comment but I don't reply to it sometimes I think it can seem like I'm being big headed and like I know it, but that's not what I want other people to think at all"* (Lila, 15).

Reciprocating a compliment instead of accepting it is a way of avoiding an "attention seeking" label on social media *"accepting compliments like obviously it's something that happens but it feels a bit strange to do like I feel like I have to reciprocate so I'm not looking like I'm getting attention"* (Darcie, 16). It is also positioned as an expectation online *"I feel like when someone comments something nice you have to sort of you don't have to but it's just kind of something that's in built in us to like compliment them back"* (Mya, 18), but also

sometimes to make the commenter feel good as well "*sometimes it's to make that person that commented feel better about themselves like oh no it's not I'm not I don't look nice you look nice or like to make them feel better about themselves"* (Alex, 14). Emojis are a way of providing a response and showing affection without having to say much "*I don't know how to respond to positive comments, so I usually just err put like a heart emoji which kind of indicates 'thank you I appreciate that'"* (Zoe, 17).

Although less common, denying a comment is positioned as an automatic response *"so if you post a picture of yourself and then people comment like 'oh yeah, you're really pretty' it's just like an automatic response to just deny it like even if you think you look alright in the picture… I don't know why that's a thing, but I just feel like you should deny it"* (Holly, 15), but also how denial may also be intertwined with a reciprocation of the comment (e.g., "don't be silly as if, have you seen yourself?").

5.5. Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the content of text-based appearance-related exchanges on adolescent girls' Instagram posts. More specifically, inductive-deductive content analysis was used to explore the content of images and captions posted by adolescent girls, the comments girls received on these posts, and how girls then reply to these comments. I then drew on interview data to help interpret and contextualise the findings. A large proportion (79.2%) of direct comments on self-images were appearance-focused, including either generalised appearance-related compliments or emojis that were largely interpreted as being appearance-related by the participants. Common responses to comments included gratitude, affection, or reciprocation. While appearance-focused text was common in comment sections, it was rarely included in captions; less than ten percent of captions referred explicitly to appearance.

Captions on self-images were typically non-appearance-related, despite being attached to self-images that girls typically post for appearance-related motives (e.g., for reassurance). Their discussion of captions suggests that self-presentational concerns are still present when captioning an image on Instagram as there is a need to appear relatable through the caption. I found little evidence of self-disparaging remarks on self-images served to "instigate" body talk; only one caption was coded as self-disparaging. This is in contrast to Chapter 4, where adolescents described self-deprecation as a common way to caption images. One possible explanation for this lies in adolescent girls' self-curation practices on Instagram, as it may be that posts with disparaging remarks are more likely to be deleted. This is particularly likely given how the findings in Chapter 4 suggest that self-disparaging remarks are viewed negatively by peers and positioned as 'attention seeking'. This finding also contrasts with offline body talk research, wherein self-disparaging remarks (e.g., saying to someone "does my bum look big in this?") are common ways of instigating fat talk (Salk & Engeln-Maddox,

2011). It may be that the act of posting a selfie acts as a reassurance seeking gesture similar to a self-disparaging remark functions in the offline context. Indeed, research supports the notion that posting a self-image is a way of seeking reassurance, in the form of appearance compliments, from peers (Bell, 2019; Chua & Chang, 2016). This suggests that the social media environment transforms the experience of body talk, in that posting images is a form of reassurance seeking behaviour (Nesi et al., 2021).

There were some self-disparaging remarks in the dataset (e.g., one caption was self-disparaging). In addition, there were instances of self-deprecating comments posted on group images by someone in the image. Self-deprecation is usually viewed as a reassurance seeking behaviour (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011), however it may be intended as a genuine comment as people often see themselves differently to others, and thus may genuinely dislike the image. The participant who posted the image may have been over focused on their own appearance in the image, for self-presentational reasons (e.g., Bell, 2019) that they did not consider other people. Previous research has shown how young people "de-tag" images on Facebook as a self-presentation strategy because they do not like the way they look in an image (Birnholtz, Burker & Steele, 2017; Lang & Barton, 2015), so these self-deprecating comments may be genuine uncertainty and dislike for own appearance in the image. It may be that there is a tendency for girls to appear less self-deprecating on their own social media pages (i.e., when they post the image) but are more likely to do this when they show up in other people's images (e.g., a groupie) due to the stigma surrounding self-deprecation on social media.

Comments on posts were more likely to be appearance-related and tended to be positive. This is consistent with previous research that found positive comments were more commonly received on self-images, than negative comments (Burnell et al., 2021). It is also consistent with the findings in Chapter 4 in that being positive to one another in public social media spaces is considered the norm, especially among girls. My data shows that these

perceptions reflect realities within the social media, and so often an innovative means of triangulation. Furthermore, research shows adolescents are keen to curate their Instagram to present a certain version of themselves (Bell, 2019; Yau & Reich, 2019), and the types of comments received may also play a role in this. Positive self-presentations in public social media channels are important to adolescents, as being negative to others online makes you look like a bad person (Burnette et al., 2017). Previous research has highlighted the self-presentational concerns are present in the images posted to social media (Bell, 2019; Chua & Chang, 2016), but it may also be that adolescents curate their posts so that only positive comments remain in the comments section. Therefore, it may be expected that on public Instagram posts the interactions are positive. This does not mean that negative appearance comments do not happen, it may just be that that they occur in private channels (e.g., direct messages) or where anonymity is afforded (e.g., Nesi et al., 2018; Chapter 4).

Previous research that has explored the content of compliments in a face-to-face situation, found that appearance-related compliments tend to focus on something specific, such as weight (e.g., you look so skinny in those jeans; Calogero, Herbozo & Thompson, 2009). However, the present content analysis showed that generalised appearance compliments were more common than specific appearance compliments (e.g., facial, body or weight related compliment). In the interview data, girls described the possible negative effects of giving and receiving specific appearance compliments, as they have the potential to make people question the other aspects of their appearance or internalise the comment as a goal that they need to achieve to get the same validation in the future (Thompson et al., 1999; Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian & Halliwell, 2015). In this way, girls suggest that they engage in behaviours that mirror what they would like to receive (i.e., they will only give generalised appearance compliments so they can receive them too). Girls appear to have a heightened awareness of compliment culture wherein general appearance compliments can have a positive impact,

whilst recognising that specific appearance compliment may impact the receiver negatively (e.g., Calogero et al., 2009). However, they also questioned the generalised comments, suggesting that compliments – whether they are general or specific - may generate an ambivalent response, despite being highly sought after.

Responses to comments were largely comments that indicated gratitude or showing affection, however reciprocation of a compliment was also a common response from participants. This is despite interview data showing that participants experienced ambivalent feelings upon receipt of them. Self-presentational concerns appear to be present in the types of responses given, with girls suggesting that there is a need to reply in an appropriate way to avoid being perceived negatively, consistent with previous research (Chua & Chang, 2016). For instance, they described how expressing gratitude (e.g., saying thank you) for receiving a compliment can make someone look rude or arrogant, and like the compliment was expected. In contrast, reciprocation of a compliment was constructed as the favoured and most appropriate response to a compliment, consistent with previous research examining how people receive offline compliments (Rees-Miller, 2011). This reciprocation was constructed as serving many functions; a way of being nice to the commenter and expressing gratitude, but also a way of deflecting the compliment because of the emotional ambivalence they experience when receiving them and the socially unacceptability of accepting them. Adolescents' self-presentational concerns seem to strongly influence their responses (e.g., not wanting to appear arrogant or as though they were expecting compliments). This may reflect a gender norm within society, wherein girls are expected to be modest especially with appearance so use reciprocation online as a way of deflecting compliments and appearing modest about appearance (Britton et al., 2006).

5.6. Chapter Conclusion

The current study captured adolescent girls' real-life Instagram data to explore the content and frequency of appearance-related messages, as well as understanding their own interpretation of these interactions. My findings highlight the prevalence of appearance-related commentary on Instagram (e.g., 79.2% of comments were appearance-related). Generalised appearance compliments were most common and more accepted by adolescent girls than specific appearance-related compliments. Self-presentational concerns were also particularly salient as girls positioned the response to a direct comment as important to how they were presenting themselves, especially on self-images. The findings also have important implications for objectification theory by highlighting the ways in which text-based interactions (e.g., comments and responses) are associated with adolescent girls adopting an external viewers perspective of appearance. Further research is needed to understand the associated consequences of such appearance-related messages and the unique relationships between specific comments and responses and body image variables.

Chapter Six: Study Two Thematic Analysis of Girls Data

***"It just sort of drills into someone that they need to look good and they need to be complimented on their appearance":* Girls' Experiences of Online Body Talk in the Development of Body Image**

6.1. Chapter Six Introduction

This chapter presents some of the empirical findings from Study Two along with a small discussion. In particular, this chapter presents a thematic analysis of adolescent girls' experiences of online body talk in the development of body image. Before presenting the findings from this study, I have provided a brief overview of relevant literature and a rationale for the study to fully contextualise the findings. This introduction will also detail the thesis research question that this study aimed to address.

As the literature review in Chapter 2 describes, research suggests that girls engage in more appearance interactions than boys (Slater & Tiggemann, 2011), and these form part of girls' everyday interactions with peers (Jones, 2004; Lawler & Nixon, 2011). Previous research suggests that these interactions provide an environment in which appearance pressures, norms and ideals are reproduced, reinforced, and negotiated as important within the peer group (Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). Girls frequently engage in body talk offline and this type of interaction can also serve multiple functions, e.g., reassurance-seeking, self-protection, or an indicator of belonging (Britton et al., 2006; Mills & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2017), and is considered a social norm among adolescent girl peer groups (Strandbu & Kvalem, 2014). Survey and experimental research have linked engagement in body talk, both offline and online, with body dissatisfaction and self-objectification among young girls and women (Calogero et al., 2009; Bailey & Ricciardelli, 2010; Wang et al., 2019).

Although there is this small yet growing body of research that has explored girls' frequency and engagement in appearance commentary (i.e., body talk) on social media, very little research has qualitatively explored adolescent girls' perceptions and experiences of online body talk and how this influences their body image. Appearance interactions, including body talk, are not simply mirrored from an offline context to an online environment (see findings from Chapter 4 and Chapter 5). Understood within the lens of the transformation framework, these interactions are seen to be transformed, altered, and constrained by social media platform design, most notably the visualness, publicness and permanence of platforms (Nesi et al., 2018). It is notable from the findings presented in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 that body talk on social media differs from its offline counterpart. In particular, in Chapter 4 adolescents described self-deprecation as a sign of modesty but that this was not explicit self-deprecating statements such as "I feel fat" but rather in a way that acknowledges an attempt to look good in a selfie (e.g., "feel cute might delete later"). However, this contradicts the findings presented in Chapter 5. Here, I found minimal evidence of explicit self-deprecation and adolescents' interpretation of receiving comments and ways to respond indicate that social media changes the way these interactions manifests. Posting a selfie to Instagram typically initiates the appearance commentary, which contrasts with making a self-disparaging remark offline (Mills & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2017). Furthermore, Chapter 5 highlights the prevalence of generalised appearance comments rather than specific, but self-presentational concerns were salient when responding to compliments on self-images, as the receiver responded to compliments in socially sanctioned ways (e.g., reciprocating a compliment rather than accepting it) to show some modesty and uncertainty with appearance. Thus, it appears that selfies are enough to elicit appearance-related reassurances and that self-deprecation (like is seen in body talk offline) is not needed. Extending upon this, this chapter aims to provide a more in-depth exploration regarding these processes.

The findings presented in the previous chapter (Chapter 5) explored appearance comments in a real-world context by documenting the content and frequency of appearance-related comments and interview data was used to understand how adolescent girls interpret these interactions. The aim of the present study is to explore girls' experiences of body talk engagement more holistically and understand how these experiences influence their body image. This will be achieved through an in-depth reflexive thematic analysis of girls interview data. The analysis presented in this chapter aims to address the following thesis research questions:

RQ$_2$. *How does gender shape adolescents' understandings and experiences of appearance interactions on social media?*

RQ$_3$. *What role do appearance interactions on social media play in adolescents' body image concerns and broader developmental outcomes?*

In particular, this chapter aims to explore girls' experiences of online body talk and how these experiences influence adolescent girls' body image and broader developmental outcomes. This chapter will start by summarising the sample involved in this analysis. Then, this chapter will present the results from this data and a small discussion to summarise and interpret the findings.

6.2. Summary of Chapter Six Method

6.2.1. Sample

In this chapter, interview data from all girls who participated in Study 2 is analysed; 21 adolescent girls (*Age M* = 15.05; *SD* = 1.83; *Range* = 12-18 years). Interviews were conducted online via Zoom and lasted between 29:43 - 56:48 minutes (*M* = 42.85; *SD* = 7.29). All participants have been assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. See Table 6.11 for participant pseudonyms and demographic information.

Table 6.11: Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym Name	**Age**	**Race/ethnicity**
Jasmine	12	White
Amy	14	Mixed race
Jodie	13	White
Lucy	14	White
Chelsea	15	White
Zoe	17	White
Isla	18	White
Harper	12	White
Shannon	16	White
Carly	13	White
Mya	18	White
Hannah	17	White
Lila	15	White
Darcie	16	White
Alex	14	Mixed race
Emily	13	White

Kayleigh	15	White
Holly	15	White
Rebecca	16	White
Lily	16	White
Charlotte	16	White

6.2.2. Analytic Procedure

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used analyse the interview data, using the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). A detailed description of this analytic procedure is explained in Chapter 3.

6.3. Results

Through the process of thematic analysis, three themes were developed to encapsulate adolescents' personal experiences about online body talk and how this contributes to their body image.

