INVESTIGATION ON SELF-IMAGE IN YOUNG PEOPLE

An investigation on self-image of young people aged 16-21 within the UK

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on youth-led national research about young people's self-image and presents important findings for young people, families, communities and organisations that support young people.

Rebecca Routledge and Molly Robson

NIHR | Applied Research Collaboration North East and North Cumbria

CENTRE FOR RESEARCH IN HEALTH & SOCIETY

University of CUMBRIA

WILLIAM HOWARD SCHOOL

Northumbria University NEWCASTLE

Contents

Executive Summary

Context

Many young people suffer from mental health problems such as low self-image and don't realise these are related to societal norms and standards. As young people ourselves, we were keen to explore what self-image issues young people experienced and what young people themselves, parents, communities and organisations who support young people might do to ensure all young people have a positive self-image.

Method

This research was designed, conducted, analysed and reported by ourselves, a team of two young researchers. The research was conducted during lockdown and so we had to use an online survey for our method. We used a mixed method survey design to understand the scale and nature of self-image issues. We distributed the survey nationally to 16 to 21 year olds and had 165 responses. A mixed method analysis was used, using descriptive statistics to analyse the quantitative data and thematic analysis to analyse the qualitative data.

Findings

- A lot of young people have self-doubt and poor self-image and aren't as confident as they should be, as they may look at other people and make comparisons.
- Many young people feel very negatively about themselves, they have very low poor image as they cannot live up to the ideals promoted in society.
- Most young people want to have a better self-image than they currently have.
- All young people access multiple social media channels.
- Despite the issues with social media, many young people reported that viewing it has sometimes increased their confidence.
- The majority of young people feel they do not meet societies norms.
- The majority of young people don't hold an individualist mindset and rely on validation from others in society in order to feel good about themselves.
- The majority of young people had considered cosmetic surgery showing it has become increasingly popular in young adults, with many influencers either promoting it or secretly getting it.
- Most young people worry about what other people think of them.
- Opinions about the impact of communities on self-image were mixed with slightly more young people thinking they had a negative impact than a positive one.
- Most young people believed their local area doesn't affect their self-image, however, people from smaller or more rural communities felt there were prejudices that affected them negatively.
- Most young people had suggestions as to how to improve self-image.

Conclusion and recommendations

Self-image is a complex phenomenon involving society, services, communities, media, and individual psychology. The rise in social media and hyper competitive marketing has led to unrealistic beauty ideals being promoted which are impossible to attain. Recent trends in education has led to increasing pressure and competition to attain academically which may be unrealistic for some or all young people.

As a result of these two significant changes many young people have poor self-image. Whilst tackling a national issue which is both collective and individual may feel challenging, there are opportunities for change. Many small scale and large scale changes can make a difference to how young people perceive themselves, and these are outlined below in full. Changes in what is celebrated as successful in all areas of life would be significant. Legislating for improved control of social media would reduce hard. Promoting greater awareness of self-image and the factors that contribute to it through education would also be impactful.

Introduction

Many young people suffer from mental health problems such as low self-image and don't realise these are related to societal norms and standards. As young people ourselves, we were keen to explore what self-image issues young people experienced and what young people themselves, parents, communities and organisations who support young people might do to ensure all young people have a positive self-image.

Key Concepts

This research reports on self-image which is defined as: "the way a person feels about his or her personality, achievements and value to society" Cambridge Dictionary Online (2021). It was first documented by the eminent psychologist Michael Rosenberg as long ago as 1965.

Other concepts relating to the self, such as self-concept (how I see myself, think about myself and feel about myself) self-esteem (my overall sense of respect for myself) and self-confidence (my overall sense of confidence) are broader and inter-related. Self-image is a component of them and influenced by them (Positive Psychology, 2021).

