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# Changing the perfect picture: Smartphones, social media and appearance pressures

**Professor Rosalind Gill, City, University of London**



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# The author

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Rosalind Gill is Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis at City, University of London, and Deputy Director of the Gender and Sexualities Research Centre. Her PhD (1991) was in Social Psychology, and she has since worked in the disciplines of Media and Communications, Psychology, Sociology and Gender Studies. She helped to establish the LSE's Gender Institute and was its first tenured academic between 1997 and 2007. She is a world-leading and prize-winning scholar in the fields of gender, media, and appearance – her work has been cited more than 25,000 times, and been translated into multiple languages including Chinese, German, Japanese, Spanish and Portuguese. She has published 12 books and more than 100 scholarly articles, and has also been committed to sharing research beyond the academy through accessibly-written articles, contributions to the media, engagement with NGOs, and four documentaries. She has twice been selected to represent the UK as its expert on gender, media and new technologies at the UN's Commission on the Status on Women (in 2003 and 2018).

# Executive summary

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- This report discusses new research with 175 18-30 year old young women and nonbinary people in the UK.
- Young women growing up today live in a world with an unprecedented number of visual images, and feel under intense pressure to look perfect and to present a perfect life. They navigate this with sophistication and impressive media literacy, but many say this is making them anxious and depressed.
- Social media play a key role in this, with the majority of young women spending several hours every day on Instagram, Snapchat, and (increasingly) TikTok. While posting can bring intense pleasure and the buzz of appreciative attention which many characterised as 'addictive', young women also experience severe anxiety about posting photographs and emphasised the many ways they felt they could fail at this.
- Appearance pressures are getting worse for young women and appearance ideals are narrowing- though also arguably changing from a thin ideal to a 'slim-thick' ideal.
- The impact of celebrity and influencer beauty tutorials is having a significant (narrowing) effect on young women's sense of how it is acceptable to look.
- The magnification functions of smartphones exacerbate this, producing a tendency to forensically scrutinise oneself and others.
- Cosmetic surgery companies as well as the wider beauty industry promoting non-surgical interventions capitalise on young women's new visual literacies, and young women routinely receive adverts and push notifications for lip fillers, cosmetic dentistry etc.
- Photographic filters and editing software are playing a new and key role in young women's lives with 90% reporting using a filter or editing their photos before posting to even out skin tone, reshape jaw or nose, shave off weight, brighten or bronze skin, and whiten teeth.
- Most young women are very supportive of trends towards 'body positivity' but do not feel they have gone far enough, and report that most representations are still too thin, too white, too skewed towards heterosexual, cisgender and non-disabled bodies.
- Young women are wary of censorship and are deeply attached to 'not judging' others, but almost two thirds believe the government needs to act urgently to regulate media and social media, and to protect them from impossible pressures.

# Introduction

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This research was undertaken at an extraordinary time, in May and June 2020. In just a few months, a global pandemic had killed hundreds of thousands of people internationally, and upwards of 40,000 in the UK. Since March 23rd in England (and earlier in the other nations/regions of the UK) all residents had been told to ‘stay at home, save lives and protect the NHS’. Schools and Universities were shut, all but essential stores were closed, and public transport was running a skeleton service, for keyworkers only. When the research was launched, the vast majority of people in the UK – with the exception of keyworkers – had been in ‘lockdown’ for eight weeks already, allowed out only once a day for exercise and to make essential trips (primarily to buy food).

Against this historically unprecedented background the research presented here set out to explore a number of questions concerning young people’s use of media, social media and smartphones, with a particular focus on questions about bodily practices, appearance and mental health and wellbeing. The research would have been important at any time, but the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown gave it a particular urgency. Day after day reports were published highlighting the devastating mental health impacts of the pandemic on young people: their education suddenly halted, their freedoms curtailed, with many experiencing financial hardship, emotional difficulties, bereavement. Young people face many of the same challenges as other groups, but they suffer disproportionately from some: they are more likely to be in insecure and rented housing than older groups, they are more likely to be in precarious forms of employment, they are more likely to have experienced disruption to their education.

This research helps to shed light on how a diverse sample of young people navigated this challenging time, as well as offering more general insights into their lives. The focus of this research on smartphone use and social media practices offers a textured appreciation of young people’s lives, mediated by the devices that accompany them everywhere. In some ways, young people’s facility and familiarity with online tools and platforms better prepared them (relative to older groups) for the lockdown period in which so many aspects of life moved online – including much work, education, psychological and health services, and social lives. In other ways, as this report shows, they experienced heightened pressure and distress.

The killing of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis on May 25th occurred just after the survey went live. The footage of his murder, recorded on phones and shared via social media, generated waves of outrage, and inspired Black Lives Matter protests across the globe, including in the UK. Some of the pain and rage about persistent racism and structural injustice made its way vividly into responses to survey questions: expressed as anger about the whiteness of the media, the failure of conventional news organisations to report fairly on the protests and on histories of racism and slavery, and about the cynicism of brands attempting to appropriate the cultural energy of the Black Lives Matter movement through a kind of ‘corporate wokeness’. The answers to several free or open questions in the survey were a particular locus for these discussions and I am immensely grateful to all the young people who took part for taking the time to share their feelings so eloquently; to take the care, in many cases, to write at length and in detail about topics that clearly moved them. These experiences were also discussed in depth in the interviews I undertook throughout June 2020.



A project that was already conceived quite broadly, then, became more so because of the unique set of circumstances that characterised the period in which it was conducted. From #blackouttuesday to Joe Wicks’ phenomenally successful online exercise sessions, from the lockdown ‘quiz night in’ to the extraordinary popularity of the TikTok transformation video, the research offers a unique window into young people’s lives and preoccupations during the COVID crisis in the UK in Spring/Summer 2020, while also illuminating their more enduring concerns about social media, mental health, the beauty industry, and ubiquitous pressures to post ‘perfect lives’.

The remainder of the report is divided into 8 chapters. Chapter 1 details the methodology used in this research, its guiding principles, and offers socio-demographic information about survey participants and interviewees. Chapter 2 reports on young people’s patterns of social media use, the celebrities and influencers they follow, and the ways they navigate their lives across platforms and profiles. Chapter 3 looks in detail at posting on social media – something that young women both enjoy yet find extremely anxiety-provoking. We discuss participants’ experiences of pressure to post pictures in which they not only look attractive but also display successes, popularity, positive dispositions and cool locations, yet in a relatable and perfect but-not-too-perfect manner. In chapter 4 the fear of getting it wrong is elaborated in more detail. We show how worries about posting could include posting a picture that is too perfect or not perfect enough, that does not garner enough likes or shares, or that receives negative comments. The chapter documents how young people manage anxieties about seeming fake, looking like they are trying too hard, needing to come across as authentic, while not seeming to be attention-seeking.

Chapter 5 zooms in on appearance pressures. It shows the intensification of pressures to look perfect, highlighting trends related to comparison with others, the proliferation of makeup sets, the force of transformation videos and the development of new beauty standards. The way that smartphones are changing appearance pressures is the topic of chapter 6. It documents the way that a variety of affordances and features of the smartphone – from magnification to filters to cosmetic surgery try-out apps – are transforming the beauty industry and facilitating new ways of seeing and judging appearance.

In chapter 7, ‘media do not represent me’ we report the anger and distress that young women and nonbinary people feel in relation to media images. These are, they told us, too perfect, too sexualised, too white, too heteronormative, too middle class and do not represent the lives of disabled and/or nonbinary people. The chapter also documents attitudes to contemporary ‘body positivity’ movements, and, in particular, their uptake by brands. Finally, chapter 8 draws together the findings in a conclusion that offers some additional food for thought for teachers, youth workers, NGOs and policy-makers.



# 1. Methodology: ethics, principles and participants

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This research was designed to explore the feelings and experiences of young people living in the UK. It is focussed on media, social media, bodily practices and body image, and the beauty industry, and is particularly interested in understanding how smartphones mediate young people’s lives. In order to explore these questions we solicited participation from almost two hundred and twenty young people. **Of these 175 were young women or nonbinary people, and it is their responses that are the focus of this report.**

Recruitment to the survey was achieved via personal networks, social media shares, and an advert on a research platform designed to find participants. Participation was incentivized via entry to a prize draw to win £100. People who took part in the survey were invited to leave their email address (which was saved separately from survey responses in order to protect anonymity and confidentiality) and a random number generator selected the prize winner on June 29th 2020.

Interviewees were recruited via personal networks and through recommendations by existing participants. In recognition of their time, interviewees were each given £25 in the form of an e-voucher from a retailer of their choice (e.g. ASOS, Amazon). All the interviews were conducted by the author using a video platform which allowed recording, and were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription agency.

## Ethical issues

The study followed ethical guidelines from the British Sociological Association, centred on the key principles of informed consent, the right to withdraw, and protection of anonymity and confidentiality. Ethical approval for the project was awarded by City, University of London’s Ethics Committee (Ref: ETH1920-1647), which also specifies a range of additional measures to ensure compliance with EU General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) relating to the storage and destruction of confidential data.

## Key principles: listening and diversity

Two key principles underpinned this research. One was the focus on listening to young people. Too much research is about young people without seeming to start from young people’s own concerns. There are regular panics about young people’s ‘screen time’, about their selfies, about sexting. By contrast this research sought to understand how **young people themselves** think and feel about a range of issues, practices and experiences.

The other key principle that shaped the research is that of diversity. It was imperative that this research should hear about the experiences of a wide range of young people from all backgrounds, of different genders, sexual orientations, disabilities, heritages, geographical regions and social classes. Far too much research focuses predominantly on white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle class and non-disabled people, and in research on body image and social media there has been a particular focus on white, middle class girls. By contrast this research **actively solicited** participation from under-represented groups through its recruitment strategies. At times this was uncomfortable: some white, cisgender, non-disabled, London-based participants who volunteered to take part in the interviews were turned away. But it has produced a sample that is notable for its diversity, as detailed below.

## The participants

The criteria for taking part in the survey were twofold:

- participants should live in the UK and
- be aged between eighteen and thirty.

The survey attracted 189 full results (that is individuals who not only started but completed all 61 questions). The demographic characteristics were as follows, based, in all cases, upon self-identification:

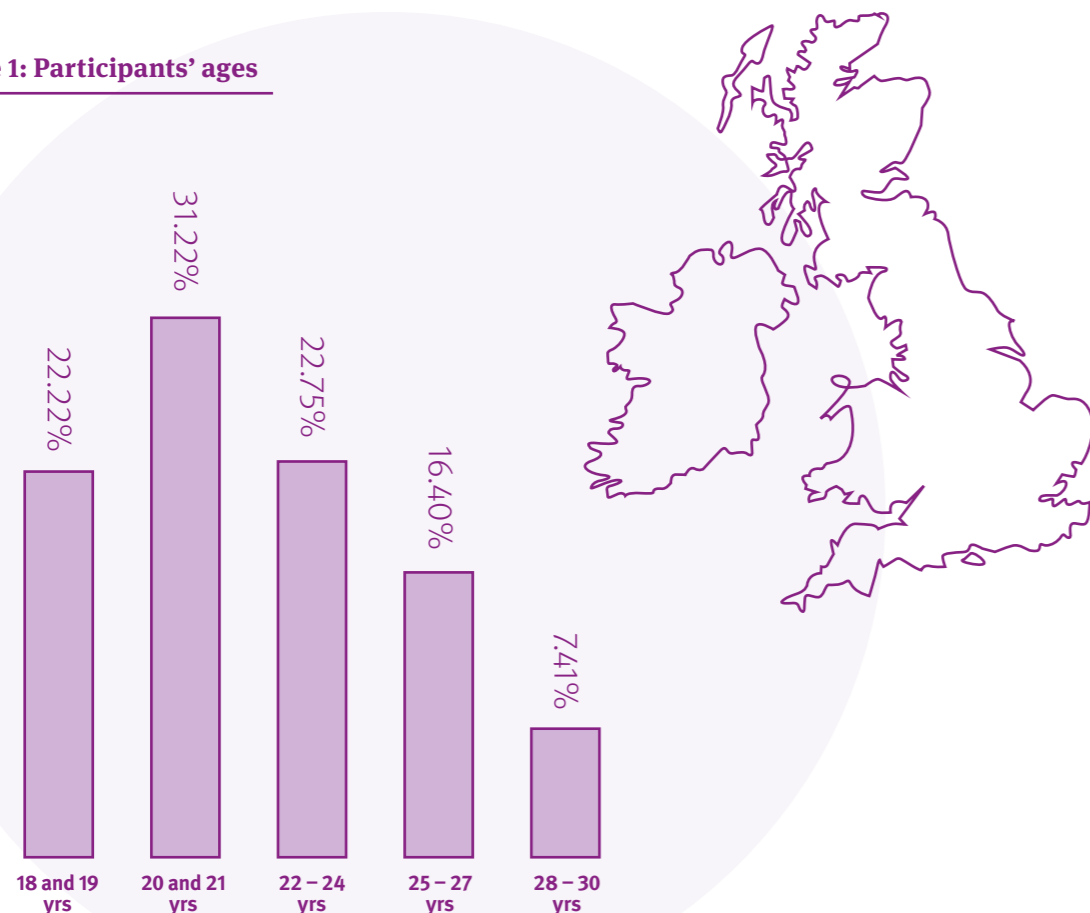
- **Gender:** 82% were women, 16% men, and 2% from people who identified as gender non-conforming or nonbinary.
- **Race and ethnicity:** 72% of respondents were white, 27% were from BAME backgrounds including African, African-Caribbean, Indian or Pakistani, Arab, Chinese or mixed-race heritage.
- **Sexuality:** 79% of the respondents identified as heterosexual, 9.5% as bi-sexual, 3.5% as gay or lesbian, with just over 7% saying they were pansexual or had an alternative sexuality.
- **Disability:** 6% identified as disabled. 93% did not consider themselves to have a disability.
- **Age range:** 18 or 19: 22%; 20 or 21: 31%; 22-24: 23% 25-27: 16.5%; 28-30 7%

27% were from BAME backgrounds including African, African-Caribbean, Indian or Pakistani, Arab, Chinese or mixed-race heritage.

21% of our sample did not identify as heterosexual

6% identified as disabled

Table 1: Participants' ages



## In-depth qualitative interviews

In addition, more than 20 hours of interviews were undertaken with a purposive sample designed to capture the diverse identities and experiences of young women. With one exception who identified as nonbinary, interviewees were all cis women, aged between 18 and 27, and included a doctor, a dancer, an acrobat, a scientist, a nail technician, a trainee vet, a fashion assistant, several people who worked in retail and hospitality, and several students. Interviewees came from a range of different regions across the UK. The interview sample was diverse in terms of class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, and included two women who were disabled.

...included a doctor, a dancer, an acrobat, a scientist, a nail technician, a trainee vet, a fashion assistant, several people who worked in retail and hospitality, and several students.

## Special considerations

Compared with most other research in the field of body image this study stands out for being reflective of the real diversity in society in relation to race and ethnicity, disability, gender identification and sexual orientation.

The research was conducted in June 2020 towards the end of the lockdown period in England, and after a period in which many (but not all) participants had been at home for 10 weeks. COVID and lockdown clearly had an impact on feelings and experiences relating to the body, and both the survey and the interviews were designed to explore this (see below).