Body talk reinforces appearance concerns

This theme encapsulates the way in which online body talk reinforces appearance and social norms, and how this also contributes to an adolescent's perceptions and experiences of appearance concerns. All types of appearance compliments were described as reinforcing elements of the appearance ideal (e.g., thinness, being attractive etc.) as they highlight the importance of physical attractiveness *"it just sort of drills into someone that they need to look good and they need to be complimented on their appearance and that looking like that is how they should be so if they have an off day where they don't get those compliments they'll just feel like there's something wrong"* (Charlotte, 16). However, some adolescents differentiated between different types of compliments, and received some (e.g., general compliments; *"beautiful"*) more positively than others. For example, weight focused compliments (e.g., "you are so skinny") were positioned as potentially detrimental to body image as it is something that could not easily be changed *"I've had comments before about like you look skinny in this and it's just not something I can quickly change so I wouldn't respond to it … I prefer the comments about the post or activity because I don't really like the idea of people focusing on my body"* (Lily, 16). Some adolescents perceived specific appearance comments as negative because they confirm the culturally accepted idea that you must meet certain ideals (e.g., small waist) to gain validation about appearance:

> I think I'd be fine with them if they focused on something that was kind of not totally out of my control but like if it was a comment on my eyes I'd probably be far more receptive to that than one about my waist because that's not something where I have

> self-confidence issues…so I posted something like a couple of years ago that has just stuck with me I put on this skirt and it was quite like sort of tight across the waist and someone wrote tiny waist and a love heart emoji so I didn't really take that as a compliment because it felt like I needed to have that in order to gain that validation because I definitely don't naturally have a small waist. (Darcie, 16).

Compliments are not only reinforcing culturally devised appearance norms and ideals, but they also reinforce that the image is acceptable. As such, compliments were constructed as a form of peer group acceptance: "*me and my friends do it for acceptance sort of wanting to you know fit in and almost like reassurance that the picture is good if people are commenting it means they like the picture so I must look good and so I do think it impacts people as they can affect you massively as for me the comments do help you get close to new people at school"* (Chelsea, 15). They are also reassurance that the image meets the culturally accepted norms and standards surrounding appearance: *"it's like you feel good like yeah I do look good in this and people think it cause they are commenting nice things*" (Lily, 16). Compliments are perceived as having a positive impact as they help reinforce, create, and maintain friendships, but at the same time they also serve to reinforce appearance norms.

Viewing appearance commentary online can also reinforce appearance norms and contribute to the way girls feel about their body image. Self-deprecating appearance-related comments were described as especially problematic. Girls described how viewing self-deprecating remarks of other could diminish their confidence, especially if the person making the remark adhered to attractiveness ideals: *"I also think it can kind of drag other people down who are maybe feeling more insecure than others cause if you are really good looking and then there's someone who's like the person who's really good looking is saying 'oh no I don't like the way I look' or if someone who's got a really good body is like 'oh no I'm so fat' it could drag people down"* (Holly, 15). In particular, they described how these interactions encourage

appearance comparisons to those making the self-disparaging remark: *"there was this one time where this absolutely drop dead gorgeous girl and she was saying on her post 'oh I look absolutely hideous in this photo my nose is way too big' and then I started kind of comparing her to me and I thought 'oh my nose is bigger than that and I was confident with this before but maybe that means that my nose is way too big' and then you start to analyse yourself because you think this person looks incredible but because they don't like how they look you kind of it kind of makes you reflect on yourself and stuff like that so it can cause you to feel quite negative"* (Lily, 16). Viewing negative appearance comments on other public posts was also described as contributing to the development of appearance-related concerns and insecurities:

> I think the negative comments mean a lot especially and even if they're not directed at you there are things that I didn't know were meant to be like insecurities that I saw other people comment on and I was like wait hang on you know I have that like I didn't realise that was meant to be a bad thing like erm like hairy arms I never knew that people cared about it that people shared their arms and stuff like that erm hip dips I never I didn't even know there was a word for that and it wasn't till I saw people commenting on their hip dips and I looked in the mirror and I was like 'oh wait is this something I'm meant to be insecure about I didn't even realise I never even noticed before so even though they might think it's harmless making those comments about themselves and obviously you know it's important to talk about your own insecurities and turn that into a positive thing but I think there needs to be a lot more recognition about how that effects other people as well. (Isla, 18).

However, not all adolescents in these interviews described themselves as adhering to social norms surrounding women appearance ideals. Girls who deviated from the idealised appearance norms (e.g., by dressing differently to the feminised norms etc.) were perceived as

unpopular and thus described being more likely to receive negative commentary and even bullying: "*I wasn't really- well- I'm still not very popular at school and if anyone from my school would follow me about a year ago erm because I used to dress differently and do my makeup different to them and I still do they don't really accept me so they bully me because I look different and my style is different"* (Lucy, 14). Adolescents who perceived themselves as different to social norms tended to orientate towards social media differently. Some adolescents try to use social media more secretively, and be more mindful about the types of images they are posting: *"being a bit different it definitely does change how I use it it's a lot more secretive type thing like I very rarely post anything about myself or things like that it's usually just like taking pictures and writing the date on it and where it was taken"* (Zoe, 17). As one of the adolescents who identified as deviating from the culturally accepted appearance norm, Zoe described not posting any self-images to avoid negativity. In particular, she described how sexuality (for example, identifying as bisexual or non-gender conforming, as Zoe openly disclosed that she was bisexual) can make you a target of negative comments if you post self-images to social media:

> I don't post selfies because there's a lot of hate so I just stay clear of that because erm well there's this whole situation at college at the minute and the whole of these groups don't like me because of my sexuality and who I am so they would usually come onto my posts and make comments and things like that erm they'll come on my snapchat even though I didn't even use Snapchat which is really funny so all they did was take a screenshot of my actual profile for some reason erm and share it around and things like that so I kept receiving requests from them and things and then they just make pretty nasty comments and then they speak about it in college so it's just personally social media is just a wall of hate unless it is family based or really close friends but even then

you can't be certain that they're not just going to fall against you for something. (Zoe, 17).

Appearance commentary – both real and imagined – as a source of rumination

The second theme describes how adolescents constructed appearance-related interactions – both the real and the imagined – as important, and a source of constant rumination and confusion. Compliments received on self-images online were described as a momentary everyday way of boosting confidence "*but if on a comment like this one here [referring to Instagram post] they have said 'oh you're really pretty' or 'you look really good' that sort of uplifted me and I was like 'I do I really do' so it kind of gives you some confidence as well so even if you don't believe in yourself, you still have that little bit of confidence from the comments section"* (Jasmine, 12). However, they described how this confidence was short-lived as – despite receiving positive feedback – they could still reflect on the images and identify problems in their appearance: "*I get lovely comments from everyone like I don't have problems but sometimes I still look at the picture and think oh no that's not good enough I just won't keep it up so yeah"* (Jodie, 13). Girls described how they also minimised the intentions of commenters, perceiving others to comment "*just for the sake of it*" (Isla, 18), which leads them to question the authenticity of the compliment: *"sometimes people can like say it but not actually mean it and then sometimes they actually mean it"* (Emily, 13).

However, as these self-images were seen as representing an idealised version of the self rather than an actual version of the self, adolescents described how, despite the instant boost, the compliments received made them question your appearance in the offline world: *"it's funny the compliments are to do with the picture rather than how I look normally and when you think about it like that you're like 'ooo well do I not look like it all the time and stuff'"* (Rebecca, 16). Compliments on highly filtered images are also a source of rumination: *"I quite like the fact that the ones that haven't got filters on necessarily are the ones that get comments like this*

cause if all of these have got filters on and they've all got comments but like I don't know there all a bit like you don't feel as good when you've got comments on these because you've got all these filters on your pictures it's like they're being influenced and they're not the natural kind of pictures" (Chelsea, 15). Therefore, feedback on images that the creator perceives as more authentic (i.e., a natural image with no filters) has more of a momentary positive effect on some adolescents, especially those who describe themselves as more self-conscious (e.g., Chelsea described herself as very self-conscious of her skin).

Although receiving no feedback on a post is rare, it was still something they described spending time ruminating about when posting a self-image to social media. Receiving no comments on a post had potential to elicit negative feelings and lead to the post being deleted: *"if it was just a picture of me it would probably make me feel I don't know I wouldn't feel good about my post I would probably end up taking it down… because you question yourself in the picture what you look like cause like obviously most of the comments are people commenting on what they look like so if you don't get any that's when you think do I not look good in this or something like that but by deleting it it's just not there anymore so people can't comment"* (Lila, 15). Some girls' experiences of rumination on receiving no commentary leads them to avoid posting content as often: *"that's why I don't post very often because if I get no comments, it makes me worried about how others will notice me and what they're thinking of me"* (Lily, 16).

Adolescents also described how they ruminate and anticipate potential negative appearance commentary when posting to Instagram, despite being rare to receive on public platforms: *"I think about the way people react like most of the time I'm more self-conscious that people are going to be like horrible about it - but then no one ever is"* (Holly, 15). They also discussed the anticipation of private negative comments in response to posting pictures on Instagram and ruminate about this. Because of this, adolescents avoid fully expressing

themselves online: *"I wouldn't say I fully express myself on there because of the judgement I feel like erm yeah because when people follow you erm like I've had stories sent to me making fun of people's looks and appearances and because I know that happens to other people I always think that might happen to me that's why I put off posting"* (Jodie, 13). Therefore, adolescents position the anticipation of feedback – both positive and negative – as exerting a bigger influence on mood than the actual feedback when engaging with Instagram.

The conflicting desire to look good under the gaze of others online

The final theme explores the way in which adolescents want to look good under the gaze of others online –both boys and girls – and how body talk plays a role in this. On social media, adolescents described the desire to look good and so engage in selective self-presentation techniques when posting images. Presentation to others is considered important and the permanent nature of public Instagram content means adolescents can scroll back through their images to make sure their older posts still represent an appealing version of themselves. This is when they engage in more self-judgement and scrutinization of appearance:

> Interviewer: how did you feel when you posted this image
>
> Darcie, 16: at the time confident but looking back I definitely scroll back through my Instagram looking at my posts and being a bit oh I don't really like that thing or so I think that looked a bit strange so there's definitely an element of judging how I present myself to other people that I won't see every day.

There appears to be a desire to carefully judge how you are presenting yourself to others on social media, but also there seems to be judgement from girls about other people's motives for posting images. In particular, being confident with appearance and posting a lot of self-images is described as an insecurity or a way for girls to seek appearance-related reassurances: "*I feel like I want to look good on my Instagram all the time to impress people and I think sometimes feeling good and thinking you look good can be a bad thing cause some people can*

be like 'oh you're really arrogant' but sometimes people like post so many pictures of themselves because they feel insecure and they want reassurance from other people" (Hannah, 17). There seems to be a standard set for girls to appear unsure about appearance to present themselves positively: "*I think that's the thing like they tell you to love yourself but when people do actually love yourself, they get told they're up the own arse and stuff like that"* (Rebecca, 16). In this way, there are strong self-presentational concerns at play as adolescents are anticipating how they are being viewed by others.

Girls described a desire to look good for potential romantic partners. Receiving positive appearance comments from boys was important to some girls who openly disclosed that they were interested in a heterosexual relationship, even more so than receiving compliments from other girls. Some girls perceived comments from boys on a post as more validating, especially if the image is more sexualised (i.e., full-body selfie in a swimsuit): *"for this one because it is slightly more revealing and it's definitely kind of validating which I guess is bad but it's validating to get comments, especially from boys, saying that I look nice"* (Isla, 18). Adolescents position compliments from boys as more validating as it can often elicit flirtatious interactions and be a way of showing romantic interest: "*yeah so this one is a bit different at the time he was a boy that I actually liked or something, so it felt good it was like he fancied me like I look good or something"* (Alex, 14). However, a negative comment from a boy was perceived as more detrimental: *"I feel like boys do comment on girls post like if it's a good thing or if it's a bad thing and I think that effects the girl more than if a girl comments on the post […] I think it's because like it's definitely about looks because a lot of girls comment bad things just because they're jealous or just because erm but if a boy comments bad it effects them more I would say"* (Jodie, 13).

Although the majority of girls in this study described a desire to look good on social media for boys in a heterosexualised manner, there was a consensus that boys can also be quite

judgemental about their appearance. The described how boys' judgement about appearance was normalised on social media and socially accepted: "*I feel like girls get judged a lot by boys, so they think about it when posting I know a lot of boys send girls pictures and make fun of their weight erm that's very that's normal"* (Jodie, 13). Despite boys' judgement being desirable and normal, girls were also angry about it and recognised how this may have the potential to affect their body image; *"boys are close possibly to being more judgemental nowadays I think boys have like such an opinion on the way girls look which really annoys me sometimes and makes me feel more self-conscious of my own appearance just cause like I don't think it's their right to say what we should look like cause they don't know what it's like to be a girl"* (Hannah, 17). Furthermore, there is a heterosexualised element of appearance interactions from boys, elicited from girls posting images, which is often received in a negative way: *"I actually feel really disappointed when I get messages from boys just about the way that I look or being really overtly sexual or even you know I've had people send me pictures of their genitals in response to something I've put on my story which is not a nice feeling"* (Isla, 18), suggesting girls perceive there to be boundaries to compliments so where compliments appear too sexualised or unwanted boys, girls actually would prefer to not receive them. And although describing these sexualised interactions as normal, some girls wish it was not the norm, despite it still being a motivation for posting images to social media:

> I we're kind of conditioned to feel as though that's erm you know getting interaction again comments and stuff likes from boys is seen as a good thing to achieve that's a erm a sort after thing erm so I think that's quite a lot that's quite a big drive for why girls do post a lot of stuff for their appearance which is a shame I wish it wasn't like that and erm there's definitely a big kind of sexual element to a lot of you know I had a lot of messages from people that I don't really know you know commenting boys

commenting on my appearance like you know asking me if I'm single asking me who you know all sorts of stuff just based on what they've seen erm online. (Isla, 18).