Self-image is a holistic concept which includes a range of other concepts as shown in the diagram below (Oltman, 2014):
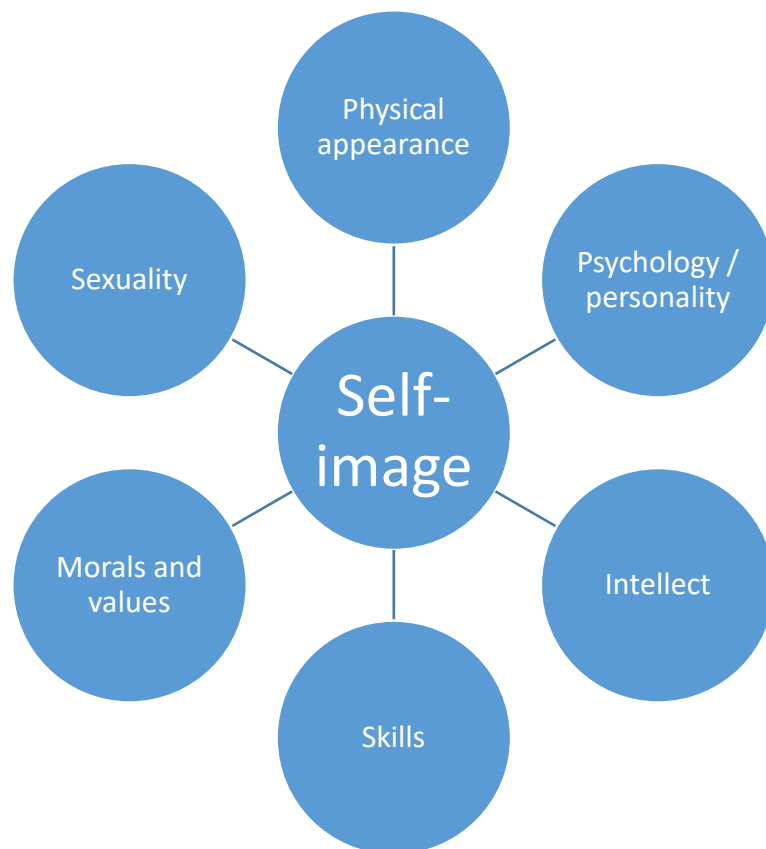
The extent to which a person's self-image is positive or negative depends on the interaction of three elements:

- What a person thinks about themselves
- What a person thinks other people think about them
- What a person's ideal self is like

If there is a close alignment between these three areas a person is likely to have a positive self-image, and where there is a big difference between any of them, there is likely to be negative self-image.

Negative self-image can lead erode self-esteem and self-confidence or, more severely, lead to mental health issues such a anxiety, depression, self-harm and body dysmorphia. Treatments for people experiencing severe self-image issues include psychoanalysis, cognitive behaviour therapy and client-centred therapy. These are not widely available however, and young people would need to display significant issues in order to access them through the National Health Service.

Context

Young people in society today arguably have greater pressure on them than ever before. Access to information has accelerated as communication channels increase. Young people now have printed materials, television, radio and social media to contend with. Society also seems to becoming increasingly competitive with everything measured and counted – grades in school, steps taken in a day, number of 'likes' a post gets. This may be increasing the opportunities for social comparison as never before.

International Policy Context

The international policy context for self-image is vague and only really reflected to any extent in the United National Convention on the Human Rights of the Child (1989). Article 6 states that all children have a right to life, they should all survive into adulthood and develop to their full potential. This sets a context for young people's entitlement to physical, mental and emotional wellbeing in order to reach their full potential. Self-image would be implied in this. Article 17 states that Government's must help protect children from media and materials online that can harm them, and this could indicate a responsibility to guard them against negative impacts of social media on their self-image. Articles 13 and 19 go further and are more supportive of self-image. Article 13 states that every child has a right to freely express their thoughts and opinions (including views on themselves and society) and article 39 states that victims of abuse, neglect, exploitation, torture or war must receive support to help them recover their dignity, self-respect and social-life.

This international document therefore sets out a convention which implies but does not directly state different countries responsibilities to support young people's self-image.

National Policy and Legislation Context

The national policy context for self-image is also vague in that The Children's Act (2004) states children should remain safe in their environments but little reference is made social

media and other online environments. It also states that all people and organisations working with children have a responsibility to help promote their welfare, enabling them to be happy and enjoy life (Her Majesty's Government, 2004). This national context explicitly acknowledges the importance of children's welfare, of which, we would argue, self-image is an implicit part.

Non-statutory Responses and Guidance

Charitable organisations offer significant support for self-image. A national campaign called the "Be Real Campaign" encourages organisations to take a body image pledge and offer support with a list of other charities to reach out to if you have body-image issues (Be Real, 2021). This suggests the voluntary and charitable sector is filling a gap in statutory services such as education, health and mental health providers. Charities are both championing the importance of positive self-image, and providing services to support young people who do suffer low self-image and associated mental health issues.

Academic Research

Academic research did not include the term self-image, but instead focussed on body-image. This indicates the significance of body image as a category within the concept of self-image and of the lack of attention paid by research in the UK to the wider areas of self-image.