The research also coincided with the surge in anti-racist activism after the death in police custody of George Floyd. The Black Lives Matter movement was spontaneously discussed by a large number of participants in the free answers in the survey, as well as being extensively explored in relation to questions about the diversity of bodies in the media in both the survey and the interviews

## Pseudonyms and notations

Interview participants are anonymous, and have all been given pseudonyms that reflect their ethnicity, class and gender identity. Where quotations are not attributed they come from the huge number of free comments left in response to various questions in the survey. In these cases original spelling and formatting has been maintained.

## 2. Social media: active and sophisticated users

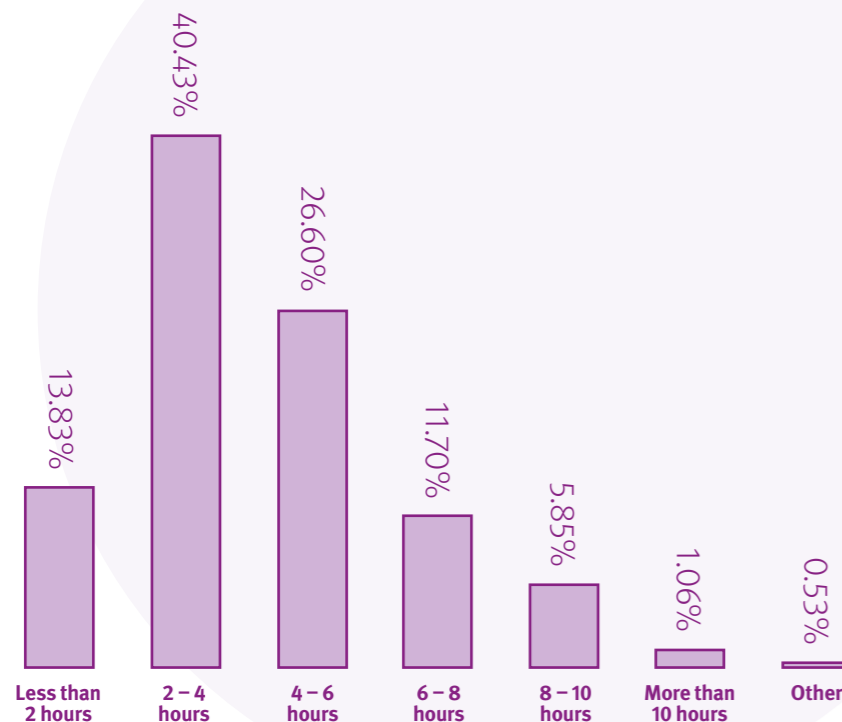
God, all of them. I have Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, I'm on LinkedIn. I don't have Snapchat, that's the one that I don't... I don't know, I'll have a look and see what I've got. Facebook, yes. I've got Tumblr. Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram are the main... Oh, and LinkedIn are the mains ones that I use. (Ruby, 27)

Definitely Instagram 90% of the time. I use it for everything, for news, for entertainment, for fashion, for shopping, literally everything. Instagram is my main source. (Bipasha, 23)

### I wake up and check my phone

Young women are spending significant proportions of their day on social media. It is typically the first thing they engage with when they wake up, and the last thing before they sleep. It is also keeping them awake (as discussed below). Only 13% said they spent fewer than two hours per day on social media, whereas 67% spent between two and six hours a day, with many describing how, when browsing, hours can go by without them noticing. 20% said they spent more than six hours per day on social media.

Table 2: Amount of time spent on social media per day



Social media **use** has dramatically increased during the COVID crisis with 80% of young women saying that they are on social media more. However, **posting** on social media has dropped significantly with 40% of young women reporting they are posting less – largely due to not going out or travelling.

As 27-year old Keisha put it:

*But then, I suppose, over the past few months, I've just thought, it is really good to connect, especially the fact that we can't physically connect with people anymore. It's good to network now. I think it's really important to network now more than ever.*

Instagram is the most popular social among our sample, with nearly 90% of young women using it. Facebook remains popular (particularly Messenger function to keep up with friends) with Snapchat used by similar numbers. TikTok has grown in popularity during the lockdown and accounts for 7.5% of time spent on socials. WhatsApp is used primarily as a communication tool with friends and family, and Twitter as a source of news. YouTube accounted for 15% of social media use, characterised as random browsing or pursuing interests e.g. music or yoga or vegan cooking.

As 20 year old student Lynne explained:

*I wake up and I check my phone. If I've got any notifications, I'll go straight to them. But then if it's just first thing in the morning, I would just scroll through Instagram. Watch people's stories. And then that's mostly it. I spend at least an hour a day. When I wake up, straight away, probably just an hour on Instagram, on the explore page, or just scrolling through. So that's pretty much it in the morning.*

INT: And then are you going back to it constantly through the day?

*Yes, I think Instagram is the one I go to the most. Not even looking through my own... What comes up on my own feed, just exploring. If I have a random thought and I think about something, I'll go to Instagram first and look up... So, if I want to see baking or something that day then I'll go to Instagram before I'll go to the internet. Get ideas, whatever. Yes, so it is pretty constant throughout the day or just checking what people are saying.*

Young women told us they use social media to support all aspects of their lives from keeping up with friends to following news, from taking part in hobbies to engaging with activism. Following influencers and celebrities were important activities, accounting for around 22% of their total social media use- the same proportion as keeping in touch with friends' lives. These are the top two categories in terms of time spent. Nearly 17% of time on social media was described as 'random browsing' of videos, memes, and other material proffered by the platforms' algorithms.

## Active and sophisticated users

Young people are thoughtful and sophisticated users of social media. They make clear and subtle differentiations in what they use different platforms for, in the different levels of trust and intimacy associated with different platforms, and the different people with whom they seek to communicate.

As 18 year old Bianca vividly expressed it:

*It depends on what social media it is. Snapchat is mainly a video of me lip-syncing a song, I would say. Or, just a random picture of my food, or just showing them where I am, because you can put the location and it will come up. Or just funny videos, like my friends doing something. Whereas Instagram, it's just pictures of me. So, it will be a full body picture, just showing my outfit. Or it will be a selfie, yes. And maybe the videos from Snapchat I'll post on Instagram as well, because I have different people on there.*

*And then Facebook is more family I'll post or just myself but less revealing, got to keep it PG for the family! (laughter) And that's mostly family stuff. I wouldn't say I post a lot on there, it's just if I wanted to update my profile picture or family, a happy birthday to someone. Because they're most likely to see it on Facebook if they're older.*

Young people actively manage their social media presences across different platforms and different accounts within one platform. Participants typically had multiple Instagrams that they used for different purposes and to engage different audiences:

*So I have my main account which is just the 1,700 people who follow me, that's friends you build up over the years, people you've known or know, just people who choose to follow you, whatever.*

*And that's just selfies, pictures with friends, highlights, which are from stories of nights out or whatever, but yes it's just mainly pictures, nice pictures of me and pictures of me and my friends.*

*But then I have a separate account, I have to have for uni, so that's all design related posts, stories that are all design related. And then I have a third account, which is my private account for my close friends where I'll just post whatever I want, funny stuff, whatever, just weird things, like personal stuff.*

Participants typically had multiple Instagrams that they used for different purposes and to engage different audiences.



## Influencers and activists

### what people said about following influencers

To see how they are responding to BLM or other issues I care about

They make me laugh

To escape from my own life

It's interesting

They inspire me to do new things and go to new places

It's interesting, especially right now, to see how different people live their lives and what they think about current topics eg BLM

To relax

Entertainment

Mindless viewing

The influencers I follow are more like what I hope my life will be like ie calmer, less worry on university and more stable

To keep up with the latest trends

Fashion and beauty hacks

To see what they wear and for inspiration for my own pictures



On Instagram, following influencers and celebrities were important activities for the vast majority (around 70%) of respondents, the same as keeping in touch with friends' lives. Influencers were – not unexpectedly – a divisive topic, with some participants professing a love and pleasure in following mainstream celebrities and others expressing contempt for 'all things Kardashian'. There was a marked trend for 'relatable' celebrities, with great affection expressed, for example, for Molly-Mae, from 2019 UK Love Island.



Another significant trend was the following of accounts that were deemed to be 'less mainstream' whether in relation to appearance or content. Others explicitly followed 'body positive' influencers or Black and/or LGBT activists:

*So, I follow a huge array. So, I follow a lot of influencers, mainly body positive influencers. A lot of influencers who discuss things like skin care. For years, well, my whole life, whole teenage life and adult life now, I've suffered from really bad acne. And for a long time, it really affected me, really, really did affect me. And, I suppose, one thing that has helped me is social media and normalising it. It isn't just this horrible thing that people make it out to be. It has really helped me accept it and break the stigma. (Keisha, 27)*

In turn this nonbinary participant explained how they use social media for information, support and inspiration particularly from other LGBT people:

*Yes. I have Facebook and I use that, occasionally for posting things but not that often. I often scroll through it and see what other people have posted and I follow different accounts, some LGBT accounts. I'm in some trans-specific Facebook groups, where we talk about various stuff to do with socially transitioning or medically transitioning or whatever, acceptance from people and stuff like that. I usually use Facebook just for chatting to people on Facebook Messenger.*

*I follow friends, I follow some influencers that I like, I follow some body positivity Instagrams and some Black Lives Matter Instagrams. I follow a lot of other LGBT people who are posting that kind of content and different stuff like that. I don't use Snapchat. I tried it once and did not like it. I use YouTube, just to watch YouTubers that I like. Usually either funny content or LGBT specific content.*

Table 3: Types of accounts followed on social media

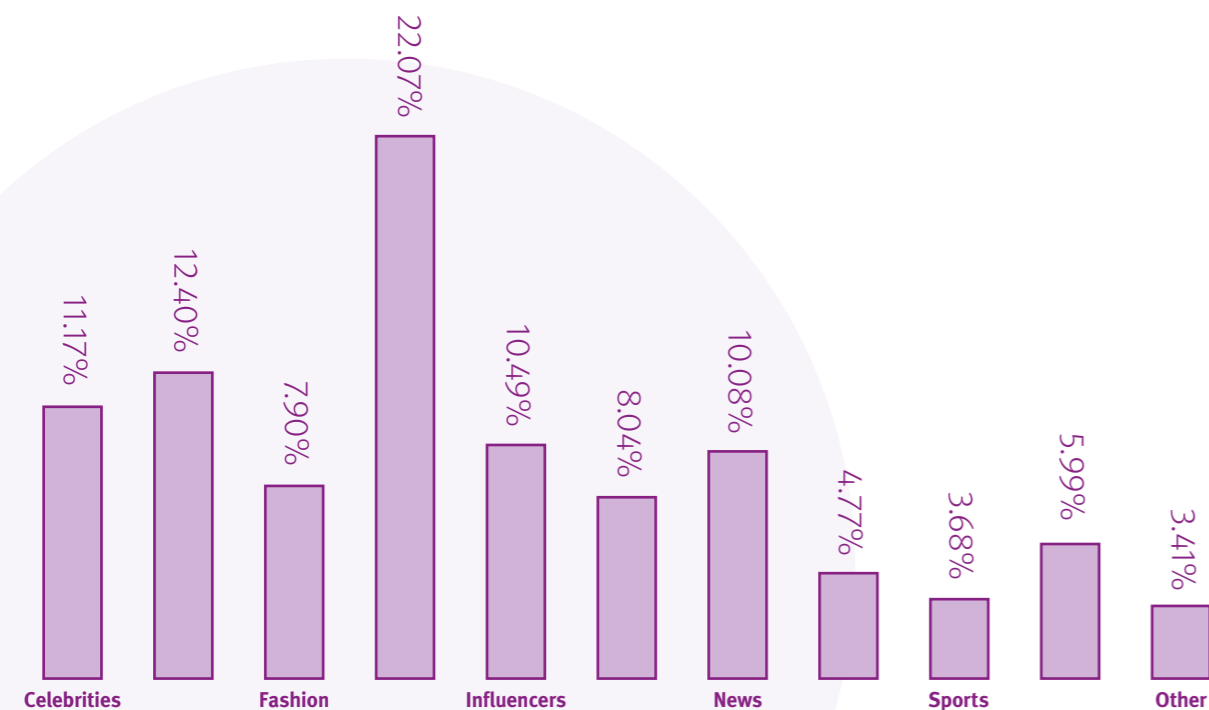
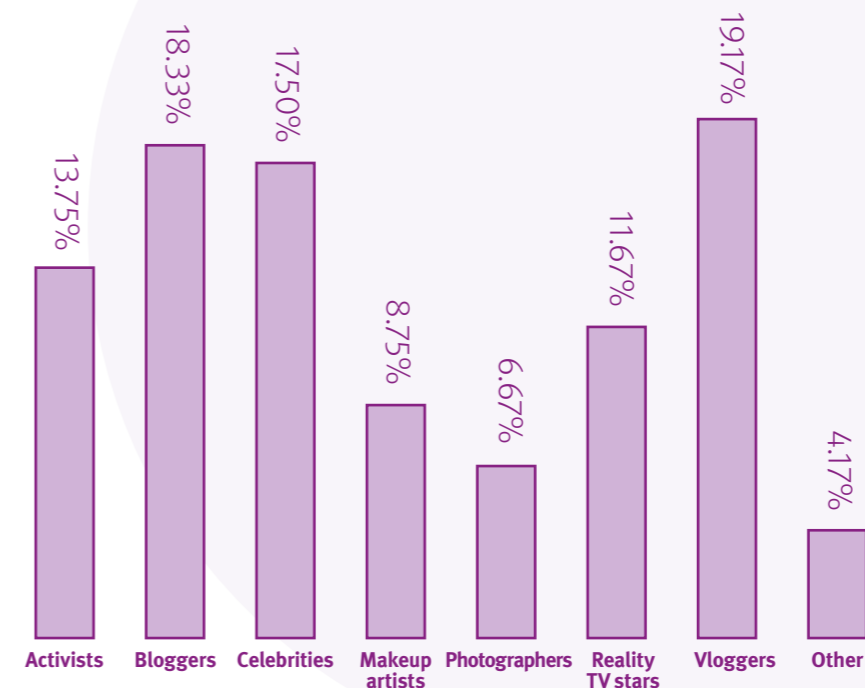


Table 4: Types of influencer accounts followed



## Pleasures and pains

Social media provoked markedly different feelings and experiences across our sample. A few participants expressed huge enthusiasm for socials for the sense of community, affirmation and fun they provided: three interviewees told us that social media were a source of pleasure and support for them. By contrast, three other interviewees experienced intense unhappiness in relation to social media. Most others expressed views that were more ambivalent. This was vividly captured in the survey responses. We asked respondents whether or not they agreed with various statements such as ‘social media makes me feel... attractive/ confident/ happy/ bad about myself’. We also asked them to rate each of these kinds of statements in terms of frequencies ranging from Always to Never. Because the questions were not mutually exclusive they produced a fascinating range of answers which reveal the ambivalence experienced in relation to socials. For example 80% responded that their social media made them feel confident at least some of the time (the vast majority checked ‘sometimes’). However, an identical proportion **of the same respondents** also told us that social media made them feel ‘bad about yourself’.