6.4. Discussion

Three themes were developed that highlight adolescent girls' experiences of online body talk and how these experiences contribute to appearance norms and perceptions of body image. They described how appearance commentary reinforced social norms, including appearance and gender norms (Theme 1). They also described appearance-related comments on Instagram as a source of rumination and overthinking, regardless of whether these comments were real or imagined (Theme 2). Finally, they discussed how boys often shaped their social media experiences creating a conflicted desire to look good (Theme 3). The analysis shows the ways in which girls perceive and experience online body talk and how this contributes to a salient appearance culture, which is responsible for enforcing appearance norms and insecurities, whilst also highlighting the important role of gender norms and stereotypes.

Compliments on Instagram posts were described as both a source of pleasure and pain; something that could boost mood but could also be a negative source of rumination. Previous research has shown how adolescents value the rewarding properties of social media such as receiving likes when posting a selfie image (Bell, 2019; Chua & Chang, 2016; McLean et al., 2015; Nesi & Prinstein, 2015; Sherman et al., 2018). The present findings extend on this previous research as they show that positive appearance comments may play a similar function to other rewarding properties on social media (e.g., the like; Sherman et al., 2018). If appearance comments are perceived as rewarding, then this may explain why girls engage in feedback-seeking behaviours on social media. Ruminating on appearance commentary, even the positive comments, may be problematic because it means adolescent attention is overly focused upon their own appearance. This process may lead to habitual monitoring of appearance (also known as self-surveillance) which in turn is associated with body shame and self-objectification (Seekis, Bradley & Duffy, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). This extends research

by Calogero et al., (2009) which found that appearance compliments are objectifying experiences that cause habitual monitoring, suggesting similar processes may be occurring in an online environment.

Findings describe how girls also anticipate and ruminate over receiving negative appearance comments or no comments on a post, despite these experiences being a rarity for most adolescents. It seems that the imagined scenarios (i.e., negative/no comments) are a source of anxiety just as much as actual comments received. Previous research has highlighted how appearance comments are viewed as a precursor of peer approval and wider acceptance of the peer group (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2005). Therefore, girls may ruminate over receiving negative comments or no feedback as if this was to happen then this would make them think that their peers are viewing and judging the image negatively. Due to the developmental age of participants, an imaginary audience may be playing a crucial role in this rumination and anticipation of appearance commentary (Cingel & Krcmar, 2014). Previous research has highlighted the way in which the imaginary audience may play a role in social media behaviours (Teran, Kan & Aubrey, 2020), but social media commentary may provide a new space for the imaginary audience to ruminate, as adolescents can see how other young people are talking about each other, both positively and negatively (Bell, 2019; Chua & Chang, 2016; Nesi et al., 2018). This process may lead to heightened self-consciousness (Yau & Reich, 2019), and the imaginary audience ideation may be leading adolescents to anticipate receiving certain comments as well as ruminating over compliments received, which in turn may be detrimental to mood. Overall, it appears that girls ruminate on both real and imagined comments suggesting that the objective data presented in Chapter 6 is only part of the experience of these interactions.

Adolescent girls described how appearance comments on social media, although create a momentary confidence booster, still reinforce appearance concerns to some extent through

transmitting salient messages surrounding the idea that appearance is important. Previous research has highlighted how social media transmits salient appearance-related messages through images (Carrotte et al., 2017). This extends previous research suggesting that messages surrounding appearance norms and ideals are communicated through the comments as well as the images. Content of appearance compliments was also considered important as there was a preference for generalised compliments over specific appearance compliments (e.g., weight-focused compliments). Even though these comments are positively intended, they still reinforce the idea that you must meet this appearance trait in order to gain validation about appearance in the future. Girls suggest that these types of comments are usually focused upon something that could not easily or quickly be changed (e.g., weight). This is consistent with research relating to body malleability, where the body is perceived as something that can be adapted to achieve the body ideal (Dweck, 1975; Burnette, 2010). In this way, girls see the body as changeable and though they may see some forms of body talk as bad because of this (e.g., weight compliments), they miss some of the problematic assumptions within it (e.g., they dislike weight comments as it is not something easily changeable rather than thinking about weight related comments as contributing to the idea of fatphobia; Araujo et al., 2018). This may have important implications for interventions aimed at reducing body talk on social media. For example, it suggests that there is a need to educate adolescents to think more deeply about the ways in which body talk may contribute to stigmatising attitudes and beliefs surrounding appearance and how this can be reduced, and how this is not just weight-related but also around appearance more generally.

Girls experienced compliments from boys as an important source of validation and some adolescents discussed the way in which there is a desire to look good on social media under the critical gaze of boys, from a heterosexual perspective. In particular, some girls perceived compliments from boys as more validating from boys when they post a sexualised

self-image to their social media platforms. This may be due to the stereotypical pressures associated with the feminine gender role in hyperfemininity is characterised by physical attractiveness and on appearing sexually attractive to others (Murnen & Byrne, 1991). Social media provides an environment wherein adolescent girls can engage in stereotypical forms of femininity, e.g., posting more self-sexualised images to social media (Ringrose, 2011; van Oosten, Vandenbosch & Peter, 2017). Extending on this research these findings suggests that appearance commentary may play a role in young girls' social media engagement in that girls may feel like their role as a woman is to appear attractive to boys, and so appearance comments play a role in this and provide a certain kind of validation from boys that they are adhering to this gendered norm and stereotype (Mascheroni, Vincent & Jimenez, 2015). However, girls also described conflicting feelings as they were very critical of compliments from boys, the culture that encourages this behaviour and how this makes them feel uncomfortable, suggesting that young girls recognise this objectification from boys and are somewhat resistant to this type of commentary (Davis, 2018). This latter finding has important implications for objectification theory as it suggests that young girls are aware of the sexualisation and objectification received from boys and are keen to be critical of this (Mendes, Ringrose, Keller, 2019). Future research should consider how this can be harnessed for educational programmes aimed at reducing objectifying experiences for girls.

6.5. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter explored adolescent girls' perceptions and experiences of appearance-related commentary on Instagram. The findings highlight the specific ways in which girls process appearance comments on their Instagram images. More specifically, appearance compliments are associated with increased anticipation and rumination over existing and imagined feedback and also shows how girls' experience of receiving and viewing comments is positioned as contributing to the development of appearance related insecurities.

Furthermore, girls place great value on receiving compliments from boys on social media but are also conflicted by this feeling. Overall, these findings reveal the complex nature of adolescent girls' interactions. Future research should aim to explore how the complex nature of body talk online can be incorporated into educational programmes to help reduce body talk on social media.

Chapter Seven: Study 2 Thematic Analysis of Boys Data

"*The constant jokes make me feel crap about myself*": A thematic analysis of boys' experiences of appearance-related banter on Instagram

7.1. Chapter Seven Introduction

This chapter presents some of the empirical findings from Study Two along with a small discussion. In particular, this chapter presents a thematic analysis of adolescent boys' experiences of online body talk in the development of body image. Before presenting the findings from this study, I have provided a brief overview of relevant literature and a rationale for the study to fully contextualise the findings. This introduction will also detail the specific thesis research questions that this study aimed to address.

Body image concerns are associated with a range of negative consequences (Slater & Tiggemann, 2015) and are particularly prominent during the adolescent period (Murray & Touyz, 2012). Surveys have suggested that adolescent boys may be just as concerned about their appearance as adolescent girls (Lonergan et al., 2019), but that their concerns may be qualitatively different (e.g., a desire to be bigger). There is a pressing need to explore the specific issues faced by young boys in relation to appearance, and how these may be similar or different to girls, so that appropriate co-educational interventions can be developed. Peer relationships and interactions play a vital role in the development of appearance concerns in both boys and girls (Rodgers et al., 2011; Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). Appearance-related interactions among peers serve to reinforce and perpetuate sociocultural appearance ideals and norms (see Chapter 4; Jones & Crawford, 2006) and have been linked to body image concerns (Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014).

An important interactional feature of adolescent boys' friendship groups that may be different to that of girls' peer groups is the use of banter to interact and communicate with each other (Whittle et al., 2019). Banter may often include jokes surrounding appearance (e.g., "you fatty"). It may be that boys use humour to talk about appearance to avoid discussing appearance seriously in order to adhere to the masculine gender role (Jankowski, 2018; de Visser & Smith, 2007). Past research has predominantly focused on boys' appearance interactions, humorous or not, in an offline setting, so little is known about how boys interact about appearance in an online context such as social media (e.g., Slater & Tiggemann, 2015). However, findings from Chapter 4 indicate that boys' appearance interactions are common on social media platforms.

Previous research exploring boys' appearance-related interactions on social media is very limited. Findings from Chapter 4, and other qualitative studies (e.g., Bell, 2019; Berne et al., 2014) provide some insight into how and why boys interact in relation to appearance on social media, but a more detailed examination is needed. In particular, it is important to understand how boys experience body talk and their perceptions of the consequences of these interactions for identity, body image and wellbeing. Therefore, the aim of the analysis presented in this chapter is to explore adolescent boys' experiences and understandings of body talk on Instagram in relation to their body image, and broader developmental outcomes. This will be achieved through an in-depth reflexive thematic analysis of boy's interview data with scroll-back technique (as described in Chapter 3). Thes analysis presented in this chapter aims to address the following thesis research questions:

RQ$_2$. *How does gender shape adolescents' understandings and experiences of appearance interactions on social media?*

RQ$_3$. *What role do appearance interactions on social media play in adolescents' body image concerns and broader developmental outcomes?*

In particular, this chapter aims to explore boys' perceptions, experiences and understandings of online body talk and explore how their interactions relates to body image, identity development and stereotypical masculinity norms. This chapter will start by summarising the sample involved in this analysis. Then, this chapter will present the results from the boy's interview data and a small discussion to summarise, interpret and contextualise the findings in relevant literature.

7.2. Summary of Chapter Seven Method

7.2.1. Sample

An opportunity sample of 9 adolescent boys (*Age M* = 14.78; *SD* = 1.64; *Range* = 13-17 years) participated in semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. Online interviews lasted between 29:43 – 56:48 minutes (*M* = 42.85; *SD* = 7.29). I had intended to recruit a larger sample of boys but struggled with recruitment. Participants were recruited from a range of geographical locations in the United Kingdom (both rural and urban areas) through advertisements on social media and mailing lists. In addition, participants were also invited to share their ten most recent Instagram posts, same as girls (Chapter 6). However, just 3 adolescents agreed to take part in this section of the study. The remaining participants either declined taking part in the data extraction (*n* = 4) or had no Instagram posts to extract (*n* = 2). It was mainly older adolescent boys that agreed to share their Instagram posts (*M* = 16.67; *SD* = 0.58; *Range* = 16-17 years), however none of their Instagram posts contained self-images, and there were no comments to analyse so this data was not extracted. See Table 7.12 for participants demographic information.

Participants completed a small demographic questionnaire that also assessed their experiences of viewing and engagement in body talk on social media (these were described in more detail in Chapter3). More than two thirds of adolescents (77.8%; *n* = 7) reported rarely viewing body talk on social media (i.e., scale point 1-2). However, viewing body talk on social media was a more common occurrence (*M* = 2.11; *SD* = 1.27) than body talk engagement (*M* = 1.44; *SD* = .53). That said, in comparison, the girls' rates of viewing and engaging in body talk are much higher (viewing *M* = 3.88; *SD* = 1.27; engaging *M* = 2.82; *SD* = 1.33).

Table 7.12: Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym Name	**Age**	**Ethnicity**	**Supplied Instagram Data**
Jamie	14	White	No

Luke	15	White	No
Daniel	13	White	No
Charlie	15	White	No
Lewis	17	White	Yes
Cameron	16	White	Yes
Nathan	13	White	No
Zach	13	White	No
Alex	17	Other (self-described)	Yes

7.2.2. Analytic Procedure

Consistent with the analysis presented in Chapter 4 and Chapter 7, a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the interview data. This analytic approach is described in detail in Chapter 3.

7.3. Results

Boys' interview data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis approach, wherein three themes were developed. These three themes encapsulate adolescent boys' experiences of appearance-related banter on Instagram. Participants are referred to by pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality (see Table 7.12).

Everything is a joke, building relationships through banter

This theme encapsulates how adolescent boys positioned many of their interactions on social media, especially those in relation to appearance, as humorous, and how these humorous interactions played an important role in friendships. Interactions about appearance (e.g., comments on an image) were almost always classified as "banter". There was also a consensus that "banter", specifically appearance-related banter was an integral part of a boys' friendship and plays a crucial role in the development of peer relationships. Publicly, boys perceived their comments and interactions were of a humorous nature, particularly in contrast to girls; "*there's a lot of inside jokes and things and it's probably more common with boys I think cause there's less erm variety in the comments for boys it seems like there's a lot more jokes"* (Charlie, 15).

Many boys described how most of their interactions occur through closed group chats (e.g., direct message function on Instagram) rather than on public posts *"we mostly interact through the group chat cause we don't post that much"* (Luke, 15), and how most of these group chats are of a humorous nature *"generally anything that somebody decides to put in the group chat is something that's for humour purposes*" (Lewis, 17). Interactions in public social media channels were also described as humorous *"me and my friends would communicate in comments but generally in an exaggerated comedic manner because when you're commenting like that you know, it's not a direct message, it's public for everyone to see so I think there's a bit more pressure to make it at least humorous to make yourself not look like you're boring "* (Lewis, 17). This banter was positioned as a normal part of boys', but not girls', friendship

groups *"it's like taking the mick out of stuff, I think it happens a lot in the friendship groups that I kind of know but some of my girls that I'm friends within their friendship group it's all complimenting each other"* (Luke 15). Thus, online banter was described as an extension of that which occurred offline *"I think so we have quite a humorous relationship in person so yes she was just carrying that on through social media*" (Alex, 17).

Boys described how banter should respect and follow social rules. They described how people avoid making jokes about things that other people are sensitive about *"luckily in my friendship groups there's an understanding and we all know what people do actually care about themselves and we avoid that for the most part*" (Charlie, 15). Understanding the boundaries is crucial when engaging in banter with friends, as well as the receiver understanding intent *"you know what people's limits are and also what things offend them and also you do it for the reaction when you have a bit of banter it should be fun if someone is upset about it that's when you stop"* (Jamie, 14). Online jokes are positioned as having the ability to impact someone both positively and negatively, depending on how confident you are: "*I think it might be a cop out answer I think it's both so for me and certain friends it's definitely positive I don't think our friendship would be anywhere near as good without it but for a lot of people what might be perceived as banter can if they don't have the confidence or the security in themselves it can just pile onto their own insecurities"* (Charlie, 15).

Appearance-related banter is positioned as having the ability to build and strengthen friendships *"yeah I think they strengthen friendships 100% especially with my closest friends because there's nothing I guess there's nothing well there is something they could do to break the friendship because we've built up a defence with each other it's very hard to break it whereas if I'd made a new friendship and things were rocky there'd be a lot less trust between us, the trust is important"* (Charlie, 15), so in this way trust is a pre-requisite to banter so this interaction is only experienced in trusting relationships. As well as building relationships,

banter has the potential to damage them too. Constant banter and jokes within friendships removed the space to discuss more serious topics, and were positioned negatively:

> Luke, 15: yeah, I think it's definitely a negative thing cause there's sometimes where you can be like having jokes and it's really funny but other times when you try to bring up something serious and people are just making jokes or they just avoid the conversation entirely it can be really annoying and damage friendships
>
> Interviewer: have you ever fallen out with friends because of that
>
> Luke, 15: with some of my friends cause whenever I bring it up like banter about appearance or mental health or whatever they'll just say they were joking or like have a massive argument and then I can't really start an argument cause there's like two or three of them that just won't talk about anything seriously.

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

This theme describes how gender norms play a big role in determining how they interact with their friends online. They discussed a need to appear masculine, and this need was positioned as a key driver for maintaining a humorous façade online as compliments and serious appearance interactions are viewed as not socially acceptable for boys. On social media, boys describe a gendered norm wherein commenting on other boys' posts in a serious manner is rare, even if non-appearance related. They described how it is common for girls to leave serious positive comments, but not boys *"I receive a lot more compliments from girls I'm friends with or whatever whereas with guys it's just more like either you don't receive a comment or it's just them making fun or whatever"* (Luke, 15).

These perceived differences in commentary were linked to perceived differences in social media more broadly. They described how boys use social media more to talk with friends in private channels whereas girls use it more publicly, posting images to broader audiences *"I think there's more of an expectation of girls to be constantly posting pictures of themselves*

whereas with boys I think it's more common to have an account where maybe the only picture of you is the profile picture, I've seen plenty of those and no posts so it's just used for communication … it's a cultural thing and it's an expectation thing I suppose" (Lewis, 17). Some boys explained that they would be more likely to receive direct messages from friends about a specific post rather than receiving public comments:

> Interviewer: can you describe this image for me
>
> Cameron, 16: there was a competition on where you had to take a picture of like you know silly things you were doing so this is just me being stupid *[Image: showed participant and his friend pulling faces to the camera and holding up two bags]*
>
> Interviewer: did you get any comments on this image
>
> Cameron, 16: I do not believe so
>
> Interviewer: so how did that make you feel
>
> Cameron, 16: to be honest it didn't really bother me cause I mainly got private messages for this one saying like how cool it was and stuff and they wished they were there with me … you know you can express yourself more when it's like a private comment really.

In this way, boys indicated that they behaved differently in public versus private spaces. They described using jokes as a way of indirectly complimenting a friends appearance "*there are genuine compliments that do get exchanged but it's often behind the layer of irony or whatever cause obviously you have friends constantly calling each other fat and things like that in the group chat in a way that nobody finds offensive cause that's the dynamic that we're all dealing with in the group chat*" (Lewis, 17).

One reason they gave for avoiding compliments online is that these are not socially acceptable. Giving appearance compliments to other boys on social media was perceived negatively by other boys *"I don't comment on people's posts … I don't feel the need to do it sometimes so I see girls posts normally the comment section is compliments and stuff like that*

but I don't think boys can say the same thing on another boys post, you see things like 'beautiful, you look gorgeous' but I don't think a boy would say that on another person's post [I: why do you think that is] probably going to be made fun of" (Jamie, 14). Commenting anything other than a joke on another boys post is considered "strange" or "weird": *"I think at least for my friendship group if you're not commenting something in a jokey way it can seem- I don't know the word- strange … it just is you'd have mick taken out of you if you commented something serious"* (Charlie, 15), so in this way giving compliments to other boys was perceived as a source of ridicule.

The negative judgement associated with public compliments is particularly gendered *"some people would call you like a simp or whatever it's not positive probably from guys from girls it would be alright- it would be good I think"* (Luke, 15). Complimenting questions the societal norm of masculinity, and the boys seem to be explicitly aware of these norms and how these norms impact their behaviour "*yeah I don't really compliment other boys, same with girls I don't really compliment girls too much [I: why do you think that is] I think it's to do with masculinity and that culture of kind of men having to be men and if you say it you're probably going to be called gay"* (Jamie, 14). This also shows that boys have a heightened awareness of heteronormative societal norms which suggests that masculinity is constructed as straight and unfeeling (Gattario et al., 2015). This seems to play into a societal norm that is talked about in great detail among many participants in that there is a culture of boys needing to "man up" so this means that they should not compliment other boys *"things like society and social norms and you know the whole man up mantra and those type of things you have to or at least it feels like you have to be very, you can't be too lovey dovey for whatever reason"* (Charlie, 15).

Using jokes as a way of complimenting is positioned as being part of a wider pressure for boys within society *"it's like a gender thing, masculine thing, boys don't really talk about things like that [talking about appearance] … I've never had many chats like that I think it*

would have to be very close friends to have that conversation but even that's rare" (Jamie, 14). Boys discuss how they have been taught by society to not open up about their emotions *"we've all kind of been brought up and like we should act in this certain way and we should not complement each other or be really open about emotions or mental health or whatever*" (Luke, 15), and how it threatens masculinity to show affection or compliment another boys appearance. Boys discuss their struggle to be open about feelings with other boys, and if they do open up about these issues they are worried that this will be viewed negatively, appearance falls into this category: *"Yeah, because within the boy friendship group that I know about compared to some of my friends who are girls and their friendship group like the whole talking about mental health or appearance and whatever there's a massive stigma around that like compared to between the genders you'd be called a girl or summat for bringing owt up"* (Luke, 15). Many boys described how boys do not necessarily have the confidence to complement each other as they want to avoid appearing publicly vulnerable "*they don't have the confidence to compliment people or they don't want to be vulnerable I guess or show emotion in that way*" (Luke, 15). In this way, boys are avoiding open conversations about appearance and thus describe hiding appearance-related worries or concerns:

> Interviewer: do you think some boys would be sensitive about their appearance
>
> Alex, 17: you would never know it because they don't talk about its boys don't really admit to feeling like that.

Banter is not always funny: the darker side of banter

The final theme encompasses the ways in which adolescent boys position banter as a way of building relationships and showing affiliation to their gender, but they also discuss a more serious and negative side to banter. Boys acknowledged that certain humorous comments can be offensive to some people and that you must be careful when joking on social media *"normally nowadays you will have to think a lot of how you say a joke cause if you were maybe*

thinking one thing that person may see it as a different" (Cameron, 16). Therefore, understanding the intention of commentary is important as this may play into how you present yourself online and how you are perceived by others.

Boys discussed how the cumulative effect of receiving humorous appearance-related commentary on social media can have a negative impact, including for body image. Some boys described how previous experiences of receiving negative humorous comments contributed to their insecurities when posting selfies to Instagram, and how this impacted how they view themselves: "*some of them when they've said anything I just remove them from it… because I just don't want anybody to put me down or whatever for just being how I am sometimes the constant jokes make me feel crap about myself*" (Luke, 15). In this way, cumulative online banter is perceived as having a negative effect on some boys, especially in relation to appearance, body image and mental health-: *"it can make you feel more insecure about something about your appearance, and it can like harm their mental health and just make them feel really down even though it's just a joke*" (Luke, 15). Interestingly negative experiences of banter were described as solidifying pre-existing appearance insecurities and reaffirming negative opinions of the yourself, rather than creating new ones: *"it depends on whose saying it and what it is so if it's something you might be insecure about beforehand and then they've reiterated that even if it is a joke you can sort of think well, they've got that thought from the picture or the post which it can like I said solidify your insecurity…I think it more reaffirms opinions of yourself rather than creates them"* (Charlie, 15).

The social media environment provides a new context wherein experiences of banter are constrained and features of this online environment as blur the boundaries when engaging in banter *"in real life you can read body language or how they are talking to you or whatever whereas online you don't get any of the emotion behind the message"* (Luke, 15). They describe how sometimes comments that are intended as jokes are difficult to receive as they lack

funniness so they can often come across as being harsh: *"I mean there's this one and the few below it saying "this is a bit serious" or "mr serious" those types of things which well I know they're jokes and I'm sorry to my friends but they're just not funny"* (Charlie, 15). In this way, appearance related banter online is described as having a negative impact on the receiver but a positive impact on the commenter *"jokes are negative on the person that it's against most of the time like for the people giving it it's quite funny but the banter towards you it could I think it would be more offensive to you"* (Jamie, 14). Understanding boundaries is important when making jokes, and certain appearance-related jokes about weight are only acceptable when posted by close friends, because certain jokes can make you feel bad about yourself:

> Interviewer: would you ever joke about appearance with each other?
>
> Jamie, 14: depending on who it is if you know someone really well and good friends sometimes people make things about someone's weight, but it just depends how well you know someone
>
> Interviewer: is that quite important?
>
> Jamie, 14: if it's something about that [*referring to* weight] you have to know them pretty well you can't just be acquaintances you have to be a best friend to say something like that
>
> Interviewer: and why do you think that is?
>
> Jamie, 14: cause if I didn't know someone and they said it to me it could make me feel bad about myself but if I know someone, I know they don't mean it in like a bad way.

Boys described many instances wherein they are unsure of the intention of a negative humorous comment, wherein commenters will play down all negative comments whether these were intended seriously or in a humorous way *"sometimes when things get a bit serious people say, 'oh we were just joking about'... one time in the group chat they were all taking piss out of my fringe and so I said 'stop it you're doing my head in' and they just said 'oh it's only a*

joke', it's annoying you just have to suck it up and take it" (Jamie, 14). It may be that once a joke has had a negative impact on a receiver, the comments are deemed as more serious and hurtful, even if not intended in this way. Furthermore, as humour is positioned as an integral part of masculinity and adhering to a gendered norm, speaking out against banter (if perceived as hurtful) is contrary to social norms and will be dismissed by the rest of the peer group: *"some when they make a joke or whenever I bring it up saying 'that could have hurt that person' or 'I didn't appreciate that' and it's like a couple of them just like all gang up and say it was like just a joke don't be bothered about it*" (Luke, 15).

7.4. Discussion

This study aimed to understand adolescent boys' perceptions and personal experiences of body talk on Instagram, and how these link to body image and broader developmental outcomes. The findings show how, within their interactions, adolescent boys positioned banter as most common on Instagram and described how it was an important part of friendships (Theme 1). They described how compliments on Instagram are not socially acceptable for boys (Theme 2), whereas banter is, due to gendered social norms surrounding masculinity. They also reflected on the darker side of banter which, despite its prominent role in friendships and gender identity development, can cause harm to individuals, including in relation to body image (Theme 3). The findings highlight the gendered nature of adolescent boys' appearance interactions indicating that certain types of interactions (i.e., banter) are crucial to how they present themselves, in adherence to their gender, on social media.

Humorous appearance interactions (banter) on social media were considered the norm for adolescent boys. This is consistent with previous research that has found boys describe using humour in face-to-face conversations about appearance with peers (Taylor, 2011), and more generally (Barnes, 2012). It is also consistent with research showing how this behaviour extends to online environments (Burnell et al., 2021). Interestingly, boys in the present study distanced themselves from talking about appearance at all on social media platforms. They did not perceive banter (e.g., comments such as "fatty") as being appearance-related, but rather construct this as a humorous social interaction. This may explain why quantitative research has shown how boys engage in less appearance-related conversation than girls (e.g., Chen & Jackson, 2012; Jones & Crawford, 2006; Jones et al., 2004) and adds weight to the growing need to develop gendered measures of assessing these types of communication.

These findings showed how humour among boys was positioned as a positive interaction and an extension of offline jokes and relationships. Previous research has found

banter in boys peer groups is often used to explore social boundaries and is a way of negotiating status within the peer group as well as peer acceptance and rejection (Whittle et al., 2019). This finding is also consistent with the findings in Chapter 4 that found boys humorous negative appearance comments (i.e., shared inside jokes) were a big part of friendships. This suggests that, for boys, humorous social media interactions are viewed as a tool for building and maintaining friendships through the formation of social bonds and intimacy (Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). Boys also described the way in which banter should respect and follow social rules in that trust is a requirement of banter, consistent with previous research exploring face-to-face banter (Johannessen, 2021). This suggest that banter is an extension of a trusting offline relationship, and although it plays an important role in building and maintaining friendships, there are also important boundaries associated with online banter.