## Loving social media

Among the major enthusiasts for social media was 23 year old Bipasha who was a full-time student, with a demanding part-time job that had continued through lockdown, but who felt her life revolved around planning and executing her Instagram, which (like many) she characterised as ‘an addiction’ that, when it went well, brought her great joy:

*I’m absolutely addicted. If there is an event coming up, all I will think about is, what am I going to wear for my Instagram picture? Or, I’m the family party planner, I love planning big parties for everybody and all the decorations, but always in the back of my mind it’s, will this look good for Instagram? It is so unhealthy (laughs) but it’s just everything I do is... If I’m going out or actively doing something, I’m like, can I get an Instagram here? Will it look good for that? If my post... If I’m getting loads of likes or getting comments, it’s the highlight of my day, genuine highlight of my day. It makes me so happy.*

## Supportive online communities

For some participants social media’s importance lay in providing a sense of community centred on gender, race, body size and shape, disability and even, as we saw above, skin conditions. Alex explains why online communities were so important for them:

INT: It sounds quite a supportive environment for you?

*Yes, definitely. I think especially when I was realising I was nonbinary and trying to figure out how to navigate all of that stuff, I think that online communities were really important to me then. I think not feeling alone and having that sense of community around me, back then more so but even still now, is a really important thing in just feeling all right with myself. I don’t even know where I’d be without the internet in terms of I don’t know how I would have dealt with the feelings that I was having, to do with gender stuff.*

### Three questions stood out

More than **90%** of women reported that social media made them feel ‘like other people are more successful than you’

More than **90%** reported feeling ‘Like other people have more fun than you’

And well over one third (**36.6%**) responded ‘Never’ when asked if social media made them feel ‘popular’

*Now, it’s good because I’ve got a lot of people who I know in real life, who are trans and nonbinary and I can talk to them in real life about that. But a lot of those people also first found community on the internet for that stuff. When if there’s nobody in your school who is out about that yet and there’s nobody else in your circle of family, friends or whatever, how are you going to know that it’s a thing that’s all right that people are?*

## Hating social media

By contrast, other participants revealed that social media made them feel depressed, felt like a waste of time, could be a source of envy when comparing themselves with others, or could make them upset to have to witness people being mean to each other.

*Well, the first thing that makes me feel a bit down is just the amount of time I’ve spent on it, even not really doing much, just looking at videos people might have shared. I just think it’s this weird trance you’re in where you can’t stop looking and then when you eventually put your phone down, you just think, oh, what a waste of time. I’ve not been doing anything for that entire time. Then also seeing what everyone else has been doing and thinking, oh, gosh, they look like they’re having a great time, I’m not doing anything. Yes.*

*Also seeing upsetting things, seeing posts on Facebook and seeing people have arguments on Facebook and just... I find that if I’m off my phone all day, if I don’t look at it once, I’m so much happier, even if I’m not particularly doing anything. I’m just so much happier if I just don’t look at it all day. So I’ve realised that that has a big impact on my happiness generally. It can be useful, but scrolling through it never really makes me happy. So I don’t know why I still do it. (India, 21)*

Another participant told me that social media made her feel ‘rubbish’:

*This is actually another reason why I don’t have Instagram, is that I just don’t want to see these perfect people. It just makes me feel rubbish. And I know that if I see too many images, it makes me question myself. I don’t know. It’s something which I feel very strongly. (Elizabeth, 23)*

## Social media ambivalence

Most of our participants expressed profound ambivalence about their experience of social media – something that Keisha, a Black woman in her late twenties who worked in retail, expressed as ‘a love-hate relationship’.

*So, sometimes I see stuff, and I’m like, oh, this is amazing. I feel great. And then, sometimes, it’s like stick thin women with the most amazing butt and the most amazing long hair, and I’m just like, this isn’t me, and why am I constantly seeing this? And it does make you feel abnormal, sometimes, and you are normal. Like, every shape and every size and...*

*Even when it comes to my skin, I know in my head that is normal. But when you see the content, it’s like, it does make you feel almost abnormal because it’s showing you that it shouldn’t be that way and that that’s what you should look like. So, for me, I have a love-hate relationship with it because sometimes I do feel really inspired, and sometimes I’m just, oh, I hate you. It’s really up and down.*

*I find that if I’m off my phone all day, if I don’t look at it once, I’m so much happier, even if I’m not particularly doing anything. I’m just so much happier if I just don’t look at it all day.*

*So, for me, I have a love-hate relationship with it because sometimes I do feel really inspired, and sometimes I’m just, oh, I hate you. It’s really up and down.*

## Logging out, deleting and cleansing

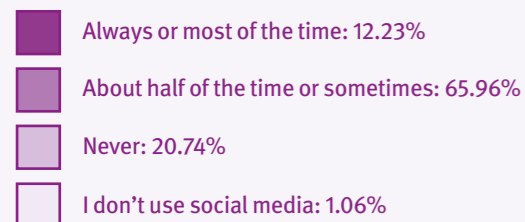
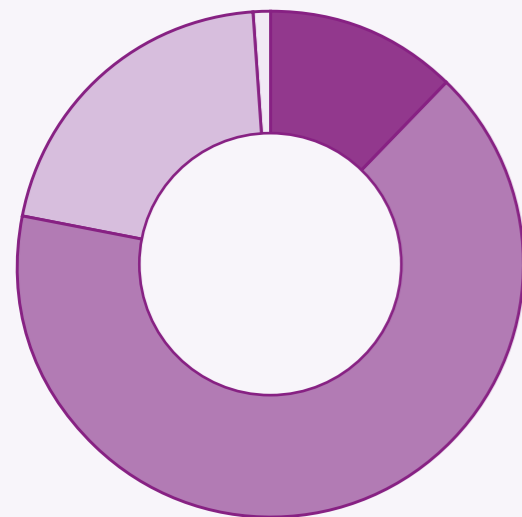
Given this ambivalence, deleting or logging out of social media apps was a recurrent topic among the conversations, with many participants reflecting on their desire to quit, or at least take a break from their social media. Here, after 20 year old White student Lynne had spoken at length and in detail about how unhappy being on Instagram made her, I asked if quitting the app had ever crossed her mind:

*It does, yes. It does quite frequently, actually. But then it's like I use Instagram for other things as well. It's just really difficult because I want to... Just as much... I don't want people to see what I'm doing a lot of the time, but I still feel this urge to see what everyone else is doing. I can't help it. I check up on people from my old school all the time. And I want to see all the videos of people baking (laughs)*

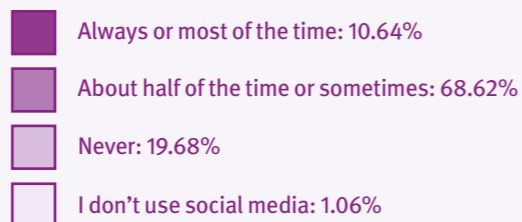
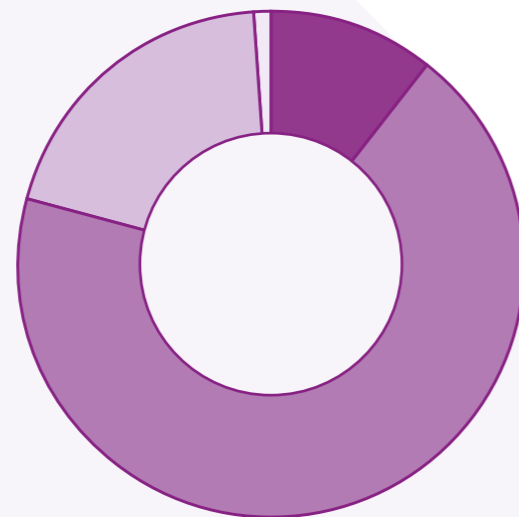
*Also a lot of movements happen in Instagram. If I didn't have Instagram I wouldn't be as aware of all the Black Lives Matter movement. I wouldn't know half as much as I do now. So, it's just really difficult because you want to be part of it. You can't help yourself that you're also the kind of thing to other people that you, yourself, don't like. It's just a really weird tug-of-war.*

This 'tug of war' was characteristic of many women's experiences. The research illuminated a variety of strategies for stepping back from socials when things became too intense or difficult. This included deleting the app, logging off for a time-limited period, switching off notifications, turning off comments, and undertaking regular 'cleanses' of socials, with the aim of being more selective about the content you see.

**Table 5: Social media makes people feel bad about themselves**



**Table 6: Social media makes people feel confident**



## 3. Posting a perfect life

So, because everybody else posting is being so perfect, and they're like, well, I had a great day, or whatever. Or they're really made up and look like the best I've ever looked. I think as soon as you drop below everybody else's standards, that's when you start comparing yourself to everyone else. And you're like, well, will they then compare me to themselves like I'm doing that, so just easier to not post it. (21 year old student)

Interviewees reported pressures to do well at college and University, anxieties about finding – and keeping – a job or jobs, financial worries about getting by, and being in a position to live independently. They also talked about worries about romantic relationships and about friendships. Pressures relating to the body and appearance must be understood in the context of this wider set of experiences.

**More than 95% of respondents answered 'yes' to the question: 'do you think people feel under pressure about their body image?' Women told us that on social media they feel pressure to look attractive (more than 90% agreed); they compare themselves to others (more than 90% agreed); feel under pressure to get likes, nice comments and shares (more than 75% agreed); and feel pressure to present a perfect life (70% agreed). Worryingly, more than 75% of the young women we surveyed said that they felt that they will 'never live up to the images you see', with around 60% saying that they sometimes felt 'depressed' as a result.**

### It has to be a nice photo

The pressure to look good and to post attractive enough photos is ubiquitous. Although there are different 'standards' applied to different social media platforms, and to stories versus posts on Instagram, as well as to group shots with friends versus individual selfies, there was consensus that 'it has to be a nice photo', and women told us about the considerable lengths they go to in order to achieve the right look (see also section 7 on filters and editing apps) in terms of clothes, hair, makeup, location, quality of image, and checking in to get friends' approval.

Adija, a 27 year old woman of West African and British heritage, based in London, thought a lot about her pictures as they also represented her fitness business:

*They have to be of a certain quality. They have to be, you know I had to get myself a really good phone, a really good phone so that I know all of my pictures and videos are going to be 4K and I, it's almost like if the quality is not good, if the backdrop is not good, if it's not exciting and something that someone would look at and go, wow that's really awesome. Then I know it's not going to get over a certain amount of likes, so I wouldn't bother posting it. I also have to think about, actually at the moment I'm kind of going through a no makeup vibe. I'm trying to go for a fitness and empowering women to not have to wear makeup that kind of thing. So I wouldn't necessarily look at my appearance like that.*

*But I'd make sure my hair looked cute. I'd make sure that my body was looking good. I'd make sure it was from a good angle, like I'm make sure I'm sitting up straight rather than rolled over... yes I think about all of those things before I would take a picture.*

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Pressure to look perfect has a particular force for disabled young women. Katie told me that she always airbrushes out her wheelchair or crutches from pictures, and also that she feels she has somehow to look even better to ‘make up for’ her disability.

*So, yes, I think it's just difficult. I feel like there's... Because the expectation to be perfect, as soon as you have a medical condition, then I feel like that's it, you can never be perfect. Especially when people view you on social media. So, I think it's just easier to hide it. I also feel like if I use a medical aid, or whatever, or have one in my photo, I feel like I almost have to look more presentable and better. Which is really weird because I'm still me, nothing changes. It is like, well, I have to make up for something.*

## The highlights reel (presenting your best self)

- Young women also told us they feel under considerable pressure to present themselves as fun, happy and sociable – as well as effortlessly beautiful- reflecting the ways that appearance pressures have extended into presenting ‘a perfect self’. They reflected self-critically on every aspect of themselves including their clothes, shoes, style and looks, and often worried that they might ‘bring friends down’ in a group shot. It is hard to overstate the palpable sense of pressure they conveyed.
- Participants told us that they feel extremely anxious before posting anything, and will always check it with two or three friends before clicking to upload or share. Lisa explains:

INT: So, you've mentioned that you don't post yourself very often on any of your accounts?

*Not really. I do get quite worried. When I do post stuff, I normally send it to some of my friends and be like, do you think this is okay to post and stuff like that, because, yes, it's out there for everyone to see, even if it is... I think they think I'm really overcautious, but it just makes me a bit anxious.*

INT: Yes. And is that with all kinds of stuff, or is it with just political stuff or just pictures of you?

*Kind of everything*

- The pressure to be perfect goes beyond appearance and extends to seeming cool enough, interesting enough, fun enough and even happy enough. That is, being perfect now extends to all aspects of self-presentation, including having the ‘right’ attitudes and dispositions- whether this related to the food that they posted pictures of or their support for BLM. Lynne explained how, in her view, this dynamic was driven by competitiveness, fear of being judged negatively, and anxiety about letting down a group.

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being perfect now extends to all aspects of self-presentation, including having the ‘right’ attitudes and dispositions- whether this related to the food that they posted pictures of or their support for BLM.

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LYNNE: Yes, it's just, I think, maybe that whole perfect life thing comes from the fear of everyone talking about you. Because it's still quite competitive. And then you feel like it's a little community of achievers. You can see where your friend's doing really well. And people you used to know, or like, or you didn't like...

So, if you're not putting more excellence into the excellence that they've already started, you just feel a bit like A, you're not good enough, or B, you are excluded from that group of all of these people who are commenting on each other's posts. Yes, you're doing really well. You'd really like to see this. You look great. This looks really interesting.

So, it's like you lose... if it's not an amazing post, if it's not perfect, you lose confidence in yourself. But you also lose connections to other people who are posting the perfect images as well, I think.

INT: Is it all domains of life?

LYNNE: It's definitely more appearance. Because straight off the cuff, it is a picture, and it is yourself, and people are going to be looking at you. But, it's also if you're getting into university, you'll post a screenshot of look, I've been accepted into this university.

Or I'm going to say nights out. Pictures of your drinks. How many drinks you've got? Yes, it's just everything. If you've got a job, oh, first day at work. It really, I think it is... It covers everything. It's just you feel you constantly you have to update what you're doing and let everyone know.

You don't want them to look back and be like, oh, my gosh, I wonder what she's doing? Because then if you have got a group of people, a group of friends that you're talking to about Instagram, and you're doing fine and you're in there, it gives you the power to look on someone else and be like, oh, my gosh, what is she doing? We're all up here, what is she doing? So and so hasn't posted in weeks, and when she does post, she gets 20 likes. It's just exclusion in a really weird way, because you're not perfect, I guess.

## Pressure to be positive

- The pressure to be positive was also talked about repeatedly by young women. Survey respondents told us again and again about ‘pressure to post the best bits’ or ‘the positive aspects’. ‘I only post photos of happy, sociable times in my life’ said one woman. Another told us ‘I always present a positive side of me, always dressed up and confident, however in real life that's not necessarily the case’. Below is one of many similar posts which describe social media as a ‘show reel’ or a ‘highlights reel’

*We post the highlight reel of our lives. People, including myself, rarely post anything negative about themselves on social media and this isn't a realistic perception of everyday life. Things go wrong but we only want other people to see the perfect bits. You can so easily make people think you lead this picture perfect life when for most people this is not the case.*

## Not being real

- Most young women expressed painful regret about not being able to be their full selves on social media. ‘I'm too scared about being judged’ was a typical response to open questions. Others said that ‘posting sad or bad times’ risks ‘coming across as an ‘attention seeker’. The notion of posting anything less than ecstatically happy was a form of attention-seeking was widespread.
- Young women explained time after time that, as one put it clearly: you ‘don't show the downs, the hard times because its seen as looking to get sympathy and can be seen as playing a game to get more popularity’. Another told us: ‘I don't like to post everything about my life on social media, for example bad or sad times as I don't want to come across as an attention seeker. I only post good or happy times so some people can see I'm doing okay and I'm happy’

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- There was a consensus that it is difficult to ‘be real’ on social media, particularly in relation to showing sadness or admitting that things are not going well. Although a ‘vulnerability trend’ and an ‘imperfection trend’ could be seen among some influencers, this was generally understood as performative, and many people commented on celebrities’ or influencers’ ‘fake crying’ that does not lead to red eyes or blotchy skin.