Adolescent boys linked humorous interactions to masculine gender norms. Adolescent boys place great importance on maintaining this humorous nature of appearance interactions within their friendship group as a way of showing affiliation to their own gender (e.g., appearing masculine; Whitaker et al., 2021); it was a way of discussing appearance in a socially acceptable way. This may be associated with toxic masculinity – which is a type of masculinity that is based on simplified understandings of traditionally masculine characteristics such as violence, physical strength, suppression of emotion and devaluation of women (Connell, 2005; Posadas, 2017). Adolescent boys may avoid discussing their engagement in appearance interactions as they want to adhere to toxic masculinity traits such as suppressing their emotions to appear "tough". Adolescent boys' adoption of humour (e.g., teasing) may also be understood within this lens of toxic masculinity; as a way of discussing appearance while upholding prevailing ideals of masculinity (e.g., Taylor, 2011). Past research has described how conversations about appearance in boys and men is a social taboo (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006; Whitaker et al., 2019). In these findings, they describe a "stigma" that is attached to

engaging in serious conversations about appearance, and this is included in giving someone a serious compliment. Compliments were perceived as feminine; boys were very keen to separate themselves from girls' appearance commentary on Instagram as they would never compliment the way girls do (e.g., in a serious nature). Thus, humour was used as a way of distinguishing themselves from something that is perceived as potentially feminine, unflattering or a sign of weakness, similar to previous health-related research wherein boys avoid discussing health issues for fear of reducing "masculinity credits" (de Visser & Smith, 2007; Jankowski, 2018). In this way, it may be suggested that boys are hyper-conscious of gendered group norms and the importance of adhering to these in an online context.

Though appearance-related banter was generally considered positive and important within boys' friendship groups, it is also recognised as developing and reinforcing insecurities about appearance and impacting on confidence levels. Humorous comments about appearance, although they are not intended to cause harm, still reflected a collective endorsement of appearance ideals (e.g., calling someone "fat" as a joke still implies that fat is a negative and that the appearance ideal is to be "skinny"; Fouts & Burgraff, 2000) thus may have negative consequences for how adolescent boys feel about their appearance (Thompson et al., 1999). Constant exposure to humorous negative appearance comments, something that is heightened due to the permanent nature of social media platforms (Nesi et al., 2018), may increase the salience of sociocultural norms surrounding appearance (Strandbu & Kvalem, 2014). Previous research has identified that exposure to messages surrounding the male ideal is associated with body dissatisfaction in young boys (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004; Taylor, 2011). It is likely that exposure to appearance-related banter on public posts, and in private (since many boys indicated they received these privately about public posts) may similarly impact body image negatively.

Self-presentational processes were also evident in adolescent boys' appearance-related interactions. They described a pressure to appear humorous when posting on public Instagram posts, and in group chats with friends, because they wanted to appear positively to their peers (i.e., not seem boring). This supports self-presentational theory which posits that adolescents want to portray the best version of themselves on social media (SPT; Baumeister, 1982; Goffman, 2021). Past research has predominantly focused on how adolescents engage with self-presentation strategies in the images they post (Terán, Yan & Aubery, 2020), but these findings extend SPT to comments sections of social media. Such findings reflect how for boys being socially desirable to others is heavily linked to gender norms (i.e., funniness is often associated with masculine gender norms and being 'funny' is often highly desirable among boys; Grogan & Richards, 2002) and so having a comments section full of jokes means that they are presenting a most desirable version of themselves to friends, whilst also adhering to gendered group norms. Adolescent boys may avoid engaging in serious appearance interactions as they want to adhere to toxic masculinity traits like suppressing their emotions to appear "tough". This has important implications as it shows how boys also experience self-presentational concerns associated with toxic masculinity gender norms so rather than being concerned about the content of images that they are posting to social media instead it highlights the role appearance commentary and gender norms play in boys' presentation of the self.

7.5. Chapter Conclusion

The present study explored adolescent boys' understanding and experiences of appearance-related commentary on social media. The findings highlight the role humour plays in online appearance-related interactions within boys' friendship groups. More specifically, appearance-related humour (or banter) was positioned as playing an important role in peer relationships, establishing gender norms and gender identity, and a source of appearance concerns. Future research is needed to further explore the role of humour in body image in

young boys, particularly focusing on the potential negative consequences that this may have. These findings show how boys perceive appearance interactions in a different way to girls therefore future research should also focus on exploring new boy-centred measures and interventions aimed at boys to tackle the issues surrounding appearance interactions and body image (discussed more fully in the next Chapter).

Chapter Eight: Discussion

8.1. Chapter Eight Introduction

Previous research has suggested that peers play an influential role in the development of body image concerns during adolescence. Many of adolescent interactions with peers are appearance-focused contributing to a peer appearance culture wherein societal beliefs surrounding the importance of appearance and appearance ideals are communicated and reinforced (Lawler & Nixon, 2011; Jones, 2004). Research has identified five appearance interactions that are influential in the development of body image and appearance concerns in adolescence; complimenting, body talk, teasing and banter, sexual advances, and appearance-related bullying (Cassidy, Jackson & Brown, 2009; Fineran, 2002; Herbozo, Stevens, Moldovan & Morrell, 2017; Keltner et al., 2001; Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994). Whilst some research has considered these appearance interactions in relation to their associated consequences, very little research has explored how these interactions play out in the context of social media.

Social media provides a new context wherein adolescent friendships and peer interactions are transformed by the varying design features afforded to them through differing social media platforms (Nesi, Choukas-Bradley & Prinstein, 2018). As adolescents now turn to social media platforms as a means of communication and interaction with friends it is likely that the appearance interactions that are known to occur in face-to-face contexts (e.g., compliments; Calogero et al., 2007) are now happening online. However, due to the design features, these interactions may be transformed in that they are more frequent, permanent and more appearance focused than before (Nesi et al., 2018). Therefore, the present thesis contributes to this limited research area by exploring adolescents' understandings, experiences,

and perceptions of appearance-related interactions in the social media environment, and how this links to broader developmental outcomes, such as body image and gender identity.

The thesis aims were outlined in Chapter 2. This final chapter will focus on how the research addressed each of these aims by discussing each one in turn. This chapter will also explore and compare the analyses presented in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 (presented as research question number two). Finally, the implications for theory and intervention, as well as the strengths and limitations of the overall research, are discussed.

8.1.1. Research Question One

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

The first overarching research question of the thesis was to broadly explore adolescents' understanding and experiences of appearance interactions that have been identified in past research and to explore the role of social media in the transformation of these interactions. In Chapter 4, the findings highlight how understandings of online appearance interactions go beyond what is superficially positive or negative. Previous research exploring online appearance interactions has only explored surface level differences in experiencing positive or negative commentary (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018; Burnell et al., 2021), but findings from Chapter 4 suggest that the boundaries are blurred as content, intent, social norms, and gender intersect. Furthermore, these findings suggest that appearance interactions are constrained by social media platform design. This suggests that interactions are not simply mirrored from the offline world to an online context, as certain design features – such as visualness, permanency and publicness (Nesi et al., 2018)– contribute to adolescent understanding, experiences and engagement with appearance interactions, whilst still retaining some similarities to offline interactions. This is an important contribution as understanding the transformative role of social

media allows researchers to develop a nuanced approach to understanding the role of social media and appearance interactions in adolescent body image concerns.

Overall, the findings revealed that positive appearance commentary was the norm. Chapter 4 indicated that girls appear to care more about appearance online and thus give and receive compliments frequently. Chapter 5 corroborated these findings by showing how girls Instagram accounts featured mostly generalised positive appearance comments. Previous research has highlighted how girls engage in more serious appearance-related interactions (e.g., less humorous or critical compared to boys) and are generally more positive in nature (Burnell et al., 2021; Jones, 2004; Jones et al., 2006). Furthermore, these positive appearance interactions were positioned as serving many functions such as a marker of popularity, sign of affinity and a self-presentation strategy (i.e., nice people comment nice things). This suggests that online appearance commentary plays an important role in the development and maintenance of peer relationships (Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014) extending offline friendships into the online environment with appearance comments facilitating these relationships.

Results in Chapter 5 revealed that generalised appearance compliments (e.g., “you’re so pretty”) were more frequent and preferred by adolescent girls compared to specific appearance-focused compliments (e.g., “your eyes are gorgeous”), and weight-related compliments were non-existent. Weight-focused appearance interactions are commonly observed in offline interactions (i.e., fat talk and receiving weight-based compliments; Calogero et al., 2009; Salk & Englen-Maddox, 2011), but this was not observed in an online context. Instead, adolescents described how specific appearance compliments have the potential to make people question other aspects of appearance in an image or internalise the compliment as a personal goal which then makes them feel like they need to look a certain way in order to receive the same validation in the future or on their next Instagram post (Thompson

et al., 1999). In this way, girls appear to be aware of the ways in which general appearance compliments can have a positive impact, whilst also recognising that specific appearance compliments may impact the receiver negatively (e.g., Calogero et al., 2009). Chapter 6 also found that appearance compliments, although initially positive to receive, still reinforce the message that appearance is important. Under the lens of objectification theory and sociocultural theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Thompson et al., 1999), even the more generalised appearance compliments are positioned as contributing to a general sense that appearance is important and that images are there to be judged and evaluated by others, based on appearance (Calogero et al., 2009). This suggests that these frequent interactions on social media are transmitting and perpetuating an appearance culture that applies appearance-related pressures for girls, which they may then internalise as appearance-related goals highlighting discrepancies in their appearance contributing to the development of appearance concerns. Future research should aim to explore how different types of compliments (specific and generalised) contribute to body dissatisfaction and self-objectification in young girls.

Although positive appearance commentary is the norm for girls, Chapter 6 highlighted the way in which girls experience appearance-related pressures online due to anticipation and rumination of commentary. Previous research has consistently highlighted the intense appearance-related pressures experienced by girls in relation to taking, editing, and posting self-images to Instagram (Cohen, Newton-John & Slater, 2018; Li, Chang, Chua & Loh, 2019; McLean et al., 2015), and so these findings extend this research to suggest that similar pressures are experienced in the comments section of posts adding another layer to the complexity of image posting on Instagram. Girls describe compliments on an Instagram post as something that could provide a momentary mood boost, but also a negative source of rumination, and that even the anticipation of comments is a source of rumination and negative thinking. Furthermore, Chapter 5 highlights how girls also ruminate over how to respond to a

compliment on Instagram suggesting that there is a need to reciprocate or deny a compliment rather than accepting it, to avoid being perceived in a negative way. In this way, the social media environment creates a new space for the imaginary audience to play a role in adolescents cognitive thinking abilities. Previous research has highlighted that this is featured when adolescents are posting images to social media (Teran, Yan & Aubrey, 2020; Zheng, Ni & Luo, 2019) but may also be playing a role when anticipating commentary from others (e.g., Bell, 2019; Chua & Chang, 2016). The anticipation of receiving comments coupled with the rumination of how compliments are intended, and also how to respond to these compliments may increase self-consciousness among adolescents due to the imaginary audience ideation (Zheng et al., 2019).

Self-deprecation is considered important and a common self-presentation strategy by some adolescents. Girls appear modest, uncertain, or self-deprecating about one's own appearance when posting an image to social media (e.g., 'feel cute, might delete later'), whereas boys are more likely to engage in self-deprecation as a form of humour (e.g., mimic a girl's interaction as a joke). Chapter 4 showed that on social media, adolescents acknowledge that people always post their "best" images therefore posting a selfie with a self-deprecating caption was seen as a negative unless done in a way that acknowledges an attempt to look good in an image whilst still adhering to cultural standards surrounding appearance modesty (e.g., "not sure about this one"; Britton et al., 2006). This is an important contribution as it suggests that as well as self-presentational concerns being prominent when posting self-images to social media (Bell, 2019) they are also evident in text-based interactions and inform the way in which they comment and interact with peers about appearance, especially on public social media platforms (e.g., Instagram).

However, contrary to the findings in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 revealed that there were little instances of self-deprecating remarks in the captions. It may be that adolescents exaggerated

this in Chapter 4 or that there were different social and group norms at play among this specific group of adolescents (Millward, 2012). Another explanation is that this content may be deleted as it is less socially desirable, especially as adolescents in Chapter 5 discussed deleting and archiving their post. That said, social media may transform this interaction and provide a new way for body talk to present itself. For example, it may be that posting a selfie is the culturally accepted reassurance seeking gesture on social media rather than seeking this reassurance through a self-deprecating comment (e.g., "does my bum look big in this?" in an offline context; Mills & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2017). Adolescents describe how it is the norm to receive appearance commentary on social media when posting a selfie, so this may be the accepted way to receive appearance related reassurances. This is consistent with previous qualitative research that found posting a selfie is a way of seeking appearance-related reassurances (Bell, 2019; Chua & Chang, 2016). Chapter 5 also found a high frequency of reciprocation responses to compliments rather than acceptance. This may be a way of upkeeping the cultural standard of appearance modesty (Britton et al., 2014) through reciprocation as self-deprecating remarks is considered 'attention seeking' by some adolescents.

Negative appearance commentary was constructed as less common on social media, consistent with past research (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018). My findings shed light on why this is the case. Maliciously intended negative appearance comments were described as less common to receive on public social media platforms but instead occurred on platforms where users are afforded anonymity to hide their identity (i.e., those with a high level of cue absence, Nesi et al., 2018). Previous research revealed that engagement with serious negative commentary on social media was positioned as unacceptable behaviour within the peer group (Burnette et al., 2017). Therefore, it may be that these interactions and instances of bullying occur on private platforms to avoid scrutiny from others (Aizenkot, 2020). No negative appearance remarks were present in the content analysis (Chapter 5) of adolescents' Instagram

data corroborating the findings in Chapter 4. That said, although serious negative comments are rare on public posts, Chapter 6 indicated that girls anticipate and ruminate over receiving this type of appearance commentary, and even receiving zero comments would be constructed as negative. Previous research found that appearance comments (both positive and negative) are positioned as a form of peer approval or rejection (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006). Therefore, even receiving no comments on a post would be perceived as negative, with adolescents believing this is an indicator of peer disapproval of appearance.