## Pressure to get likes

As we have seen already, young women also felt under intense pressure to get ‘likes’, positive comments or shares for their posts. Not doing so was experienced as shaming and humiliating. The ‘likes economy’ was also something they used as a means to assess and judge others – including friends or potential dates. Elizabeth, Adija and then Katie elaborate below:

*I don’t want to post something which not many people like. And I know cognitively that’s ridiculous and that it doesn’t really matter, but people do notice if you get a lot of likes, and it always becomes a bit of a pressure really. (Elizabeth, 23)*

*It’s like Black Mirror... you have your phone up and you get, you can rate someone. Like you would rate an Uber driver on there. You do it for people, and that’s exactly what likes is on Instagram. Lots of people I know, they’ll post something and if it doesn’t get over a certain amount of likes they’ll just delete it. Because it’s humiliating. (Adija, 27)*

*But I think it’s still that bit where you’re putting out everything has to be perfect on Instagram, I feel like. And it’s always measured by how many likes you get. That’s one of the big things. A lot of my friends will post a photo, and then they’ll message me on Snapchat or something saying, oh, I’ve posted a photo, can you go like it? And it’s just like everybody is so obsessed with the amount of likes they get.*

*Even I am. When I was, I think, 14, and I was so worried that everyone at school was getting more likes than me. I had this app thing. So, you would go through it and it would give you people like you for being on this other app because you like other people’s and they like yours.*

*So, I think it’s really bad that at the age of 14, I was actively trying to seek likes that were fake, just so other people would think better of me. (Katie, 20)*

Katie echoed words heard earlier from others in saying that it feels like a competition for proof that you are worth something – even if it has to be faked. Like other participants she is highly critical of this and regards it as ‘unhealthy’, but feels trapped within it.

The experience of pressure and of intense anxiety pulsed through conversations about this. There was a vivid sense of participants being reluctant participants in a system of social media akin to dystopian fictions like Black Mirror or The Circle, in which escape is not possible and ‘every single action is connected to some kind of fear or anxiety’ but ‘there’s nothing you can do’.

## 4. Fear of Getting it Wrong

Honestly, it’s awful. Every single thing anyone does is judged and I’m having anxiety anyway. It just makes things so much worse. I’m just anxious about every single thing I do now. I’m definitely influenced by the fact that it’s going to be judged by people. Yes. It’s very stressful because anything will be judged and you can’t really... Even if you’re just being yourself and people are all for being yourself, they’re still going to judge you anyway. (India, 21)

- A disturbing finding is the prevalence of severe anxiety among young women about ‘getting it wrong’ on social media.
- This fear ranged over accidentally posting something (e.g. posting to a public account, when you meant to post to your friends), posting a picture that is not perfect enough, posting a picture that is too perfect, posting a picture that does not garner enough likes, or receives negative comments.
- The public nature of this was experienced as very exposing and potentially humiliating by young women.
- Being fake, trying too hard, looking like you are attempting to get likes are also all ‘fails’ as young women negotiate multiple contradictory demands around looking perfect but not too perfect, putting immense thought, care and work into your posts but not being seen to ‘try too hard’, and needing to be authentic but not being able to be real.
- Young women feel as if they are under constant surveillance about how they look and how they present themselves more broadly.
- On nights out with friends they report feeling that they are constantly being filmed. While they take care with close friends to ensure that everyone is happy with group photos before posting them, young women worry about showing up on other people’s feeds and how they will look. As one woman put it ‘it is like having a TV crew with you every time you go to a pub or club’. Many others described how they would be ‘sucking my tummy in’ or ‘presenting my best side’ all the time they were out – undermining the idea of a relaxing evening.
- Intense pleasure could come from getting likes and appreciative comments, but women also told us that they could have their confidence destroyed by a nasty comment, and that this would loom larger than all the nice comments put together
- What was experienced as a wider toxic culture on social media also had a very sobering effect on young women. They see the kinds of trolling and abuse that celebrities and others may receive and the ubiquity of cruel and brutal comments has a wider disquieting impact, contributing to a sense of fearfulness about being on the receiving end of such poisonous attention. Some women turned off their comments in order to avoid this.
- It is worth noting that young women also received significant amounts of sexual harassment on social media on a regular basis and were frequently sent unwanted ‘dickpics’ or other forms of intimate intrusion. A striking feature of this was how normalised and expected this was, and how women regarded it as something they had to ‘manage’ on their own.

it is like having a TV crew with you every time you go to a pub or club.

## Being perfect but also being real

As already discussed participants told us that they felt under pressure to make sure that any posts were ‘nice’ and ‘good’ photos in which they looked ‘beautiful’ and ‘perfect’. However they also told us that there was a risk of appearing ‘too’ perfect and therefore seeming ‘fake’ or inauthentic. Lynne summed up the balancing act in the following way:

*I just think social media has got to a point now where there’s this urge for everyone to be really realistic. And for everyone to be really perfect.*

18 year old Bianca worried about her pictures looking unnatural when she edited them or used filters:

*I don’t want my pictures to look too fake, because that’s not my Instagram, it’s a bit like I want it to look as natural as possible, even though I’m wearing makeup. I want it to look like I haven’t put a filter on or something like that.*

22 year old Anna told me that filters were ‘out of fashion’ and that they look too obvious and ‘tacky’ or false:

*I feel like now if you, it’s out of fashion if you put a filter on a picture. Looks quite obviously like it’s got a filter on it and it looks a bit tacky, maybe is the word. So I really don’t like my pictures to look like they have a filter.*

Bipasha, who did do extensive editing of her photos to bring them to an almost professional quality (see chapter 6), talked about how hurt she was when someone commented that her pictures looked fake:

*Yes. I’ve had some nasty messages sent to me. I think one of them really upset me. Someone sent me a message saying, “your pictures look more filtered than tap water”, and it was completely... Yes, and that one upset me and I rang my boyfriend and I was like, “why is this person saying this to me?” He was like, “they’re literally just hating on you, don’t even worry about it, it’s nothing, da-da-da”.*

## Being vain or looking like you are trying too hard

Another way of getting it wrong – rather ironic considering the immense amount of time women told us they spent preparing their photos for posting – is looking like you are ‘trying too hard’. For example, Anna told us she wouldn’t use a filter because ‘it looks like you are trying too hard if you do it’. Instead you need to edit your picture ‘like the colours are just amazing and it’s a really good picture kind of thing’.

It was interesting that several participants spontaneously disclosed the strategies they used to not seem too vain or appear that they have been trying too hard. Lynne said she would embed a more perfect picture in a wider series of less flattering photos so she didn’t look too vain. In turn Ruby would deploy a self-deprecating caption that might – for example – ironically draw attention to her vanity:

*I will say, actually, sometimes I will post these Instagram perfect photographs. But normally, they will be accompanied by some sort of statement of me going I know I’m being incredibly vain here but look how fabulous I look.*

*I posted an Instagram story, where I was doing a handstand workout, and I walked past the camera and noticed how good my abs looked. And then spent a minute just going ooh, look at my abs. Ooh, they look great. Then be like, “when you notice how good your abs look.”*

## Posting too much or too little

Another widespread fear, or way that young women worried that they could get it wrong, was in posting too much or too little. Both, it seems attracted opprobrium and shaped social media practices. Young women told me they were worried about annoying people by posting too often and that there was a need to ‘regulate’ how often you appeared in others’ feeds. As 20 year old Soraya put it:

*But for me I just wouldn’t ever post that often anyway even if I had a lot of photos because I think I just wouldn’t want to keep appearing on someone’s, I wouldn’t want to be an annoying person. Even if I had loads of photos to post I think I would still somewhat regulate how often I post them just so that I’m not bombarding anyone with pictures of me.*

However they also felt a pressure to post ‘enough’ for fear of being seen as anti-social or being forgotten. Bianca explained:

*But on Snapchat the longest I haven’t posted is two weeks, a week. Because people start asking “where have you been?” “I haven’t heard from you” or “oh, you’re always posting, where have you been?”*

*And you’re like oh. Or “you’re being antisocial” and you’re just like, “I’m just trying to get on with it”.*

Excoriating social anxiety related to posting was interfering with the sleep of numerous participants in this study. They reported that if they posted a picture or story late in the evening (which was understood as the best time to post), they would be consumed by anxiety and would need to check and recheck the platform multiple times before they could go to sleep. A related fear was of having accidentally posted something unintended, with many young women comparing worry about this to the culturally familiar worry about ‘having turned the gas off’ – checking multiple times before being able to relax enough to go to sleep. Many women reported that if they woke up in the night they would feel anxious and check their phones to see if their post was being liked – even if it was 4 AM.

# 5. Appearance pressures are intensifying and extending

We are constantly being told we are not thin enough, not pretty enough, too many spots, not enough boob, not enough bum, too bigger thighs...it goes on and on.

We see lots of images of perfect bodies that we feel we have to live up to.

Because you feel like you are always being judged and attractiveness = a better life.

(Comments left anonymously on survey)

- It is hard to overstate the amount of pressure young women experience in relation to appearance.
- A striking 100% of respondents agreed that society places significant importance on appearance.
- Moreover, more than 80% of young women said they felt under pressure to look a particular way. Of these, more than half said they experienced this pressure as intense ('a lot, a great deal').
- This held true across different age groups, different sexual orientations, different heritages, socio-economic groups and disabilities.
- Young women told us that these standards are 'unattainable' and 'toxic' and that they are wearing them down and making them unhappy.

## We feel bombarded

Many women took great care to explain how and why they feel under intense pressure. As one woman put it: 'it is everywhere, all the time, and social pressure to look a certain way is very real'. 'There is too much pressure' said another survey respondent, while another specified 'external pressures'. Some said 'peer pressure' – wanting to be liked and popular -and many talked about 'media pressure'. 'We are overwhelmed' said many young women; 'we feel bombarded'.

Compared with previous generations today's young women live in a world where visual images of women's bodies are ubiquitous across media, public space and especially online. In response to open questions women told us vividly how this made them feel: 'I don't look like that, I'll never look like that'. 'I see all these perfect bodies in bikinis and it makes me feel really low'

it is everywhere, all the time, and social pressure to look a certain way is very real

## Perfect looks and perfect body

There was a very high degree of consensus about how women 'should' look: 'no body hair, white teeth, curvy but slim, good skin'. While some respondents saw 'thinness' as the ideal they were everywhere told to aspire to, for many others a 'slim-thick' ideal was mentioned, – 'slim but curvy with big boobs and big bum'. As one respondent put it:

*A very fit, slim body has been normalised as what a woman should look like. Men also face the normalisation of a fit physique. For women there is the added pressure to have large breasts and a large bottom while maintaining a slim waist which is very difficult for most people to do. Very beautiful bodies are what we see and absorb as the bar we need to reach to be beautiful ourselves.'* (Comment left anonymously on survey)

Perfect skin and a hairless body were mentioned repeatedly as essential, as well as good teeth and a beautiful, full mouth. 'No scars, no blemishes', a 'toned' body. Time after time, young women told us that appearance ideals were 'too perfect', 'unrealistic' and 'unattainable'. Respondents were articulate in their critiques of this and in identifying the mechanisms by which they felt it worked – e.g. making it seem as if beauty is a "choice" for which they are personally responsible:

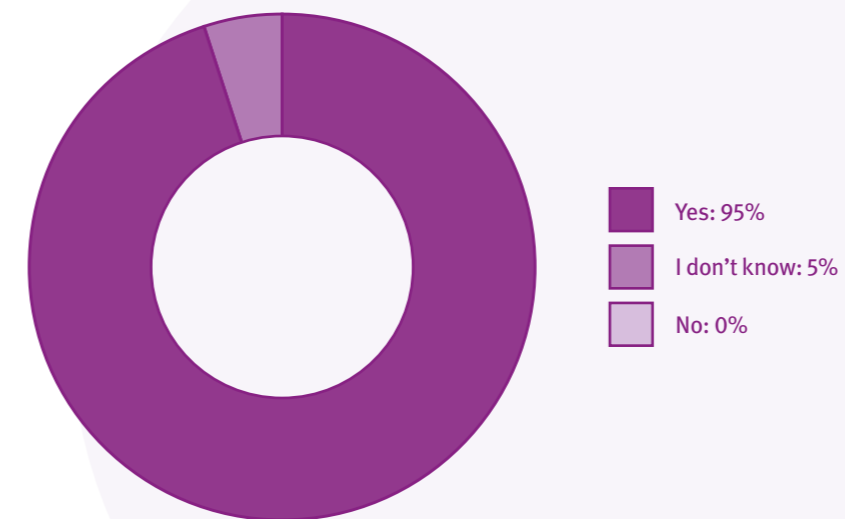
*Because we are overwhelmed with images of "perfection" which is very limited and often unattainable for many women leading them to want surgery or to want to diet or exercise. Personal appearance is also seen as a choice and something you have control over. So if you "look bad" it is because you have chosen not to go to the gym, have the surgery, etc*

Nevertheless they also told us that they feel pressured to try to live up to these ideals, even though they know they are unrealistic:

*Because from a young age, we are all bombarded with images of how we "should" be. As we grow up it becomes apparent that those goals are unrealistic, yet the media continues to tell us this is how we should be*

*But we still aspire to be like those represented in the media, which is actually unattainable but this is what is presented and therefore everyone has distorted views about how people should look*

Table 7: Are people under pressure about their body image



It translated into a myriad of painful feelings of failure: too fat, bad skin, no bum, thin lips, wispy eyelashes, uneven eyebrows, big nose, weak jaw, flabby thighs, cellulite, crooked teeth, acne scars, dimpled upper arms – the list was seemingly endless. As a researcher the revelations produced a profound sadness in me, and a huge sense of disjuncture as I talked with young women who all appeared to me attractive, interesting, thoughtful, perceptive and witty. Yet so many of them told me that they felt they were not good enough and could not live up to the expectations that has been placed upon them. To offer just one example of many:

*I think it's... I don't know if it's just me being weird, or if this is what society and social media and stuff is implanted into my brain and stuff. Because I never go out without makeup. I'd never ever post without makeup because it's just this, I keep saying it, expectation to be your best you at all time.*

### Comparing oneself with others

Comparing oneself unfavourably with others was a theme that pulsed through the research. Negative comparisons were made with celebrities and influencers, with people in adverts and with friends, as captured in these quotes from Alba, Keisha and India

*I think there's a lot more women influencers and a lot more images to compare yourself to for women than there is men (Alba, 20)*

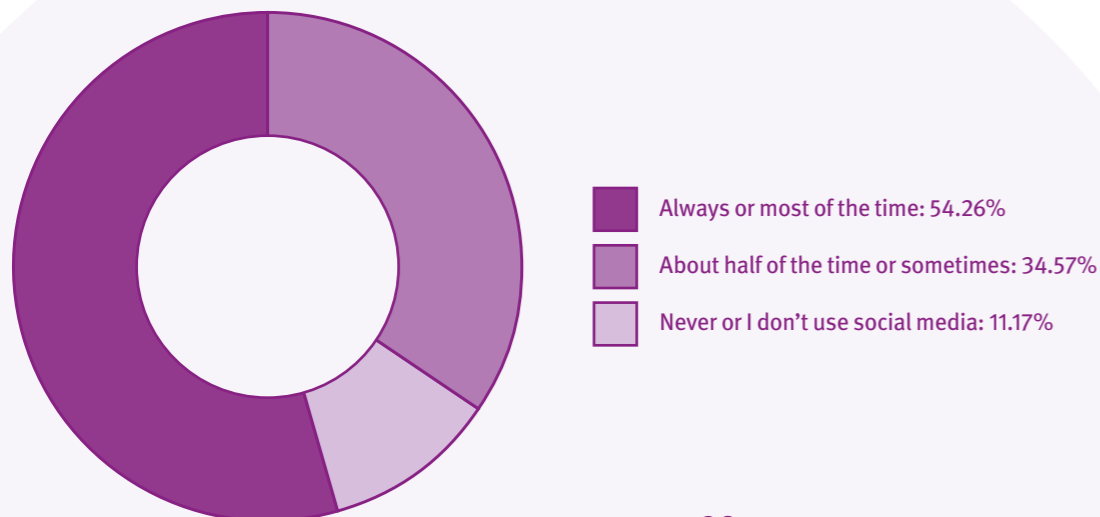
*It's all too perfect again. Yes. Skin condition and all these adverts of perfect skin, perfect eyebrows, all of that kind of thing... If you're not looking like that, you just think, why am I not looking like that? How do they even look like that? Yes. Just general health things... You just think, it can't be that difficult. They all look amazing and I don't look like that. So definitely there's a, this is what you must look like. (India, 23)*

*And even when you say, oh, I'm fine, that doesn't bother me, in the back of your mind, it is still like, well, everyone else on Instagram looks this way. And the content is telling you you should look this way, and I look like this. It's just a bit... It can put you down when you're not in the greatest of moods, and when that narrative is pushed. (Keisha, 27)*

Lily described finding it really 'upsetting and draining':

*And that's quite upsetting. And it's just that comparison, constant comparison to people. And sometimes it can be quite draining.*

**Table 8: Frequency that participants feel pressure to look attractive**



### Proliferating makeup sets

- Young women have grown up in a world in which attention to women's bodies and faces is not just omnipresent but also increasingly forensic. Adverts showing images of magnifying glasses to look at pores and of tape measures to determine thigh circumference are completely routine. They encourage women not simply to look at themselves but to develop new visual literacies (particularly of the face) to measure, assess and **scrutinize** themselves.
- This generation of women have also been hailed both by proliferating makeup sets and they have been targeted with 'personalised' beauty products. Influencers' 'basic' and 'simple' beauty routines that can easily feature upwards of 40-50 elements (a world away from the 3-step 'cleanse, tone, moisturise' mantra of yesteryear)

### Transformation videos

Beyond this form of cosmetic advertising, and comparisons with friends or influencers, another significant feature of appearance pressure is found in the popularity of transformation videos. Our survey respondents reported that they watched these extensively. Sometimes these were deliberately sought out – for example to see makeup techniques – but more often they were viewed in the course of random browsing on social media. Anna said she had become quite addicted to such videos, and also that the algorithms of the sites she was on would supply her with countless other examples once she had watched one:

*If I see it on YouTube, I will watch it because it's really interesting. It will be like a nose job, before and after, or anything. Eyebrow waxing, before and after. Dentistry, it's just really interesting to see. I mean those videos get a lot of views. I think there is a thing about interaction tracking. So if I click on one of those videos, the next day there will be a bunch on there. Because it tracks what you're looking at and what you're engaging with and then shows you more of that.*





Lily told us how her exposure to makeup videos and body transformation videos more generally had intensified her scrutiny of herself, quite literally making her see herself in new and much more critical ways

*Yes. I mean even with... Because I've watched a lot of videos of people doing the eye shadow, and whatnot. So then now, because I've watched so many videos of people doing their eyeshadow, I've realised I've got quite small eyes. And that I've got hooded eyelids. So now I have a problem with my eyelids, because I've watched so many videos of people doing their makeup.*

For Lily, this really intensified during the coronavirus lockdown, particularly as she spent more time on social media and became a new user of TikTok:

*And I think there was a large exposure of just seeing people on TikTok, and Instagram as well. And it's like you start to look at yourself, and you notice things you didn't before. And with TikTok there's been quite a lot of trends as well. So there's been like a side profile trend. And you see all these people with really good side profiles. And you see a nice jawline, and whatnot. And you know I'd never thought before, oh, I look bad from the side.*

*And you start noticing it on yourself. And it is... Yes. And there's been quite a lot of trends like that. Oh, side profile, like oh no, side back profile as well. So people are recording what they look like from the back as well.*

INT: Yes. How does it make you feel?

*Yes, it's just not very nice, to be honest. Because as I said, before I never thought, "oh my God, my side profile is horrible." But then I started taking pictures of myself from the side as well. And you know when you see your own jawline, or side profile, you're like, "well why does mine look like that". And it's kind of upsetting that you see so many people. And then you read the comments. And everyone's saying, "oh my God, wow," and that kind of thing. And it just puts you down a little bit.*

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*So there's been like a side profile trend. And you see all these people with really good side profiles. And you see a nice jawline, and whatnot. And you know I'd never thought before, oh, I look bad from the side.*

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## New beauty standards

- As well as intensifying, appearance pressures are also extending to new times of life (e.g. childhood, pregnancy, new motherhood), and to new areas of the body as the beauty industry and influencers set up new standards relating to thigh gap, bikini bridge, underboob and hot dog legs<sup>3</sup>.
- Many young women told us that beauty norms are changing – moving away from thin ideals to a newer 'slim-thick' ideal with a big bum and large breasts but a very small waist. This new 'curvy' ideal had not led to a relaxation of pressures on young women.
- Young women also felt overwhelmed by pressures to view themselves from all angles to have '360 degree perfection'.
- The beauty industry has also moved inside the body with drinks and supplements to promote hair, skin, nails, while wellness trends push towards 'clean' eating and being perfect on the inside too.

## Minute deviations are 'badass'

- Another way of revealing the intensification of appearance pressures is to see how minutely women have to deviate from the norm of perfection in order to be seen as very 'radical', 'daring', or 'badass'. For example, young women told us that they thought influencers were 'brave' or 'really pushing against images of perfection' if they posted images of themselves after eating or when sitting down – in both cases showing a gently distended belly – even when they were in all other respects excelling against normative standards ie beautiful, slim, toned, etc. The 'Instagram versus reality' trend is a particularly interesting example of this, as the 'real' photos differ so minutely from the 'Insta' ones.<sup>4</sup>

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**94%** of respondents said they felt pressure to look a certain way. Of these, half experienced the pressure as intense.

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## COVID, lockdown and body image

The pandemic and associated lockdown had various effects on young women's appearance-related experiences.

- They spent much more time than usual on social media, but posted less than usual
- Transformation videos (particularly on TikTok) were watched by many and fed into pressures to lose weight, improve tone and perfect the body and face
- Some experienced lockdown as a welcome break from appearance pressures as they frequently only saw family members
- Some, by contrast, experienced increased pressure on appearance as their social lives were conducted online (e.g. Zoom pub quizzes, FaceTime catch-ups with groups of friends etc) where they felt they needed to look perfect
- A significant proportion of young women used the period of lockdown to allow one or more aspects of their body to 'recover' from regular beauty processes: many women reported taking off nail varnish or acrylic nails to let their nails 'breathe'; others reported taking out hair extensions or weaves; some reported taking off fake eyelashes and using the time to apply conditioning serum to their lashes. While this could be considered 'aesthetic rest'<sup>5</sup> it was not understood as a relaxing of appearance pressures, but rather a longer term investment in one's appearance
- More generally many young women experienced the lockdown as an opportunity to add value to or capitalise their appearance e.g. through weight loss or exercise programmes, or intensive skin treatments
- By the end of lockdown, many young women told us they felt worse about themselves – that they didn't like looking in the mirror, that they were scared of being out in the world again and being judged. There was also a very widespread sense of disappointment in themselves that they had not achieved the desired transformations (e.g. in weight or tone) and therefore that they had 'wasted' lockdown.

## 6. The beauty industry on my phone

We are bombarded with images of these "perfect" models without understanding how they have come to that look. With all the current filters on snapchat and Instagram our faces are altered without us noticing, so then comparing a photo with a filter to one without you suddenly feel unattractive and like you need to change in order to fit the beauty standards

(Comments left anonymously on survey)

### Appearance pressures amplified and reconfigured by smartphones

This research shows

- The normalisation of cosmetic surgery, and constant exposure to adverts for cosmetic procedures via adverts and push notifications- along side the ubiquitous cosmetic surgery transformation video as discussed above
- The ubiquity of editing and filtering of images and the new pressures this produces e.g. new ways of looking forensically at oneself and others
- The routine use of filters, edits and enhancers
- The use of other apps that measure, monitor, facilitate try-outs etc

### New visual literacies and nano-surveillance

- Compared with older women, this generation practice 'nano-surveillance'<sup>6</sup> of their bodies. They quite literally see differently, with much greater attention to detail. In interviews participants talked in **extraordinary detail** about the things that they felt were wrong with their face and body. They apply similar scrutiny to others.
- This is facilitated by the magnification features of phones which allow spots, blemishes, undepilated eyebrow hair etc to be seen easily. Appearance pressures are dramatically intensified by this HD magnified technology.

The young women in the study approached their own appearance and that of others in an almost forensic manner, based in the experience of routine image magnification. Smartphones, together with the cosmetics industry, are producing significant shifts in young women's visual literacies of the body – particularly the face – such that they quite literally see themselves and others differently from previous generations. Self-scrutiny was intense and often surprisingly dispassionate; I was struck by the way that interviewees checked through different features of their facial appearance – their eyebrows, their eyelashes, their skin tone, their nose, their teeth, their mouth shape while they talked in the interviews. As they go through life, many are accompanied by an imagined critically evaluative gaze from others. They practised what Ana Elias has called a 'checklist gaze'. They felt they had to be vigilant to the possibility of negative judgment at all times. As Bianca explained

Smartphones, together with the cosmetics industry, are producing significant shifts in young women's visual literacies of the body – particularly the face – such that they quite literally see themselves and others differently from previous generations.

They felt they had to be vigilant to the possibility of negative judgment at all times.

*The thing is though, you won't see it but other people will. Even [unclear] Instagram you'll look at something that they obviously haven't seen and you're like "oh yes, I didn't see that". And they've obviously not seen it. What else? Like, I have to be careful because of my figure, I don't want it to look weird. ...So, I have no bum type of thing. So, I get conscious of does my bum look okay? Or, because my eyebrows are light, it's like, do my eyebrows look okay? Do my eyelashes look okay? Does my hair look okay? So, there's a bit of frizz sticking up, I'll try and blemish it out or cut it out. Everything has to be perfect.*

The level of detail in self-appraisals was also evident in Lily's discussion about photos of her:

*I think it has to be on this side, so this is my favourite side, I don't like pictures on that side. I usually like to have my makeup, so skin can look better, with my eyebrows, and maybe my eyelashes. I don't actually usually take pictures if I just have mascara on. So I like to only take pictures when I have my eyelashes, I feel like they add more to the overall look.*

*And probably if my hair is nice, and it's not in a ponytail, or a messy bun, or something like that. So just when I've done my makeup, and I feel good about myself. So that's when I like to take a picture, so I can kind of be... You know, look at it and think, oh, that is me, that is what I look like. I don't look too bad.*

## Filtered life

Young women are well aware that some of the anguish and pressure they experienced in relation to appearance had come from a culture in which the use of filters, digital manipulation and editing was routine. They told us:

*People feel pressured to look like the images they see in the media, even though these are often edited so are impossible to be replicated.*

*If everyone is editing their photos on social media then you feel more pressured to edit your photos so you don't feel like the odd one out, which contributes to the problem...*

But having a sophisticated knowledge and understanding of these processes does not translate into feeling immune from them.

- Filters and photo editing are intensifying appearance pressures on women and raising the stakes on what counts as a good enough picture to post. This pressure is particularly acute when women post pictures on their own rather than as part of a group. Most women now filter or actively edit their photos before posting.
- 90% of young women sometimes use a filter when posting a selfie. Of these, more than half reported that they used a filter half of the time or more. These range from comedy filters (e.g. cat face) to sepia or black and white filters. A 'grainy' look is currently very popular and available on Instagram. Thousands of tutorials and lessons on YouTube instruct women on topics such as 'how to edit your picture like Kim Kardashian'.
- 85% women also edit their photos using tools outside the platforms' own tools and/or using apps such as FaceTune. Besides cropping or reshaping a selfie or changing contrast or colour saturation, the main things women seek to edit are: skin tone, face contours, weight (to look slimmer), to brighten or bronze skin, to reshape nose or jaw, to make lips look fuller, to make eyes look bigger, and to whiten teeth.
- The use of filters and editing tools is fraught with problems for young women: on the one hand they want to make themselves look better – picture perfect – but on the other there is pressure to be authentic and not to be 'fake'.

## Editing the self

Two thirds of the young women in this research said that they edited their selfies at least some of the time. Almost 75% of those who did so said that they would spend up to 10 minutes 'preparing' a photo before uploading it, with a small minority spending considerably longer. We asked young women to tell us which aspects of their photos they changed, and by far the most common answers were 'to even out skin tone', 'to brighten skin' and 'to make teeth whiter'. Smaller numbers adjusted their body to look slimmer (around 10%) or to have larger breasts, fuller lips, thicker hair. In addition a significant proportion of the answers focussed on technical aspects of the photo such as brightness, contrast and colour saturation – rather than the face or body per se.

In our interviews most participants said they used both filters and editing apps sparingly. As Ches, 20, explained:

*It's not really a big thing with posts anymore that you put a filter on it. I often just adjust the lighting, the main thing that I would do, just adjusting the lighting makes it look like a nicer higher quality picture often.*

*And I'd sometimes I'd just use an editing app to make my arm look less fat, because if I've got it on my side I always feel like it looks big in comparison to how I know it actually is and so I feel like that editing doesn't feel like I'm cheating the system, it's not like showing something that isn't real.*

*Occasionally I smooth my skin, but rarely, to be honest, because I have quite nice skin anyway, so I don't feel a massive need to do that. If I had a spot on my chin, I'd remove it, if the picture's looking good other than the spot, I would patch that out. But I would say I don't really edit, other than lighting and stuff, maybe, and the arm thing.*

Many other participants gave similar answers, being clear they would edit out a spot or a cold sore, change the lighting or contrast, and perhaps 'tweak' a feature they didn't like, but being careful not to 'overdo it' or make the photo look 'fake' or like a 'cheat'. For a small number of participants, however, posting an **unedited** photo was unthinkable or 'horrible'. A strong sense of feeling under hostile surveillance came from this 18 year old mixed race Londoner:

*With Instagram I always edit my pictures. With Instagram it's a thing where people can zoom in on the picture and look at something, oh, she's got a bit of a spot on her head, or she hasn't done her eyebrows properly or she hasn't done her makeup properly. Or her room's a bit messy. Or it's just everything. The picture has to be perfect. If there's something random in the background you've got to edit out or just not post the picture at all.*

*I also use Facetune, so it gets rid of my blemish on my face, I have for years. And I will not post a picture without. On Instagram it's always a makeup picture, always, it's never just a normal picture of whatever.*

## The 5 most common edits made by women in our research

Even out skin tone

Brighten skin

Whiten teeth

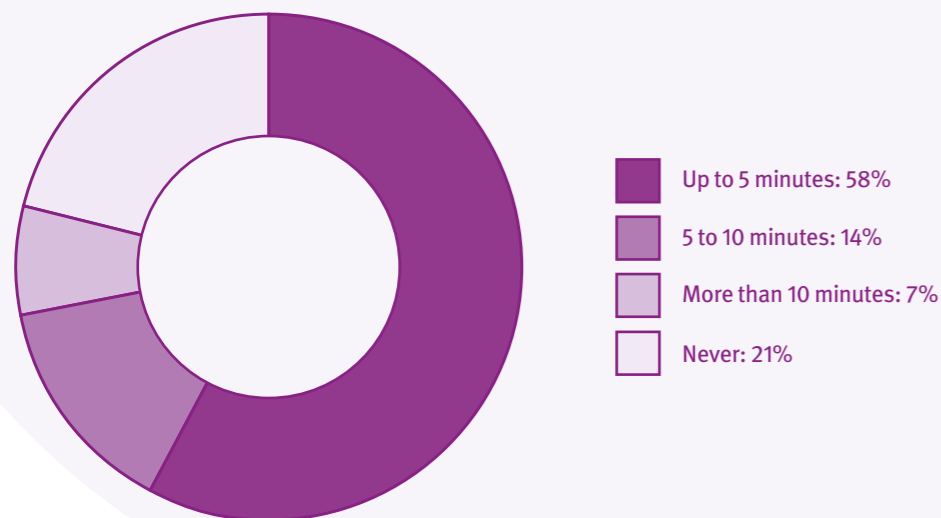
Bronze skin

Look slimmer

people can zoom in on the picture and look at something, oh, she's got a bit of a spot on her head, or she hasn't done her eyebrows properly or she hasn't done her makeup properly.