Although serious negative appearance comments were positioned as rare, Chapter 4 found that negative appearance comments were intended humorously among adolescents and they positioned this interaction as being a big part of friendships (i.e., sharing inside jokes). Appearance-related humour was particularly common among adolescent boys. Findings from Chapter 4 suggested that boys engage in more humorous appearance interactions, especially surrounding weight. It appears that humour plays an important role in adolescent boys' appearance-related interactions, which is consistent with previous offline interaction research wherein boys use humour to openly talk about appearance (Taylor, 2011; Whitaker et al., 2019). Chapter 7 explored the role of humour in more detail finding that appearance-focused banter is a norm within adolescent boys' friendship groups and that this is an extension from offline to online (Taylor, 2011; Burnell et al., 2021). Boys distanced themselves from appearance-interactions unless they were humorous, perceiving these interactions as a way of developing, maintaining, and reinforcing friendships (Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014),

Interestingly, Chapter 7 also revealed that boys do not view appearance-related banter (e.g., comments such as "fatty") as being appearance-related but instead construct this as a playful social interaction, suggesting that there is some cognitive dissonance playing a role here. This is important to consider as although they do not recognise it as appearance-focused it still transmits negative appearance-related messages. In this way, some boys did recognise

banter as a way of developing and reinforcing insecurities about appearance which in turn impacted some boys' confidence levels. At the surface level, and considering the intention, these interactions online are humorous and not intended to cause harm, however they still reflect an endorsement of appearance ideals (e.g., Fouts & Burgraff 2000; Berne et al., 2014). Furthermore, due to the permanent nature of social media platforms, boys' banter interactions are different from their offline counterparts (Nesi et al., 2018). On social media, they are constantly exposed to humorous negative appearance comments, which may reinforce the sociocultural norms surrounding appearance (Strandbu & Kvalem, 2014) which in turn may be associated with the development of appearance concerns.

In conclusion, taken together, these findings highlight the ways in which adolescents understand and experience appearance interactions on social media. In particular, they highlight the role in which self-presentational concerns are particularly salient in appearance commentary as well as in the images that are posted to social media, and how commentary and images work in tandem together. The findings also have important contributions to the transformation framework (Nesi et al., 2018) and highlight the way in which social media design features transform adolescent experiences of appearance interactions. Adolescents' experiences of positive appearance commentary (i.e., compliments and banter) are transformed by social media as they appear to be more frequent and intense due to their greater visualness, publicness and permanency which is more prominent on social media platforms such as Instagram.

8.1.2. Research Question Two

How does gender shape adolescents' understandings and experiences of appearance interactions on social media?

The second overarching research question in my thesis was focused upon the role of gender in determining and influencing adolescents' experiences and understandings of

appearance interactions on social media. Previous research has identified the gendered nature of peer appearance interactions in an offline context (Jones, 2004; Lawler & Nixon, 2011), where girls report receiving more appearance-related commentary than boys (Slater & Tiggemann, 2015). By addressing this research question, this thesis aims to make an important contribution to the research literature through exploring and understanding the role of gender in the perpetuation of appearance interactions on social media which in turn will contribute to informing interventions and future research that has predominantly been gendered towards understanding women's experiences (e.g., questionnaires designed to answer women-specific questions). Within this thesis, Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 separately explored girls' and boys' experiences of body talk/banter on Instagram and how this contributes to the development of body image.

Initially, findings from Chapter 4 suggested that whilst social media design features similarly transformed adolescents' appearance interaction for both boys and girls, these interactions were highly gendered in nature. This is consistent with previous research exploring general social media behaviours such as selfie posting and providing general feedback (e.g., Bell, 2019; Burnell et al., 2021; Chua & Chang, 2016). However, these findings provide some further insight into how gender plays a role in the specific types of appearance interactions adolescents experience on social media. For example, girls appeared to care more about appearance interactions, complimented one another's appearance and engaged with self-disparaging remarks. Whereas boys' interactions were constructed as more humorous in relation to appearance. This is similar to research exploring appearance interactions in an offline context (Jones, 2004). This is an important finding as it suggests that adolescent interactions manifest in different ways whilst still being consistent with broader sociocultural expectations surrounding gender (e.g., Strandbu & Kvalem, 2014). It appears as though

adolescents' understandings, perceptions and experiences of online appearance interactions are largely informed by gendered group norms.

One of the key findings from this thesis is the difference between girls' and boys' experiences of the types of appearance commentary on Instagram. Chapter 5 highlighted the way in which girls receive frequent generalised appearance compliments rather than specific compliments. In comparison, boys were difficult to recruit for this part of the analysis either because they had no Instagram posts, they did not want to share their Instagram data or I received no parental consent for this part of the study. That said, from the interview data it was clear that boys were not experiencing appearance compliments in the same way as girls. Boys discussed appearance compliments as a rarity suggesting that they are not subject to the same appearance scrutiny as girls, on Instagram. In addition, for girls, they pose that there is a conflicting desire to look good under the gaze of others, specifically from boys. The anticipation of potential positive and negative appearance commentary from boys on social media is described as contributing to appearance-related pressures girls experience when using social media. In this way, girls value commentary from boys potentially influencing their perception on how they are expected to behave and look, and how this contributes to being a woman (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2014). Understood within the context of objectification theory and sociocultural theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Thompson et al., 1999), it is posed that men and women have different roles within society, and in turn these stereotypical roles impact on the way in which they interact about appearance online. For women, direct or indirect evaluation on appearance through compliments is a frequent experience and this is documented within previous literature (Calogero et al., 2009; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; di Gennaro & Ritschel, 2019), and it would appear that from these findings, girls experience similar scrutiny and evaluation on social media. In comparison, although men may not experience this direct and indirect evaluation explicitly through complimenting, there is still an

evaluative nature to their humorous commentary. Constant jokes about appearance may still lead to the internalisation of that humorous comment which may lead boys to habitually monitor this aspect of appearance leading to self-consciousness (Hoffman & Warschburger, 2019).

Gendered group norms seem to play an important role in the types of interactions adolescents engage with. In particular, for boys, engaging in humorous appearance commentary (e.g., commenting on a friend's post in a humorous way) is positioned as a way of showing affiliation to their own gender (i.e., appearing masculine; Whitaker et al., 2021). In comparison to girls who are very keen to compliment on Instagram, boys wanted to distinguish themselves from girls' appearance commentary as they would never compliment in a serious manner due to fear of being perceived in a negative light by peers. Complimenting was positioned as feminine, unflattering or a sign of weakness among the boys' peer group. In this way, boys were very keen to distance themselves from talking about appearance or body image concerns due to there being a "stigma" attached to this type of commentary. Making jokes about appearance on social media plays an important social identity role wherein boys use humour to indicate gender-group membership (e.g., Taylor, 2011). Furthermore, these findings highlight the way in which boys' and girls' interactions on social media reflect the competing cultural expectations surrounding appearance and gender roles (Strandbu & Kvalem, 2014). This is an important contribution because these findings may have important implications for how educators approach discussions surrounding social media literacy and appearance concerns within interventions with a need to highlight the role of gender roles and attempting to combat stereotypical gendered behaviours in relation to appearance and body image.

Finally, both boys and girls indicated the role in which self-presentation plays a role in their engagement with appearance commentary on Instagram. Chapter 5 identified that girls' self-presentational concerns strongly influenced their responses to compliments on Instagram.

There seems to be a need to avoid appearing big headed or as though they were expecting compliments and so use reciprocation online as a way of deflecting a compliment and appearing modest. This may reflect a gendered norm within society wherein femininity is characterised by women underestimating their achievements (Murnen & Byrne, 1991) and thus a need to appear modest in all situations, but particularly surrounding appearance (Britton et al., 2006). Appearing too confident about appearance can have negative consequences for how people view women (Daniels, Zurbriggen & Ward, 2020) thus may explain why adolescents are keen to deflect a compliment online to present themselves in a positive light. Self-presentational and self-performative factors also played a role in boys' online interactions, albeit differently than for girls. Chapter 7 highlighted that they felt a pressure to always appear humorous when interacting both publicly and privately (i.e., in group chats) online, because there was a need to appear "fun" to their peers. This self-presentational concern may be associated with adhering to a gendered norm as funniness is commonly associated with masculinity (Grogan & Richards, 2002) therefore they use appearance commentary to do this, especially as appearance is considered a humorous topic to make fun of among boys' peer groups (Taylor, 2011). Alternatively, as boys describe using humour as a gateway to honest conversation, humorous negative commentary may be used as a form of self-protection to mask serious interactions (i.e., a serious compliment to another boy) in case it is received negatively (Jankowski, 2014).

In conclusion, it is clear from the findings presented across the analysis chapters in this thesis, that there are stark differences in how boys and girls experience and understand appearance commentary online. These findings fill a gap within the research literature as although the role of gender has been highlighted in previous appearance interactions and social media research (Jones & Crawford, 2006; Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014; Slater & Tiggemann, 2015), this thesis identifies how binary gender roles play a role and how

adolescents perceive, understand and experience the gender roles and group norms. Girls appear to be aware of gender roles and norms wherein they feel their role as a woman is to be evaluated and judged based off appearance, thus valuing appearance compliments on Instagram images (Calogero et al., 2009). Likewise, it is suggested that boys are also hyper-conscious of their gendered group norms surrounding masculinity and the importance of adhering to these in an online context. These gendered norms may potentially be quite toxic for adolescent boys as constant joking about appearance in order to adhere to masculine norms, may over time lead to the development of insecurities surrounding appearance and also the inability to talk about these insecurities to seek help or reassurance. This has important implications which will be discussed in the section below.

8.1.3. Research Question Three

What role do appearance interactions on social media play in adolescents' body image concerns and broader developmental outcomes?

The final overarching research question of this thesis was to explore the contributing role of appearance interactions on social media in adolescent body image concerns and broader developmental outcomes. The findings presented within this thesis highlight the way in which appearance interactions on social media play a pertinent role in contributing to the development of adolescents' appearance concerns. Self-presentation strategies also play an important role in adolescents' engagement with appearance interactions on social media. The implications for sociocultural theory, objectification theory and self-presentation theory are discussed within this section.

Appearance Concerns

The findings presented in this thesis highlight the ways in which appearance interactions play a role in the development of appearance concerns. Sociocultural theory indicates that peer appearance interactions provide an interaction where appearance is focused

upon and then internalised as important (Thompson et al., 1999). Contributing to this, these findings provide an insight into the way adolescents' appearance interactions (e.g., compliments, self-deprecating remarks, and appearance-related humour) reinforces and perpetuates appearance ideals (i.e., compliments reinforce that adherence to the ideal, Burnell et al., 2021; humour positions bodies that do not conform to appearance ideals as a source of humour; Fouts & Burgraff, 2000). Adolescents described how these interactions reinforce the message surrounding the appearance culture, and it is this implicit and explicit messaging that facilitates the internalisation of appearance ideals as personal goals (Tiggemann & Barbato, 2018) which in turn may contribute to appearance concerns among girls and boys (Jones et al., 2004).

Furthermore, receiving compliments online is interpreted as an external evaluation of appearance so in accordance with objectification theory, and previous research, this may increase the pressure for adolescents to adopt an external viewers perspective of the body (Calogero et al., 2009; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In addition, these compliments can be experienced in a multitude of different ways (i.e., viewed, posted, and received). Chapter 5 highlights the way in which different types of compliments are interpreted by adolescents and suggests that even the generalised compliments contribute to the sense that appearance is the most important thing, and that for girls they are there to be evaluated and judged based upon appearance. What is interesting about these findings is that they highlight the need to understand appearance commentary in tandem with images posted to Instagram as adolescents construct both as crucial for reinforcing and reproducing salient appearance messages on social media. Extensive research has explored the role of objectification in the images on social media (Bell et al., 2018; Cohen, Newton-John & Slater, 2018; Salomon & Brown, 2021), but future work is needed to expand on these findings and explore the specific role of text-based interactions in objectification tendencies.

Additionally, these findings suggest that text-based interactions play an important role in the way in which girls are evaluated, valued, and judged based on their appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997). The findings from Chapter 7 also have important implications for understanding boys' appearance and body image concerns. Although boys are not subject to the same appearance scrutiny online as girls, their engagement with appearance-related banter may still play a role in appearance concerns, as humorous negative comments still reinforce messages that legitimize bodies that deviate from the appearance ideal to be mocked (Fouts & Burgraff, 2000). For boys, humorous appearance related interactions (e.g., "fatty") may imply that they deviate from the socially accepted appearance ideal emphasising this external evaluation on appearance which may then be internalised (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013). This has important implications for objectification theory as it may be that the gendered norms surrounding boys' appearance interactions transmits messages differently to girls but with similar potential consequences, as previous research has found in other areas (Slater & Tiggemann, 2010). Future research should aim to further explore objectification tendencies in men to develop a more nuanced understanding of these processes due to the increasing appearance-related pressures faced by men as well (Davids, Watson & Gere, 2019).

Self-Presentation

Findings across all chapters suggests that appearance commentary serves a self-presentation purpose lending important implications for self-presentation theory (SPT). Previous research has adopted the self-presentation theory (Baumeister, 1982) to explore the role of social media in identify formation, with a focus on how individuals usually convey an ideal and perfect version of themselves through the images posted to social media (Bell, 2019; Chua & Chang, 2016). Previous research has documented the way in which young people create images in a way to maximise physical attractiveness using filters, adopting certain camera angles and using photo-editing software (Bell, 2019; Chua & Chang, 2016). However,

posting images to social media is only part of the functionality of these platforms, and so highly visual platforms, like Instagram, are designed for interaction on these idealised images.