I also use Facetune, so it gets rid of my blemish on my face, I have for years. And I will not post a picture without. On Instagram it's always a makeup picture, always, it's never just a normal picture of whatever.

**Table 9: Time spent editing photos before uploading to social media**



### Other beauty apps

Beyond editing apps such as FaceTune, VSCO, Perfect 365, and BodyTune, Airbrush (all of which were used by participants in this research) there are additionally a huge range of apps that offer to variously rate, track, or improve (young) women’s appearance.

Other appearance apps being used include:

- apps to scan your skin to check for blemishes or acne (e.g. Meitu or TroveSkin),
- apps in which you enter your measures and the app will create a ‘virtual you’ to show where you need to improve (e.g. lose weight)

One popular type of app offers to re-imagine you in a different way if you submit a photo and some basic personal data. For example while the research was ongoing, various age-imaging apps became popular, purporting to show users what they would look like when they were older. Aging Booth and FaceApp and Oldify are some of the names in this field, while ChangeMyFace claims to be able to run its ‘innovative aging software’ on a selfie, and then distinguish between the impact of different lifestyles e.g. smoking, drug use, alcohol consumption etc. Other apps of this kind promise to show you ‘what would I look like as a boy’ or as an anime character, etc. Younger participants told me that they had used these apps ‘for a laugh’ or ‘because it is interesting’.

Similar apps can be thought of as ‘try-outs’ for possible appearance changes that might range from a different hairstyle (what would I look like with a fringe or with short hair) to various cosmetic treatments and surgeries from tooth whitening to nose-reshaping. Young women told me that these apps are ‘funny’ or ‘silly’ or ‘just something you do when you’re bored’. As these students said:

*I used the L’Oréal one two weeks ago. I think it’s new. It’s like test your hair dye colour. Just because we’re in lockdown, I was like should I change my hair colour? The nothing else to do, so I’ll try it. Those things that make you see what you’d look like as a boy or what you’d look like if you were old because it’s funny. But yes.* (Lynne, 20)

*I have used the apps but only like for a bit of fun. Not anything serious. I wouldn’t base me cutting my hair, or dyeing my hair off one of those apps because they’re not that realistic. But I have used them just to see what I’d look like.* (Alba, 20)

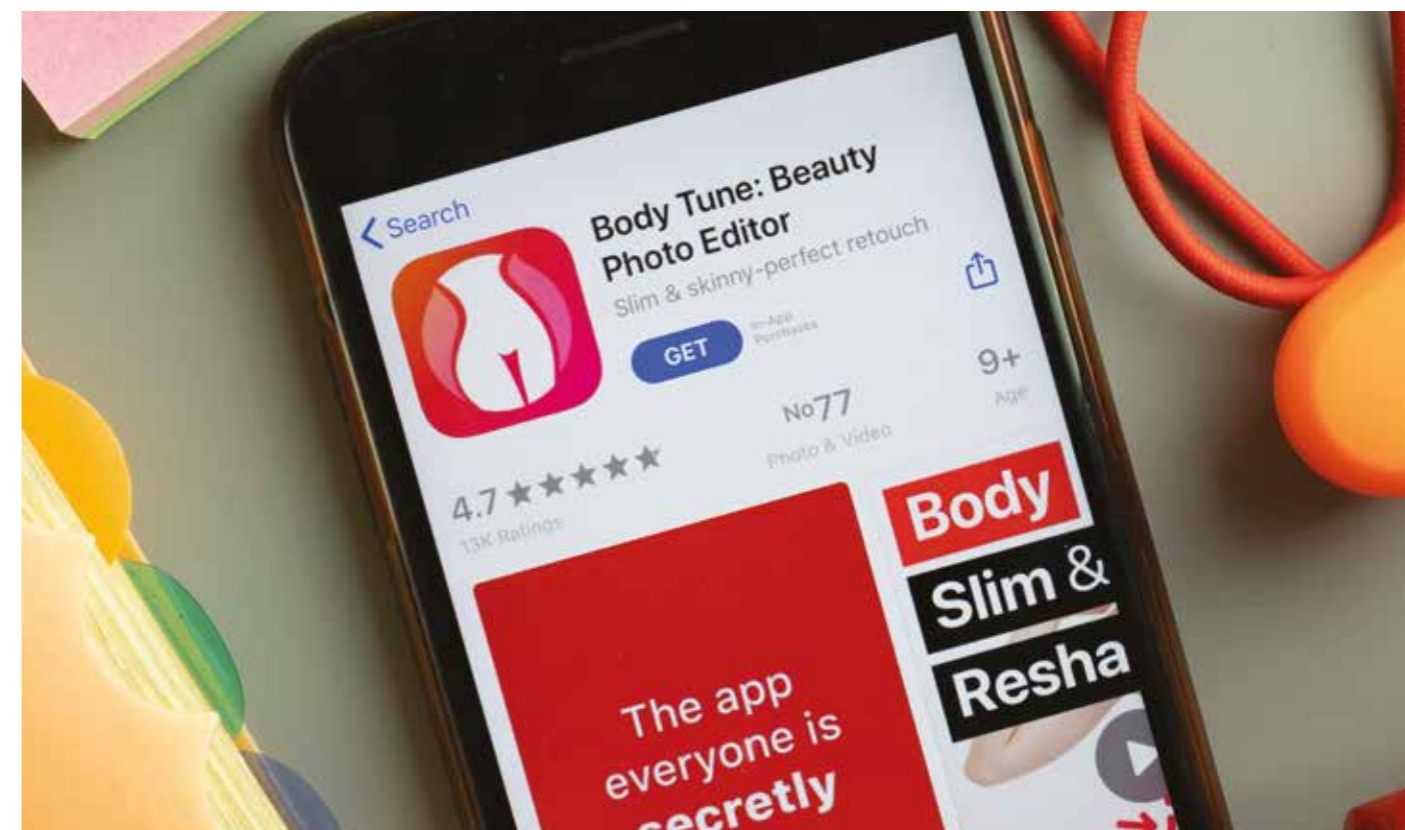
However young women also said that ‘once you’ve looked you can never be allowed to forget’ – with Anna singling out relentless push notifications for cosmetic dentistry procedures after a single ‘try out’.

‘Rating’ apps were also popular. These also use a single uploaded selfie to offer a score for how attractive you look, how fat you look, how symmetrical your face is, etc

INT: What about the ones that they almost give you feedback. Like, I don’t know, I’ve done the one of how old do I look, you can see.

*Oh yes. Again I only really use them if they come up on Snapchat or Instagram just as, if I’m bored. But yes I have done those. There’s some on Instagram that rate your face as well. Which is probably completely random. But yes there’s a few of those on Instagram* (Alba, 20)

Most women characterised these – again – as ‘random’, ‘funny’ or ‘silly’ as in the quote above. But they could, understandably, also be distressing. One 20 year old told me that she had never liked her nose, but then took some ratings tests and had it confirmed, which was something upsetting. She was careful not to create any drama around the experience, saying ‘it wasn’t like, “oh shock, what’s this, like up-staying news”, it was like, “yes thought so”’ but it also made her think ‘well I won’t get pictures from the side’ and that she has to ‘know my angles’. She also described submitting her photo to apps that would rate how symmetrical her face is, and feeling disappointed that ‘unless I get a nose job I can’t improve that score.’ This makes evident a link between apps that are often used ‘for a laugh’ and a beauty industry actively promoting surgical and non-surgical procedures to young women – often with the promise that they can improve their ‘score’.



## Cosmetic surgery

Without exception all the young women we interviewed reported receiving multiple adverts on their feeds and in their inboxes for cosmetic procedures. Lip fillers, dental treatments, skin treatments and bum enhancers were most often mentioned as utterly routine:

*Definitely feeling like that, teeth straightening, teeth whitening, really all the time Invisalign stuff (Anna, 22)*

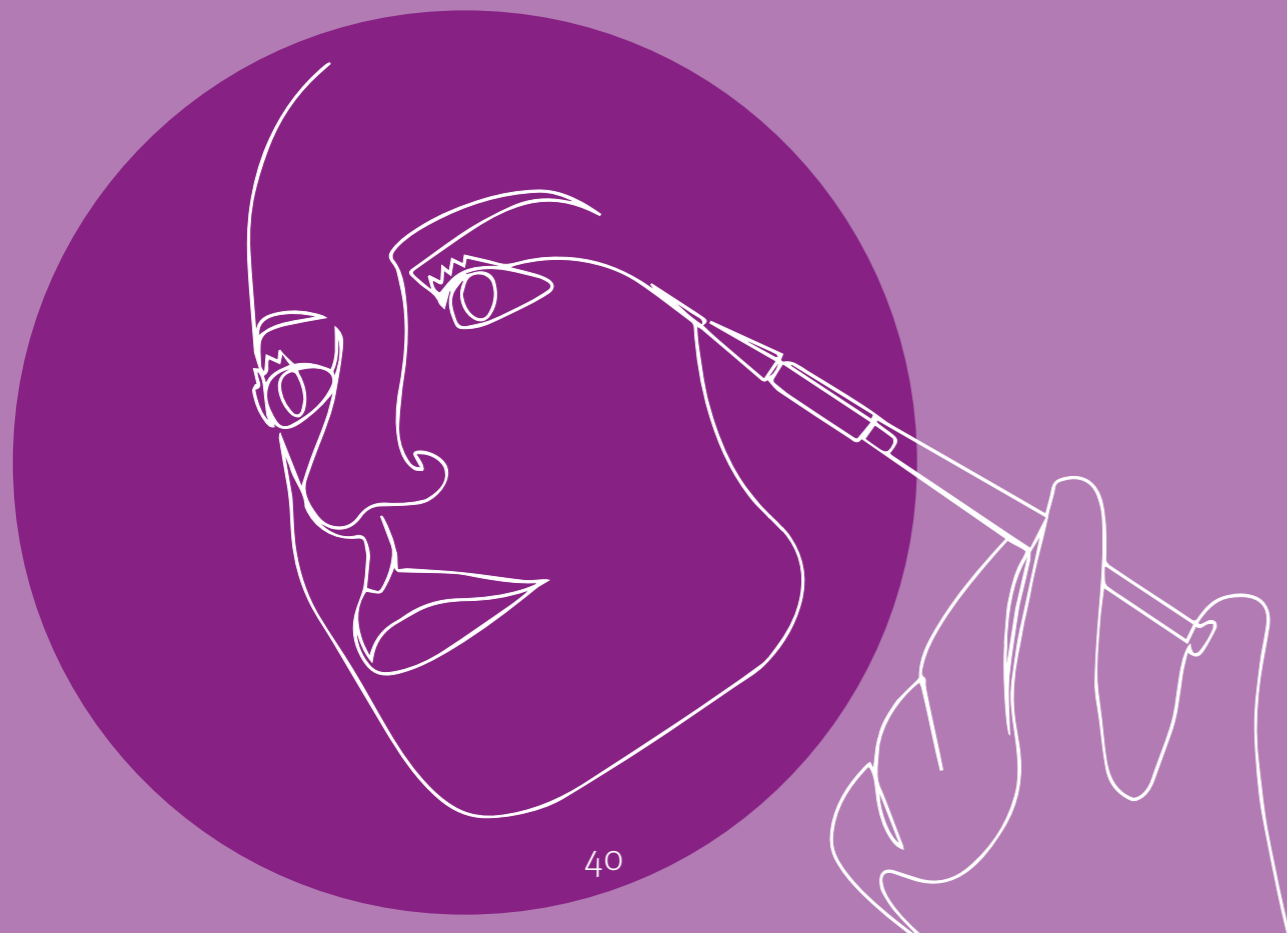
*Yes. I think, definitely, lip fillers I get. Loads of skin treatment ones. Sometimes bum enhancers have come up. (Lynne, 20)*

It was experienced as a pressure by some, even as it was normalised. Lily explains how she found it both ‘nice’ and ‘satisfying’ to see before and after photos or videos, but also depressing, causing you to ‘look down on yourself’ and ‘spiral down from there’:

*Yes, I get quite a lot on Instagram. So it's like seeing the before and after. Like seeing nose jobs, lip fillers, people are getting their teeth done. And it's kind of nice to see that people have had it done, like it's satisfying to see how much of a difference it's made to someone's face. But at the same time it's quite sad that we've made that beauty standard. So everyone thinks the second picture is looking, is the better version of you. And it's quite sad, because it shouldn't be that way.*

*Yes, yes, no, I've actually seen quite a lot of pages. Like a beauty salon, so there's the Kylie Jenner package, which is to get the Kylie Jenner look. Which is just horrible. Which is get bigger lips, get more cheekbones in here, and an eyebrow lift. And the fact that I even know about this, it's just bad. Because it's just been coming up on my page.*

*And you just feel like... You see all these people getting it, getting that look. And it's like what is this, what it's supposed to be like that standard of perfection. So then you look down on yourself, and it's just... It's just like a spiral down from there.*



## 7. ‘Media do not represent me’

If you were to learn about the lives of women using only media (adverts and TV) you would not be wrong for believing that only young, slim and predominantly white women exist in the world and that their job is to raise children and look pretty

My body type is almost never represented in the media. In most media women’s bodies are slim, toned, tanned and hairless. This is not realistic for me or for most people I know, yet the media still tells us that the reason our bodies do not look like this “ideal” type is because we haven’t worked hard for it yet. This allows companies to sell products to us which promise to help us improve our flaws – flaws which would not have been considered a flaw in the first place had it not been for the media.

(Comments left anonymously on survey)

- Questions about media and social media provoked **huge passion** among participants. Women told us clearly and categorically that **they do not see themselves represented in media**.
- 94% answered ‘Yes’ to the question ‘Do media promote unrealistic images’.
- Only 16% agreed that the ‘media show people of a range of diverse backgrounds’.
- Free space to elaborate on these responses produced more than 150 detailed answers in which women expressed anger, hurt and disappointment. For example: ‘They portray a perfect life which is not real’ said one woman. ‘Social media only portrays people’s best bits’ said another.