In this thesis, findings suggest that positive appearance commentary serves a strong self-presentational function as giving positive appearance comments makes the commenter look socially desirable, makes the person in the image look good and that they meet the appearance ideal, and it makes both the commenter and poster feel good. Additionally, Chapter 5 indicated that there were self-presentational concerns playing a role in the way adolescents respond to compliments. Adolescents felt a need to avoid appearing too confident with appearance and so described a need to reciprocate, deflect or deny a compliment, which also reflects gendered norms around modesty and underemphasis of achievements (Murnen & Byrne, 1991). Finally, boys also described a pressure to engage in humorous appearance interactions on public social media sites in order to appear "masculine" to the wider peer group, suggesting self-presentation playing a role in humorous interactions too. These findings make an important contribution to self-presentation theory. Past research has focused on how adolescents use social media as a site for self-presentation and this is done through the images (Bell, 2019). These findings extend this research by showing how self-presentational theory can be applied to commentary in social media spaces.

Social Development – Peer Relationships

Finally, the findings also have important implications for adolescent social development in relation to their formation of peer relationships. Chapter 4 indicated that appearance interactions play an important role in the development and maintenance of friendships. Previous research has highlighted that peer acceptance and rejection during adolescence is perceived as achievable through adherence to appearance ideals (Lawler & Nixon, 2011). My findings show how this plays out in a social media environment as adolescents discussed how posting an image to Instagram and receiving positive appearance

comments reinforces peer approval, and this in turn contributes to social hierarchies (Bell, 2019; Chua & Chang, 2016). The quantifiable nature of social media appearance commentary (e.g., a number of comments received on a post) reinforces an online social hierarchy, in that popularity equates to meeting appearance ideals (Bell, 2019; Chua & Chang, 2016). These findings suggest that appearance commentary plays an important role in the development of peer relationships, as well as these peer interactions also perpetuating a prominent appearance culture.

Findings from across the thesis highlight how humour among boys is an extension of offline jokes and a facilitator of friendships within boys' peer group. This is consistent with previous research that has found general (i.e., non-appearance focused) banter is often used to explore social boundaries, develop strong friendships, and negotiate peer acceptance and rejection among boys (Steer et al., 2020; Whittle et al., 2019). This suggests that although boys' appearance-interactions may differ to that of girls (i.e., more of a humorous nature), they still play a similar role in the development of peer relationships. Boys use humour online as a tool for forming social bonds and intimacy with friends (Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014), but they are also aware of the way in which humorous appearance comments should respect and follow social rules and how overstepping these boundaries may impact on relationships.

Taken together, these findings have important implications for social development. Adolescence is characterised by an increased sensitivity to the sociocultural environment and become more aware of social cues (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). During this period, adolescents spend a lot more time with peers, both in person and on social media (boyd, 2014). Sociocultural theory highlights how peers play an important role in the development of appearance concerns (Thompson et al., 1999). Peer appearance interactions have been implicated in the development, perpetuation and reinforcement of cultural appearance norms and ideals (Jones, 2004). This thesis highlights the way in which appearance interactions on

social media may have a positive influence (i.e., source of intimacy, developing friendships) and/or a negative influence (i.e., transmitting salient messages surrounding the importance of meeting appearance ideals) on peer relationships. These findings also highlight the salient role appearance interactions play in peer acceptance and rejection, and how adolescents perceive this as contributing towards rumination and negative feelings towards appearance. This has important implications for the way researchers understand the role of peers in social development during adolescence as well as the important role these peers play in the development of appearance concerns.

8.2. Implications of the Research

Implications for Transformation Framework

The present thesis highlights the role in which social media design transforms adolescents' understandings, experiences, and perceptions of appearance interactions. Chapter 4 indicated that whilst some appearance interactions bore some similarities to their offline counterparts there were some key differences. Previous researchers have suggested that online behaviours are simply mirrored from offline to online (e.g., Zywica & Danowski, 2008) however findings from this thesis suggest that appearance interactions are transformed and constrained by the social media environment. Although previous research has highlighted that social media provides a novel environment for adolescents' peer experiences (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015), it has struggled to explain how and why this environment creates different experiences. The transformation framework provides a useful framework for understanding the ways in which social media design features constrain and change adolescent experiences. The findings presented in this thesis lend support for the utility of the transformation framework as a tool for understanding appearance interactions on social media (Nesi et al., 2018). Most notably, the findings suggest that three design features are crucial in the transformation of appearance interactions, and these are: (1) visualness, (2) publicness, and (3) permanency.

First, this thesis highlights the way in which the visualness of a social media platform influences appearance commentary. Visualness, as a design feature, has not been highlighted in previous theoretical models of social media yet is an important feature as certain platforms (i.e., Instagram) are limited in their functionalities as Instagram focuses on communication mostly via image and video displays, whereas Twitter focuses on communication mostly via text (Perloff, 2014). In the context of appearance interactions, highly visual platforms like Instagram create a highly appearance-focused environment wherein appearance commentary is more frequent. Communication occurs once an individual has posted an image (usually a selfie; Perloff, 2014) and therefore many of the comments are appearance focused – as highlighted in Chapter 5. Furthermore, the visualness transforms the nature of traditional body talk. In an offline context, body talk occurs when somebody makes a self-deprecating comment (e.g., "I look so fat"; Mills & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2017), however my findings suggest that for girls posting an image is the self-deprecating remark wherein you are inviting people to provide appearance compliments which in turn responses are modest. Due to the visualness of Instagram, adolescents recognise that it is not acceptable to post a self-image whilst also being too self-deprecating in the caption, as this is viewed negatively by adolescents (see Chapter 4). Therefore, this interaction has been transformed to occur in different ways wherein the image initiates positive commentary and then adolescents can respond in self-deprecating, modest and deflecting ways, mimicking offline body talk (Mills & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2017).

Second, this thesis indicates that appearance interactions may be transformed due to the publicness of Instagram. Appearance commentary on a main grid post is visible to the wider peer group and therefore strong self-presentational and self-performative functions are at play. For example, adolescents are carefully curating comments and thinking about how they are being perceived by other social media users. In this way, many of the public commentary is positive about appearance, as being negative about other people's appearance is perceived

badly (Burnette et al., 2017). Furthermore, the publicness of Instagram appearance commentary may mean that an adolescent's imaginary audience cognitive functions are heightened as social media now provides an environment wherein there is an actual audience that fulfils an expectation of others judging and evaluating them (boyd 2014; Underwood and Ehrenreich 2017).

Finally, the findings suggest that permanency transforms adolescents' experiences of appearance interactions on social media. In an offline context, there is no record of appearance interactions so adolescents cannot refer and re-analyse their conversations with peers. However, due to the permanent nature of some social media platforms, adolescents can now return to their posts and read through all the appearance interactions multiple times, as well as being exposed to other appearance interactions all the time (Peter & Valkenburg, 2013). This changes the nature of how these interactions are experiences suggesting that they are more intense and that adolescents are exposed to frequent and multiple appearance-related messages that perpetuate and contribute to an appearance culture (Jones, 2004; Lawler & Nixon, 2011; Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014).

Overall, this is a useful framework for understanding these interactions and to gain a more nuanced approach to social media and understanding the potential impact of these interactions on body image. The findings from this thesis therefore make an important and valid contribution to this framework, by detailing how some appearance interactions (i.e., compliments) are experienced in more frequent and intense ways due to their greater visualness, publicness and permanency. Future research should aim to adopt this framework when exploring online behaviours and interactions to understand how the different design features of social media contribute to adolescents' peer relationships and to their wider social development.

Practical Applications

The findings of the present thesis have important implications for intervention programmes aimed at reducing appearance concerns in adolescents. Currently, many body image interventions focus upon tackling the role social media imagery plays upon appearance and body image concerns (Mulgrew, McCulloch, Farren, Prichard & Lim, 2018; Tamplin, McLean & Paxton, 2018). However, these findings suggest that text-based interactions work in tandem with images posted to social media. Therefore, ideally, the exploration of appearance commentary, supported by recent research in this area (Burnette et al., 2017; Burnell et al., 2021), should be integrated into current social media literacy and body image intervention to address how appearance commentary alongside ideal images perpetuates an appearance culture. Future research should aim to explore how we can integrate this in order to minimise the frequency and intensity of appearance commentary on social media, potentially by centring youth voice into this discussion to explore their perception on this.

Furthermore, some previous digital literacy interventions such as the SoMe (Gordon et al., 2021) and the Body Talk in the Digital Age (BTIDA; Bell et al., 2021) programmes have been designed to be delivered universally in mixed-gender classes with the aim of improving body satisfaction and reducing appearance commentary. Although these interventions were successful for adolescent girls, they did not seem to have many positive effects on boys (Bell et al., 2021; Gordon et al., 2021). Previous research has indicated the requirement for gender-specific interventions and education programmes (e.g., McCabe et al., 2017; Yager et al., 2013) and this research corroborates this as I found stark differences between how boys and girls interact about appearance on social media. Moving forward, interventions should be designed to focus upon the use of appearance-related humour by boys and to tackle the role of masculinity in appearance and body image concerns. It may be more suitable to address some of these issues within gender-specific interventions alongside co-educational programmes to allow adolescents the opportunity to discuss these topics in different environments, as this has

been previously beneficial in intervention programmes (Doley, McLean, Griffiths & Yager, 2021; Yager, Diedrichs, & Drummond, 2013). In demonstrating the stark differences between how boys and girls interact about appearance on social media, the findings of this thesis highlight the pressing need for the design and development of interventions that are catered specifically to boy's needs. That is, they should be focused on reducing appearance-related 'banter' and tackle the role of toxic masculinity in these behaviours.

Overall, these findings also have important practical applications for teacher and parent education. A review of previous classroom-based interventions has revealed that most sessions are facilitated by a researcher who is external to the school (Yager et al., 2013). Whilst this review identified effectiveness associated with having a researcher deliver these interventions, there is a need to train teachers to deliver interventions in order to facilitate broader dissemination of educational programmes. Recent interventions have found improvements in adolescents' body esteem when delivered by teachers (Diedrichs et al., 2021). This suggests that there may be a need to educate teachers surrounding the topics of social media appearance commentary. For example, educating school staff surrounding topics such as banter and how to tackle toxic masculinity in appearance interactions may be crucial in reducing these types of interactions both in the school environment and on social media, as well as challenging these ideas of toxic masculinity within wider society (Elliott, 2018).

Previous research has also revealed that parental influence, such as parental modelling and parental restrictions, are important factors in determining adolescents' social media use (Burnette et al., 2017). That said, some research has suggested that parental restrictions on an adolescent's social media use have no effectiveness on adolescents overall social media use (Lee & Chae, 2007). However, some research has found that parental involvement positively reduces adolescent engagement with risky behaviours (Racz & McMahon, 2011; Stone et al., 2012) therefore adopting these techniques may help to reduce a prominent appearance culture

within the home environment. Parental involvement and conversations create a sense of empowerment for adolescents (Latzer, Spivak-Lavi & Katz, 2015). Therefore, parental education on these topics is crucial. On the surface, parents may believe that appearance interactions are harmless but as my findings highlight these interactions transmit salient appearance messages surrounding the importance of appearance, and so this should be the focus of parental education.

8.3. Reflection on the Methodology

The purpose of this section is to reflect on the methodology approach used in this thesis. Overall, this thesis adopts a qualitative led mixed-methods approach which allowed for appropriate exploration of the aims and research questions under a critical realist lens. Through adopting a mixed-methods approach, I was able to explore the role of social media and appearance interactions more broadly than compared to a single method approach (Plano Clark, 2019). Under the lens of critical realism, this thesis allowed for the exploration of participants' own knowledge, perception, and experience as reality but also examined the role of the sociocultural context in which this knowledge about online appearance interactions is situated, and how this constructs knowledge, understanding and feelings of body image.

A key strength of this research is the adoption of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. A qualitative approach was adopted in the means of focus group and interviews to explore and capture the complexities involved in the experiences of appearance interactions on social media. By initially adopting focus groups, I was able to explore adolescents shared understanding and group norms surrounding these online interactions (Peterson-Sweeney, 2005) whilst the one-to-one online interview technique allowed for a more in-depth exploration of these topics and allowed adolescents to voice opinions without any judgement from their peers (Flanagan, Greenfield, Coad & Neilson, 2015). Adding a quantitative element to this work in Chapter 5 was valuable as it provided insight into adolescent girls' actual real-life

Instagram data, allowing exploration of a complex interaction. I used qualitative data (e.g., one-to-one interview data) to interpret quantitative data (e.g., content analysis of Instagram data) centring youth voice in helping us understand their experiences. To my knowledge, this is one of the first empirical pieces of work within the field of body image and social media to combine these techniques in this way. I also used a combination of inductive and deductive coding (similar to Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2017; Jankowski et al., 2014) that was informed by a range of perspectives (e.g., past research, perceived salience in dataset, interview data). Thus, in contrast to past inductive-deductive content analyses, I have incorporated youth voice into this process through the interview data. Previous research has highlighted the importance of youth voice in research (Kirshner, O'Donoghue & McLaughlin, 2005) therefore this study makes an important contribution to the area of adolescent social media use and appearance interactions. This was a novel methodological approach and by centring youth voice throughout the process helped me understand adolescents' actual experiences and interpretations. Furthermore, I have been able to capture real-life data (e.g., Instagram posts, comments, replies) and instead of solely focusing on the frequency of content or using survey methods to explore associated consequences I have had the opportunity to ask young people for their own interpretation. That said, this study could have gone further in its approach by including youth in the analysis process (Liebenberg, Jamal & Ikeda, 2020), as it may not be fully representative due to curation. Nevertheless, this thesis makes an important contribution to the area of adolescent social media use, in terms of both the findings and the methodological approach used.