### Media images of women are ‘too perfect’

Time after time women reported that media portrayals are ‘too perfect’ showing ‘ideals’ of appearance that are ‘unrealistic’ and ‘unachievable’. ‘Tall, thin, perfect – it’s so unrealistic’ said one respondent. ‘Visually perfect’ said another. ‘Way too perfect’ and ‘skinny, airbrushed, perfect-looking’ said others. ‘They have been filtered and photoshopped to death’:

*People aren't happy all the time or beautiful all the time. Despite pores being something everyone has on their face, we very rarely see them in the media... There are so many different aspects to the unrealistic images in the media. It is all so airbrushed and perfect and happy.*

Women told us that media of all kinds focus disproportionately on women’s looks. As one respondent put it ‘I think women are represented as beautiful people. I think media focuses more on appearance than what they do’. Another told us: ‘Women are judged more than men on the way they look, the media often portrays women’s value to be in their looks’. Others noted that women are ‘almost always gorgeous with blemish-free skin and long, thick hair’.

Respondents explained how this made them feel: ‘not good enough’, ‘body shamed’ and ‘pressured to live up to the expectation caused by different media’ -as well as incited constantly to compare themselves with others: ‘it feels like women are just there to be looked at and compared to each other’

## Media images of women are 'too sexualised'

As well as being seen as exemplifying unrealistic standards of physical attractiveness, bolstered by filtering and photo-manipulation techniques that produced unreal images, there was a strong consensus among participants that women in the media are presented in a highly sexualised way, that most found troubling, not because of a concern with seeing sexuality represented, but because of what they described as the objectification or commodification of women's bodies. Along with the words 'perfect' and 'edited', the word 'sexualised' was mentioned by the majority of survey respondents when asked about representations of women. Typical responses included the following:

*They are represented by their looks and not anything else and are often oversexualised.*

*It's all sex sex sex appeal girls with big bum, big boobs, slim thick Long thick hair.*

*It's all fake girls these days.*

Examples of what respondents understood variously as 'sexualisation', 'hypersexualisation' and 'sexual objectification' were given from across media. Advertising, music videos and reality TV series were most likely to be indicted for presenting women in a sexualised way – with mentions also of the tabloid press and magazines: 'Women are often represented as sex objects in the media, in particular in music videos, newspapers/magazines'

## The whiteness of media

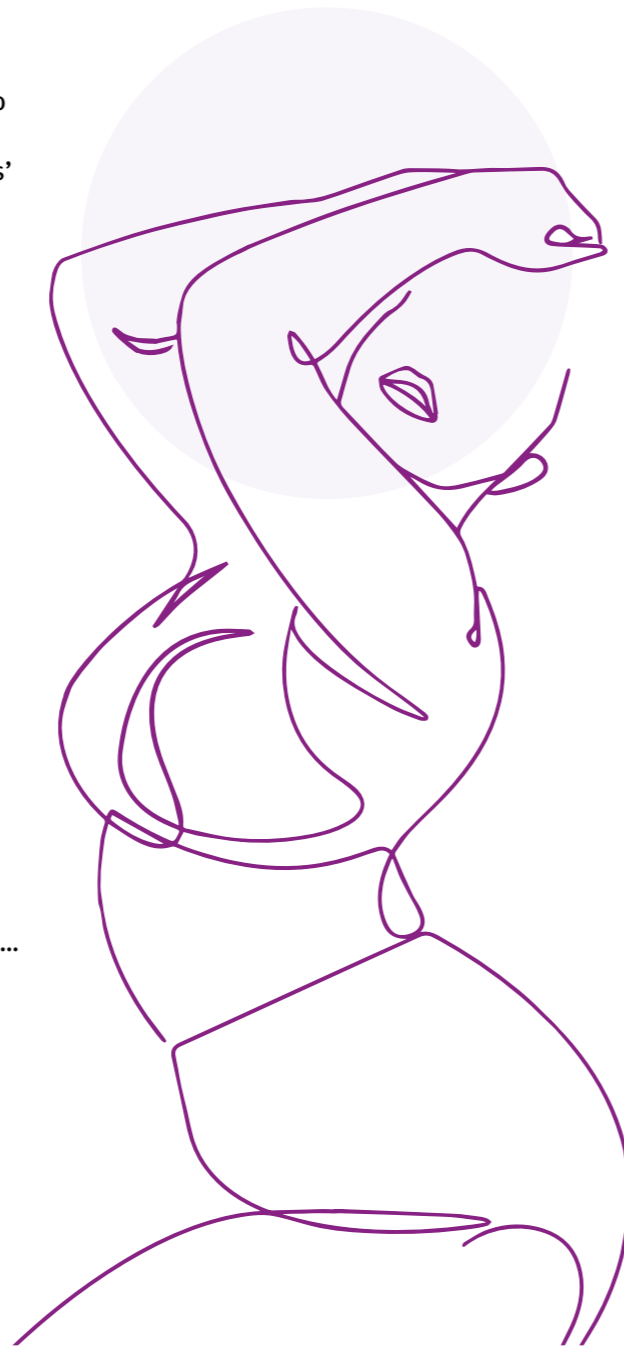
A strong motif in both the interviews and the responses to the survey centred on the whiteness of mainstream media. For participants from diverse BAME backgrounds this reflected long and deeply-held experiences of not feeling represented. As one woman put it in a thoughtful response to the question about whether media representations reflect your life:

*As a black woman the media rarely represent us so its hard for me to see myself in that aspect.*

Another woman told me: *I am Sri Lankan British and I haven't heard of any major characters of similar origin' throughout my life.*

Another reported: *As someone of mixed white/east Asian ethnicity growing up in England, I did not see anyone really representing myself in the television I watched or the magazines I read.*

Young people of colour reported the devastating impact that not seeing people like themselves in media had had upon their sense of self. 'It massively affects my self-confidence' one young black woman told me. Another, of south Asian heritage, said it had made it very difficult to 'relate... as very few south Asian women are represented positively in the media'.



## Nonbinary invisibility

Despite the gradual increase in visibility of transgender people in the media since 2014, and the increasing awareness of the numbers of people who identify outside a rigid gender binary, young people told us that there is a striking absence of representations of non-binary people. The following comments were left in response to a question in the survey about whether media 'reflect your life':

*I don't feel like a typical 'girl'*

*I don't fit into the standardised definition of beauty in western society and my hobbies and interests tend to be more defined as 'masculine'*

*Given how binary gender roles and their portrayals are, portraying non-binary folks like me is seemingly impossible, because everyone assumes I'm either "man" or "woman".*

Another person summed up their comments about media succinctly as follows:

*There are hardly any media representations I can relate to as a nonbinary person.*

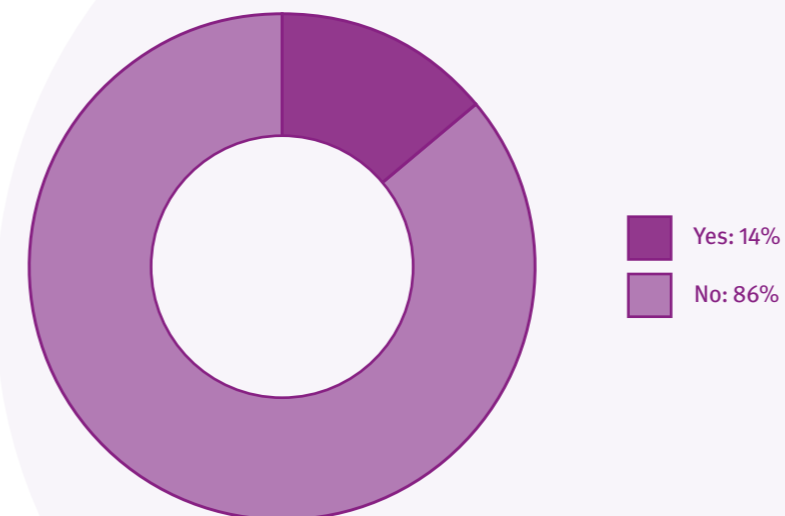
A further response suggested that the very rare representations are themselves highly problematic: 'If our existence is not being questioned to fuck, then we are shown as sad, confused, maybe even a bit dangerous people.'

In an interview with 20 year old Alex they elaborated how painful this invisibility could feel, rendering them 'unreadable' or 'unidentifiable' in what they felt to be a central sense of their identity. Indeed, they mention a defining moment in which they saw a minor character on the TV show *New Amsterdam* identified as non-binary.

INT You mentioned the almost complete invisibility of nonbinary people in mainstream media. Are there any examples that you can think of?

*Yes. I can think of... I'm watching a show called New Amsterdam and there's a nurse in that who goes by they/them pronouns. They are not a big character. They're just in the background sometimes but they're referred to with they/them pronouns and they have a little badge on their lanyard that says, they/them. That was just a really nice thing to see. Like, cool.*

**Table 10: Do social media representations reflect your life?**



## Where are disabled young people in media?

The absence of representations of disability in media was also mentioned by some respondents as a major problem, As one survey participant put it succinctly: 'Women with disabilities are rarely shown'.

Among our respondents, the issue of non-representation had not achieved the status of reflection accorded to issues of race, gender or sexuality. Nevertheless it had a profound impact on disabled participants, who reported high levels of unhappiness and depression. Of the ten disabled women who participated in the research, seven expressed the feeling that 'my body and appearance will never be good enough' while more than half said that they felt 'depressed' and a similar proportion said they had no self-confidence. Nine disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement 'I would not change my appearance or body'.

One disabled interviewee said she felt 'invisible' and she described herself as a person who is 'hidden' from view. She eloquently discussed being caught between her personal media 'communities' – especially online – for people with the same condition as her, where she found some support but which she sometimes experienced as depressing and overwhelming, and wider media **where she never saw anyone like her.**

*So, if you've got, I don't know, questions about your health or if you need to find a good doctor, or just for advice on pain management, or whatever. And then you can just put a little post in a group. And that's really good because it's like everyone across the country. Because I don't know anyone with my conditions that are nearby. So, it helps. I don't know, just support, I guess. But then, if there's loads and loads of posts on one day, and it's a day you don't want to think about it. And then, **everything** is about a medical condition, it can get really overwhelming....So, it can be really supportive, but then the complete opposite. It depends what mood you're in*

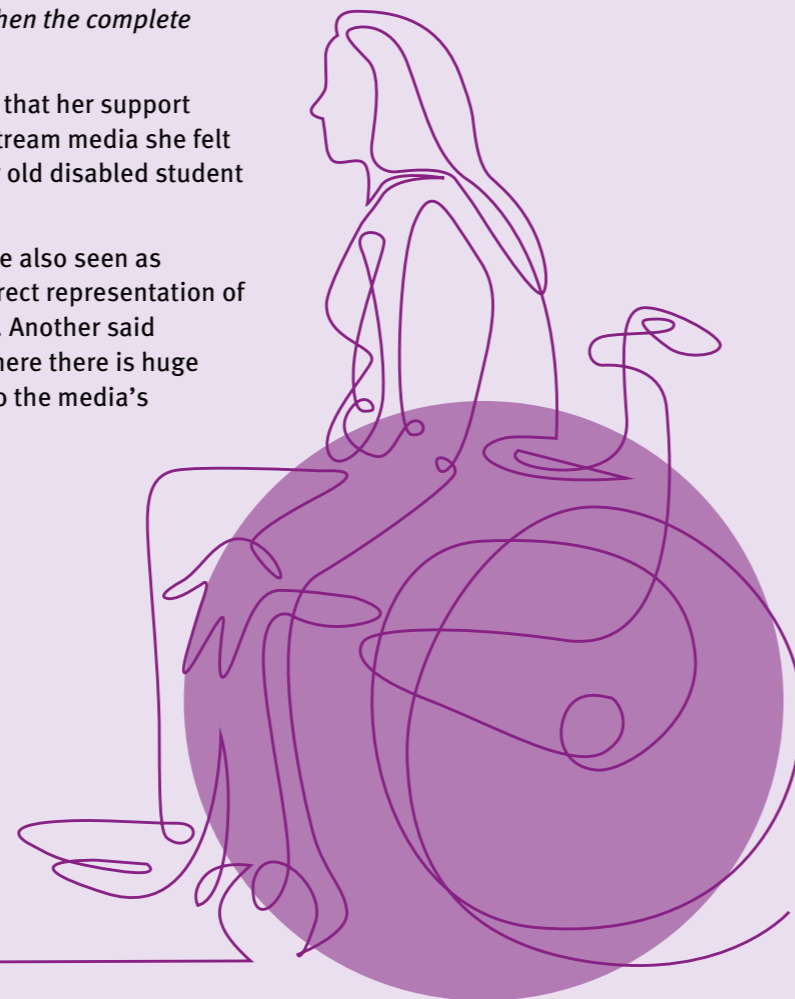
Katie was reluctant to be defined by her disability, and felt that her support networks could sometimes be overwhelming. Yet in mainstream media she felt that disability was completely disavowed. As a twenty year old disabled student she told us categorically that media do not represent her.

Representations of illness and of mental health issues were also seen as problematic by several participants. 'There's not much correct representation of people with mental health problems' said one respondent. Another said 'I have experiences in many areas of life (eg healthcare) where there is huge media focus, however my experiences are often different to the media's representation'.

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Women with disabilities are rarely shown.

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## Missing the lives of lesbian, bisexual and queer-identified women

Lesbian, bisexual and queer-identified women also reported feeling that media do not represent their lives at all. They told us:

*Typical media such as tv shows do not want to portray lgbtq+ representation in actual accurate ways most of the time and so rarely do I see someone that I identify with.*

*Although I am a young, conventionally attractive white woman and I am able to see aspects of myself in media... my life as a queer person in a queer relationship with a less than perfect family relationship is not often represented in mainstream media.*

*Women are so often presented in relation to men (as a wife, girlfriend, sex object or in a heterosexual family), so as a lesbian woman I don't relate to these images.*

## Class and success

Many respondents also told us that they felt most media represented middle or even upper class women and did not reflect their own lives: 'They're always slim and high class'. Time and money were both identified as resources that many participants in this research lacked, and media emphasis upon success and achievement was jarring

*Social media presents people who are always achieving – always working out, starting businesses and wearing nice clothes. It's not only that I – or many people I know – couldn't afford this lifestyle, it's just that its impossible to be achieving all the time*

*They have more money than the average person, bigger house, etc*

*Portrayals of students and low income demographics are confined to stereotypes*

*I don't have the time to look like people I see in the media...It makes me feel angry because we all internalise it though as being normal.*

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Women are so often presented in relation to men (as a wife, girlfriend, sex object or in a heterosexual family), so as a lesbian woman I don't relate to these images.

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## Not bothered/It's getting better?

A small number of respondents presented views that were dissonant with the majority's critical tenor. Among these there are two separate tendencies. On the one hand several people wrote in survey responses that media representation was 'no big deal'. 'I think social media is just a way to keep life memorable. Doesn't related [sic] much to gender' wrote one survey respondent. Another said 'It's just an image', conveying a sense of not being unduly bothered by the issue.

A different perspective was the notion that things are changing for the better. One interviewee said that she felt Netflix, in particular, was beginning to offer more interesting and complex portrayals of women. Others also congratulated the network for investigative documentaries – for example about the beauty industry. A small proportion of participants felt that it was possible to live different or alternative media lives, by carefully choosing to follow diverse or body positive people online – although most noted these were still a tiny minority. One respondent, exemplifying this argument, said: 'I think that there's quite diverse representation of women **if you really really look for it**, but its easier to find images of perfect influencers'. Both comments below, left on the survey, capture the sense of change, while emphasising that this is limited to small areas and particular communities.

*I feel social media has been represented as less professional but now some women are sharing more successes and it's becoming better. The same way that it used to make me feel quite bad about myself that things like Instagram made me feel that my life was boring but not people are bringing each other up and supporting each other more. I feel you do have to find a community though...*

*In adverts especially women are often represented with a "perfect body image", although there are more adverts surfacing that are more inclusive. There are some social media accounts that focus on "non-perfect" body image but this only accounts for a small percentage of overall social media.*

## Body positivity

There is huge enthusiasm among young women for the idea of body positivity – understood as a greater range of representations of women of different shapes, sizes, ages, ethnicities, religions, styles and appearances.

- A large majority of respondents were extremely positive. Free questions garnered answers that said 'it's brilliant' and 'I love it' and 'it is so good finally to see women of different shapes and sizes'. As Keisha put it:

*I definitely think it's changing. I think it's definitely being brought up with the times. I think it's becoming more inclusive, and it is becoming more normal. Everything is being normalised now and becoming more realistic, which I think is really, really good. Yes, everything is changing now, but I do think it is changing for the best. I think it is making everyone feel comfortable, and I think that's the most important... Well, no everyone, but a majority of people feel comfortable in their own skin.*

- However, around 15% expressed concerns about body positivity leading to the 'promotion' of obesity or unhealthy weight.
- Other widely held views were that 'body positivity has not gone far enough' – that the range of images is still far too narrow, too white, too slim, too normative in its representation of gender and sexuality, and with nowhere near enough images of disabled women and people who are trans or nonbinary.

*Overall I wouldn't say it's great. Say you're shopping for clothes, all the models are super-tall, super-skinny, and pretty much white. And it's pretty much people that look... They fit into a certain stereotype and they're the only people you really see on social media. Even in magazines and stuff like that.*

- Many people told us that the number of 'body positive' images is still only a tiny minority of the millions they see in any one day, and that every time a brand does something different e.g. shows a bigger body, a woman in a hijab, or someone with a skin condition 'it makes the news' so it definitely isn't accepted or normal. Katie said:

*I think it's really bad that you get excited when brands have variation. That isn't something that we should feel lucky to get, it should just be the expected. I can't understand why it's not. I think it is just this ideal picture of beauty and stuff. And that's really harming to, pretty much, everyone.*





## 'Media do not represent me'

Bipasha, in turn, told me:

*I think we are seeing it, but I don't know how to phrase it other than to say I don't think it's genuine body positivity... There's still a race thing. It's such a big deal if there's a girl in a headscarf in a picture or a girl with dark skin and it's just like, "why"? But for a brand to include that, it's like they've done the world a favour. You haven't. I don't buy into it. I think women are just trapped by it. I think brands can get away with it because what else are you supposed to do? You have to shop.*

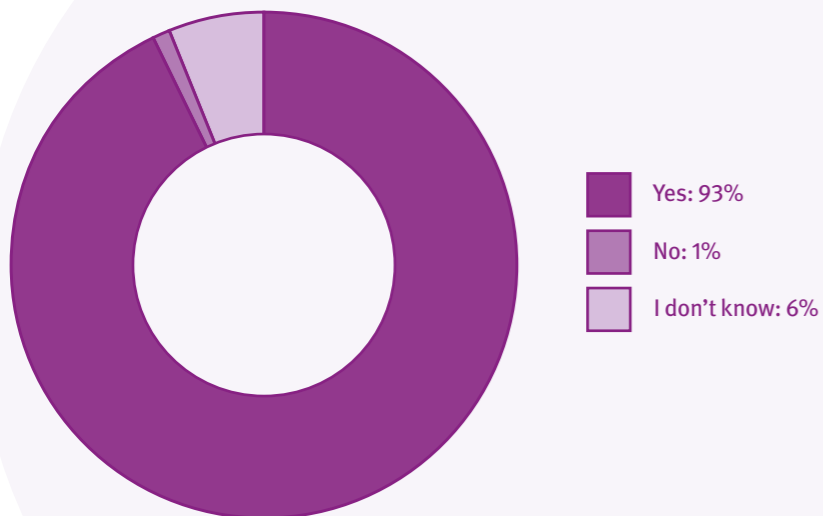
- Young women are extremely media literate and savvy and expressed considerable anger about brands 'appropriating' movements for fat acceptance or Black Lives Matter, but doing so in a way that was insincere or tokenistic. Others argued that this was less significant than the visual discourse changing overall. The quotes below from Adija and Bianca, both young Black British women reflect the different views on this topic particularly in relation to the uptake of BLM by brands:

*Like Nike have really taken on the whole Black Lives Matter thing and the whole bigger bodies, curvy bodies and all that kind of stuff. Yes they're making absolute millions out of it, but more people are seeing it and its been making it mainstream. So if it's for a good cause then I think press is a good thing. Because it's opening up people's eyes.*

*The thing is though they now are changing but it won't last. What you'll see is it's a trend, it's a new trend, getting Black Lives into brands. And it will be there for a year, maybe six months and then it will start going down, decreasing...I don't think anything's going to change long-term. It's just for the short-term...Don't do it, just leave it alone because it's just fake, it's false and I don't like it.*

- While there was a strong endorsement of the view that it is important to 'feel comfortable in your own skin' it is important to note that this view did not necessarily lead to criticism of appearance pressures, but could instead be used to justify doing **more** beauty work, since this would lead to feeling better and having greater self-esteem. This is an interesting example of the way that anti-beauty-pressure discourses could be 'hacked' and rerouted to support the beauty industry.

**Table 11: Do media promote unrealistic images?**



*It's such a big deal if there's a girl in a headscarf in a picture or a girl with dark skin and it's just like, "why"? But for a brand to include that, it's like they've done the world a favour. You haven't. I don't buy into it.*

## 8. Conclusions and thinking ahead

This report illuminates a variety of features of young women's and nonbinary people's lives. It explores the way they use social media, the significant experience of pressure associated with posting, including the many ways in which they feel fearful of getting it wrong. The report highlights a number of disturbing findings about the nature and extent of the appearance pressure young women experience, and how this translates into significant anxiety and distress. This is having an impact on young women's mental and physical wellbeing, their sleep, their relationships and many other aspects of their lives – to say nothing of the 'opportunity costs' of this intense focus on appearance.

This report highlights a number of new findings about

- the intensifying pressures on young women;
- the way that social media's picture-perfect cultures are lived and experienced;
- the ways that smartphones are amplifying appearance pressures;
- the way that expectations to be 'perfect' extend beyond looks into being happy, fun, positive, and seen in the right places and with the right people;
- the dynamics of how young women relate to celebrities and influencers and the way they scrutinize each other;
- women's profound sense of feeling under constant surveillance and feeling judged;
- the tailored nature of individual beauty advertising (including for cosmetic procedures);
- the role that filters and photo-editing apps play in relation to contradictory imperatives to be perfect and to be authentic.
- Young women and nonbinary people's trenchant and articulate critiques of the media;
- And their attitudes to body positivity and brands' uptake of it.



## Skilled and savvy but lonely

- The young people who took part in this research are skilled and savvy users of media, who operate with ingenuity and sophistication across multiple media platforms and in different environments.
- Many young women spoke about their coping strategies (turning off comments, temporarily deleting the apps), their support networks (mothers, sisters and close friends off line), and also about diverse forms of resistance to the pressures elucidated here- these included supporting people who are doing things differently, posting ‘process rather than outcome’ pictures, and following and liking posts by other women, other people of colour, other queer and other disabled people.
- However, despite this, a striking finding of the research is how lonely many feel, and, in particular, how alone they feel with some of the demands and pressures identified in this report: namely to post a ‘perfect’ life, and to deal with a constant sense of being under scrutiny and being judged.
- For many young women the space provided by the interview was itself very significant: in having the opportunity to discuss quotidian experiences and dilemmas (such as what to post and whether a photo is ‘nice enough’), and, crucially, in breaking the isolation that a culture of compulsory perfection creates. Several young women told me that they rarely or never had these kinds of conversations with others, and that there were not many places where they felt safe, especially online. Two interviewees commented that the interview felt like a ‘detox’.
- It is crucially important that there are safe spaces where young people can discuss these experiences openly and without judgment.



## Media literacy does not erase pain

- The teaching of media literacy is often hailed as a key strategy to help young people navigate a world characterised by inequalities and representations that are sexist, racist, ablist and homophobic.
- This research shows that young women and nonbinary people are **already** phenomenally literate and critical readers of a whole variety of media – including the kinds they create themselves.
- But it also underscores that being critical, or knowing how a ‘fake’ image has been constructed, does not necessarily negate its force and impact. Indeed, young women told us repeatedly: ‘Even though I know it isn’t real it still gets to me’. Time and again they demonstrated sophisticated awareness of photographic and digital manipulation techniques, yet told us that knowing this does not lessen the power of images of female ‘perfection’. As one young woman wrote on the survey free answers: ‘The media in general uses images which are unrealistic by constantly changing photos by editing them and therefore creates an image which couldn’t be further from the truth’ but it ‘still leads to expectations’ that are ‘too high’. As another put it, ‘even though you know this...it’s easy to start comparing’. Another respondent, talked about media producing a ‘cycle of insecurity’, with pressures to conform and then to compare themselves with others.
- Media literacy, while of value, is not a panacea. It can help to give a name to the shape of pain, but not stop it from hurting. As this 23 year old newly qualified doctor put it, choking back tears, ‘the damage has already been done’:

*What really bothers me is that I’m so ingrained to be... In terms of body shape and things like that then, it’s just, even though it goes against everything that I believe in, it’s really hard to shake out of my mind because I think we’ve all been programmed to be fat-phobic and to be able to recognise what your body should look like.*

*And then it’s made me miserable for so long, and it makes me really angry because I haven’t chosen to have these stereotypes. I feel like they’ve been fed to me. And I think it’s, yes, because you’re just presented all the time with pretty much a replica of what it looks like to be perfect, and then variations of that perfect. I guess there’s a perfect in terms of celebrities, and then there’s a perfect in terms of models, and models just look ridiculous. They look horrible, but they’re a model.*

- We need bolder, more creative and more imaginative ways forward than simply teaching young people to deconstruct or critique toxic media representations.

## It's getting harder

- Despite the considerable optimism we have documented about 'body positivity' – albeit with caveats – there was a strong sense in this research that young women feel things are getting worse rather than better.
- Within media scholarship there is considerable scepticism about accounts which mobilise concerns about children, and a strong motif celebrating young people as capable and agentic 'digital natives'.
- But within this research anxieties were repeatedly raised by our 18-27 year old interviewees about 'younger people' and the difficulties ahead of them. Young women spontaneously volunteered their worries about younger people including younger siblings, cousins and in one case children that an interviewee babysat for on a regular basis. Comparing themselves with younger people our participants frequently voiced the sense that things would become 'even harder' for a generation who had 'grown up on Instagram'. 20 year old Soraya told me:

*I don't really think it's getting better. I think it's probably got worse if you're looking over a span of ten years. When I was at primary school or early secondary school I didn't really have a phone like a proper phone. I remember my first social media I got was Facebook and I didn't use it for any of those kind of purposes. It was just having Facebook on a phone which is like cool enough.*

In turn Lisa emphasised the growing focus on what you look like:

*... It feels like more focused on how you look, and there's more opportunities to be absorbed in other people's lives and how they look and how their lives look.*

For Bianca it was simply a sense that 'it's getting worse'.

## We're not judging but we want regulation and protection

This generation of young women are clear in the emphasis they place on personal choice and freedom.

- While they feel surveilled and judged in their own lives they place great emphasis upon not judging others. This translates into 'not judging' women, for example, for decisions they make about cosmetic surgery or work in the sex industry. Anna captures the 'tricky' nature of the issue:

*It's a really tricky issue. I think it is something that needs to be looked at in very, in the context of where it's being questioned. Because I definitely do believe in, I wouldn't necessarily call it censorship, but in some cases, things shouldn't be allowed. Like the [BLM] campaign I'm doing and hateful language, hate speech online obviously. That should be regulated.*

*But at the same time you can't regulate everything. I don't think there should be regulations about what people are posting personally from a personal account in terms of just themselves. If a woman wants to post a picture naked, that should be completely her choice.*

- Young women express a suspicion of government censorship, and (as noted above) of brands cynically appropriating 'diversity'
- However, they also feel strongly that something has to be done. Nearly two thirds of young women in the survey felt that the government should regulate media images in some way. Others also suggested that social media platforms should do more to protect women from the effect of ubiquitous perfect bodies.

- Some of the ideas young women expressed included: rejecting images of women who were unhealthily thin; banning airbrushing or photo editing of women in magazines and adverts; including warnings on all images that have been digitally altered to make them more perfect; removing the features that make 'likes' visible to others in order to reduce pressure on young women; regulating adverts for cosmetic surgery; regulating companies offering 'non-surgical' appearance procedures such as botox or lip-fillers.

*I definitely think that they should use models over size eight, just because size six is so unattainable for normal people. And normally, they just look quite unhealthy. It's just a bad image to give.*

*I would love, as well, if they'd use more black models and not just because they feel like they have to, just because black women are really beautiful. And they're never on TV, and it so weird because it's just not realistic.*

*And then, yes, declare if they've been edited. But I'd prefer if they could just ban editing, instead of having to declare it just actually say, you know you can't do it. Unless it's your skin product and you really, really need to smooth the skin just so you can get up close. There's just no need. So, I would prefer if they if they just banned it altogether. But I know they won't.*

In this conclusion I have drawn together some key messages of this report which I hope will be useful for NGOs, Government, policy-makers, teachers and youth workers to consider. We have a collective responsibility to address the issues raised here and to respond to the requests and demands the participants have so clearly and passionately articulated.

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Nearly two thirds of young women in the survey felt that the government should regulate media images in some way.

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<sup>1</sup> Conducted during May, June and July 2020

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Orgad, S. & Gill, R. (2020) *The Confidence Cult(ure)* Duke University Press

<sup>4</sup> Gill, R. (2020) *Challenging the perfect picture: Social media, smartphone use and COVID-19*. London

<sup>5</sup> Dosekun, S. (2017). The risky business of postfeminist beauty. In Elias et al (ed) *Aesthetic Labour* (pp. 167-181). Palgrave Macmillan, London.

<sup>6</sup> This term is borrowed from Ana Elias

This report discusses new research with 175 young women and nonbinary people. It explores their experiences of ‘life on my phone’ discussing everything from pressure to look perfect and to present your ‘best life’ no matter how you feel, to attitudes to body positivity, feelings about media, and struggles with mental health. Conducted during 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, the first UK lockdown, and in the midst of revitalized anti-racist activism in the wake of the killing of George Floyd, the research is grounded in listening to young people, and offers rich insights into their lives and concerns.

Rosalind Gill is Professor of Social and Cultural analysis at City, University of London, and is author of several books including *Gender and the Media* (Polity, 2017), *Aesthetic Labour: Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism* (Palgrave 2017 with Ana Elias and Christina Scharff), and *Mediated Intimacy: Sex Advice in Media Culture* (Polity, 2018, with Meg-John Barker and Laura Harvey)