Furthermore, another strength of this research is the use of a scroll-back method during the interviews and capturing of Instagram data as it allowed for a participant-led approach to the data collection (Robards & Lincoln, 2019). This is a useful tool for stimulating discussion and also encouraging participants to analyse their own digital traces and reflect on what things mean online, how they are interpreted by others and how certain posts and interactions make

them feel, providing useful insights into adolescent social media appearance interactions. A useful aspect of the scroll-back method is that it can be used on different social media sites (e.g., Facebook or Instagram), as well as having the ability to explore ephemeral social media platforms (e.g., Snapchat and Instagram stories) and logged history (e.g., views on YouTube or likes on Twitter). However, a limitation of how the scroll-back method was adopted for this thesis was the lack of knowledge and preparation for how adolescents actually use Instagram. For instance, it became clear throughout the research that they use the 'archive' (*i.e., archiving a post means that it has been shared to hide it from your profile and make it so your followers and other people on Instagram can't see, but it keeps all the likes and comments, and you can go back and see the post*) feature on Instagram or how adolescents regularly curate their Instagram accounts which often involves completely deleting posts from their feeds. Although this provided some useful insights into adolescents Instagram use, I think it also limited how in-depth I could go with the scroll-back method and questioning for some participants. Future research should aim to incorporate these different features into the scroll-back method (e.g., by asking participants to scroll-back through their archive).

Despite the numerous strengths and contributions of this research it is not without sample and methodological limitations. A key limitation that is present throughout the studies is that the sample of participants is comprised of predominantly white adolescent girls and boys. Although some social media research has found remarkably similar patterns of use across different cultural groups of adolescents (Livingstone, 2019), it is still important for future research to explore these issues in a diverse sample, both ethnically and culturally. This is a limitation of the body image research area in general (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016), and so the findings presented in this thesis, although not aimed at generalising, they limit understanding of how more diverse groups of adolescents engage with social media and experience appearance interactions and body image. Similarly, a limitation of my thesis is the

recruitment of mostly boys and girls and so pertaining a binary gender perspective of appearance commentary on social media and body image. It is recognised at the beginning of this thesis, that within the broader body image literature there is an overfocus on binary gender assumptions (i.e., girl vs boy). It is important to recognise the problems associated with this and future research should aim to explore experiences of social media, appearance commentary and body image in gender diverse individuals to move away from such a binary approach on these issues. Another sample limitation is issue with not asking participants about their sexual identity. There was a lack of understanding about how sexual identity intersects with adolescents' experiences of social media appearance interactions and body image. It is important to understand how sexual minority cis men and women (Mason et al., 2018; Nowicki et al., 2022) and trans men and women (McGuire et al., 2016) may have similar or different experiences to straight cis men and women so that we gain a more holistic understanding of these issues and how to develop appropriate interventions. Moving forward, an intersectionality framework may be particularly useful for understanding sexual and gender minority experiences of body image, whilst also highlighting how societal expectations of binary gender roles (like those explored in my thesis, e.g., toxic masculinity traits of being tough) also influences these experiences in similar ways to cis individuals (Morrison et al., 2020; Richburg & Stewart, 2022).

Another sampling limitation present in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 is the potential of a self-selecting bias. I recruited via social media platforms and university mailing lists for participation in the one-to-one interviews and extraction of social media data, thus it may be that only adolescents who are more willing to discuss appearance-related topics and share their social media data will volunteer to participate. In particular, in Chapter 5 the sample of adolescent girls recruited may have only taken part in this study because their feeds were curated in a way to only show positive comments and so they felt happy to share with a

researcher. It may be that adolescents who receive negative appearance commentary did not want to volunteer to take part, therefore limiting the research findings variability in type of comments and responses. This is something to consider in future research and when interpreting the findings presented in this thesis. Similarly, there may be a self-selecting bias issue in relation to the boys recruited for this study. Boys were difficult to recruit for this study, therefore it may be that there is something (e.g., confidence or more openness surrounding these topics) that makes these boys more likely to participate compared to other boys. This should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings, but also in how researchers approach participant recruitment in future research. A final limitation to note is the potential reluctance of adolescent boys to reveal sensitive information surrounding body image issues, due to being interviewed by a woman interviewer. Although presence of a woman interviewer is not considered an issue by young men (Yager, Diedrichs & Drummond, 2013), adolescent boys may feel more reluctant to speak openly about their concerns with someone of a different gender identity. This may account for the difficulties recruiting adolescent boys to the study. That said, previous research has identified that the presence of a woman interviewer may reduce feelings of judgement for young men (Bottamini & Ste-Marie, 2006). Future research in this space may wish to consider asking participants for their preference (e.g., similar to Grogan & Richards, 2002).

8.4. Final Conclusions

Despite the limitations, this thesis makes an important and novel contribution to the appearance interactions, social media, and body image literatures by highlighting the unique way in which social media transforms adolescent appearance interactions with peers. The findings also show how this highly appearance-focused environment transmits salient messages surrounding appearance norms and ideals, which in turn is associated with adolescent's perception and experiences of body image. Furthermore, it emphasises the

important role in which gender plays in an adolescent's understanding, perception, and experiences of appearance commentary on social media. Therefore, it is suggested that adolescent appearance interactions on social media are not simply mirrored from offline to online, but instead they are constrained by social media platform design, gendered group norms, self-presentation strategies and peer relationships which influence the way in which these interactions are perceived, experienced and how they contribute to the peer appearance culture during adolescent development. The findings of this present thesis have important implications for theoretical frameworks and intervention programmes. Future research should aim to focus on exploring these social media appearance interactions and examine the related consequences in the context of appearance and body image concerns.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Study 1 Focus Group Guide

Introduction Questions

- Can you tell me about how you use social media? In other words, what do you use it for?
- What do you think of social media? In other words, do you think it is a positive tool or a negative tool?
- How do you interact with your peers on social media?
    - Pictures?
    - Tagging?
    - Private messages?
    - Group messages?
    - Comments?
- How are these interactions on social media focused on appearance?
    - Does this happen? Can you explain why? In what ways?
- How can these interactions focused on appearance online be positive or negative? Can you give some examples?
- Tell me about the different ways you can interact with peers online that focuses on appearance.
    - Liking a friend's photo
    - Tagging someone in something
    - Commenting on a photo
    - Snapchat messages
    - Replying to stories
    - Making stories
    - Use of emojis? If so, what type of emojis?
    - Games?

Now I'm going to show you some online interactions:
Scenario 1: Example of cyberbullying on Instagram (female & male version)
[Take a moment to read the scenarios in front of you]

- How would this make you feel?
- How do you characterise this interaction, e.g., is it cyberbullying or teasing or banter? How could you tell?
- Why are these comments directed at appearance?
- In what ways are teenagers bullied online about their appearance? Do you see it happen a lot?
- How likely is this to occur in real life? E.g., in an offline situation?
- Lucy is upset about her likes – how and why is this important?
- Are the interactions shown in these situations usually between peers/friends or are these types of comments usually from complete strangers?
- Do you see this more on public or private posts?

- These horrible comments left on Louise's/Liam's posts; would you expect to see them often online?
- Can you give me any examples of this that you have seen?
- Does the type of image posted influence the types of interactions that occur? In other words, do certain images deserve nasty or nice comments? Why?
- Would you expect this to happen more on girls' post or a boy's post?

Scenario 2: Example of a body talk conversation on Snapchat (Female & Male version)
[Take a moment to read the scenarios in front of you]

- What are your overall thoughts about this interaction?
- How would this make you feel if you were part of the conversation?
- Why do you think people respond in the ways they have? Is this a common thing you experience?
- Is this a positive or negative interaction? Why?
- In what ways are conversations like this focus on appearance?
- How likely is this to occur in real life? In other words, would this conversation occur in an offline situation?
- How do these types of conversations online begin? Why are they appearance focused?
- Do you see these comments on public or private posts? In other words, are they in private messages or on public posts?
- Can you give me any examples of where you have engaged in this type of interaction?
- Are there any differences between how girls interact, and how boys interact after looking at both scenarios?

Scenario 3: Example of compliments on Instagram (female and male version)
[Take a moment to read the scenarios in front of you]

- What are your overall thoughts regarding this type of interaction?
- How would receiving these comments make you feel, compared to watching a friend receive them?
- What are your thoughts on receiving these types of comments from your friends versus from complete strangers?
- What does the use of emojis do? Can you explain these to me? More powerful than words?
- Why do you think all these compliments are appearance focused? Is this the only way to compliment someone?
- How likely is this to occur in real life? In other words, would this conversation occur in an offline situation?
- What are the differences between boys' and girls' compliments?
- Do certain types of images elicit certain types of responses like those in the scenarios?
- How much does an image affect the type of response?
- Would you expect these comments on a public post or through private message? Why?

Scenario 4: Sexual advances on Facebook Messenger (Female & Male version)
[Take a moment to read the scenarios in front of you]

- What are your overall thoughts regarding this situation?
- How would it make you feel if you received these messages? Why?
- Why do you think they are appearance-focused?
- Do you think these are positive or negative interactions?
- How would this make you feel if it was a complete stranger sending you these messages compared with someone you know?
- How does this differ to a real-life situation like this? Does it even happen?
- Do you think this type of interaction is appropriate? Why?
- Tell me what you think the main issues are with this type of interaction?

Scenario 5: Teasing/Banter on WhatsApp (Female & Male version)
[Take a moment to read the scenarios in front of you]

- What are your overall thoughts regarding this situation?
- How would it make you feel if you received these messages as a response? Why?
- To what extent would you consider this to be serious? AND to what extent might it be joking? Would this change your interaction?
- How would you differentiate between whether it being jokey or serious?
- How does this differ to a real-life interaction?
- Do these interactions only occur in private messages? Or do they occur on public posts?
- Why is there a focus on appearance?
- Can you tell me about an experience like this?
- Do you think this is a positive or negative interaction? Why? What makes it positive/negative?
- Can you tell me the main issues that arise when interacting about appearance online? Do people take things in the wrong way?

Closing Questions

- Before we finish…
- Do you think there's a difference in interactions between friends & peers, and interactions with celebrities/influencers?

And finally, are there any appearance-related interactions that we haven't discussed today that you want to tell me about?

Appendix 2: Study 2 Interview Guide

Open Questions/Introduction:

- Could you tell me your participant number, age, gender and favourite social media?
- To start with, could you tell me about how you use Instagram?
- What is your favourite thing about Instagram?
- What kind of content do you post?
- What kind of people do you follow? (Friends, family, celebrities)
- What do you spend most of your time doing on Instagram? (Posting/looking at posts/editing/commenting on posts/stories)
- How do you interact with friends on Instagram?
- Can you give me an example of how you have used it to express yourself?
- What do you mean by ….?

Covid-19 Related Questions:

- How do you feel like that the isolation/quarantine period has influenced what you post to social media?
- Has it changed the way you post to social media?
- Why? Can you explain that in more detail?

Questions used in the scroll-back section of the interview:

- Can you show me one of your Instagram posts that is a selfie (or an image with you in it)?
- Can you describe the image – what does it show, who is in it and what are you doing?
- How did you feel when you posted that?
- How did you feel when you received that comment? (Pointing to specific comments)
- How did you feel when you commented that? (Pointing to specific comments)
- Why did you think that?
- Why did you comment like that?
- Tell me about your relationship with the person who commented that?
- How does your relationship to the commenter make you interpret the comment? Why?
- Why is it important that you receive comments on your self-images?
- How is this interaction positive/negative?
- Can you tell me more about that?
- Tell me about that interaction?
- Tell me why you posted that image and caption? How was you feeling at the time?

General follow up questions:

- **Why do you think that?**
- **How did that make you feel?**
- **Can you tell me more about that?**
- **Why is that important?**
- **How has Covid-19 influenced that?**

- **What do you mean by saying …? Who determines it? Do other people do that?**
- **In response to "I don't know why" -> ask if other people do it? Like who? Do you think these people influence you?**

Exploratory body talk questions:

- Do you make negative comments about your own appearance? How? Why?
- Do you think making negative comments about the self is positive or negative? How? Why? How would you make negative comments about appearance?
- Can you tell me about a time where you and your friends have made negative appearance comments about yourself on social media?
- Why do you and your friends talk like this? I.e., why do you and your friends make negative appearance comments about the self on social media?
- What does it mean to be happy in your own appearance?
- Do you make positive comments about your own appearance on Instagram?
- Do your friends make positive comments about your appearance on Instagram?
- What role do your friends play in influencing how you react to comments online?
- Why do people post positively about appearance on Instagram?
- How does it make you feel when you see positive appearance comments either on your self-image or on other people's posts?
- How would you respond to a positive appearance comment on your post? Why?
- Do you think carefully about how to comment on someone's appearance on Instagram? Why?
- Do you think carefully about how to caption your own self-image on Instagram? Why?

Exploring scenarios relating to body talk:

- Why do you think there is such a big focus on appearance online?
- How do your friends influence you the way you interact about appearance online?
- Do you think social media plays a role in these appearance comments? How?
- Do you think appearance is important/highlighted when you are on social media? How?
- What does it mean to be positive about your own appearance?
- How do you think gender plays a role in appearance commentary on social media?
- How do you think friendship circles or peer group play a role in appearance commentary on social media?
- How does popularity play a role in appearance commentary online?
- How are the ways you comment about appearance important to how you portray yourself online?
- What is important when posting to social media? What are the things you think about when posting images/comments/captions/replies to/on social media? Why?
- What impact (if any) do you think social media commentary has on you? How?

Closing Questions

- Thank you for discussing your experiences of appearance interactions on social media. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about appearance interactions on social media?