The main paper reviewed was a rapid evaluation of the literature on body image by the Government (Burrowes, 2013) which incorporated 22 systematic review of literature. The main findings of the review were that weight, social factors, the impact of images in the media and individual psychological factors all contributed to lower body satisfaction (p.7).

The review identified that images of other people have an impact on individual body-image, with evidence that watching images of thin women or muscly men could reduce body-satisfaction (Burrowes, 2013, p.9).

Body image and low self-esteem and depression were linked, one easily reinforcing the other. This was particularly the case for women (ibid, p.10). Low body image was also linked to eating disorders and increased risk of suicide (ibid p.13-14). Research by Fein and Spencer (1997) revealed how a low self-image is likely to fuel prejudice and stereotyping of others as a defence mechanism, creating on-going cycles of self-image issues.

Good quality relationships with parents and peers was associated with higher body satisfaction and conversely, poor relationships were associated with lower body satisfaction. Individuals who feel social pressure acutely were more likely to feel worse about their bodies, and people with low body-image were more prone to teasing. The people around us therefore have the ability to impact on our body-image (ibid, p.11).

Socioeconomic status was significant, with poorer children more likely to be overweight yet unaware of it and girls from middle to upper socioeconomic status having the lowest body satisfaction (ibid, p.12).

Another findings was people with low body satisfaction had more favourable views of cosmetic surgery (ibid, p.13).

A gender bias was evident with females more likely to have low body satisfaction than males (ibid, p.16), but age and ethnicity did not affect body-image.

The final piece of research reviewed by Fardouly et al., (2014) showed social media is popular with young people and may account for the rise in body dissatisfaction. This research showed a positive correlation between facebook usage and negative mood. In 2013, 90% of 16-24 year olds in the UK were found to use social media suggesting the scale of influence this platform may have on self-image, and the amount of time young people spend on social media has sharply increased in the last decade (McCrory, Best and Maddock, 2020).

Burrowes (2013, p.7) report suggested that physical exercise, education and psychotherapeutic programmes might be helpful in combatting low body image. These are, however, aimed at individuals improving their self-perception. This research sought to understand if changes could also be made in society in order to improve the expectations young people live with.

Overall, the context for this research suggests there is no clear legislative framework compelling governments or organisations to protect young people's self-image nationally or internationally. A duty to ensure all young people have a positive self-image might, however, be implied in the documents pertaining to child welfare and thriving. Academic research focussed on the narrower concept of body-image suggesting the significance of this within self-image and the need for wider research such as this.

Research Project Overview

This project was funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR), North East and North Cumbria Applied Research Collaboration (NENC ARC). Staff from the University of Cumbria and Northumbria University supported this group of young researchers to plan, conduct, analyse, write up and disseminate their own research project. They were entirely youth-led.

The project commenced in December 2020 when we heard about the opportunity to do our own research. When we started work in January 2021 we were in a lockdown and had to take part virtually via MSTeams. We were able to meet in person from the 18th March 2021 until the 2nd July 2021 when the project came to an end.

Methodology

Research Aims

Our research aim was to produce guidance to prevent young people's self-worth being dependent on societal standards in order to ensure more young people are content with their self-image.

Research Questions

Our research questions were designed to explore the impact of society (networks, community, social media) on the self-image of 16-21 year-old's in England. For example:

- How happy are you with your body-image?
- Do you access social media?
- Do you want to change your body?
- What can the Government or education do more of?
- What else?

Research Method

The self- image research used a mixed method approach, mixing qualitative and quantitative data from surveys to give a sense of the range, scale and nature of self-image issues in England. This mixed method approach ensured a depth of understanding about the topic.

Data Collection Tools

We used an online mixed method survey to get as many responses as possible. We decided to use an online survey in Microsoft Forms as it was a quick and easy tool to use. Online surveys were also the only really viable way for us to collect data given we were conducting the research during a pandemic and at a national scale.

A copy of the research questions is available in Appendix 1.

Participants, Sampling and Recruitment

Our participants were 16-21 year-olds in England and Scotland. They could have any ethnicity, any gender, any sexuality, any religion and any socio-economic status. A total of around 8 million young people could potentially have completed the survey with this participant criteria, however, our

purposive sampling strategy and recruitment through known networks meant that a small sample was likely. We also expected low numbers due to survey fatigue throughout the lockdown.

Individuals were invited via personal social media accounts and reach was also achieved via appropriate social media groups. Reach was further extended with known organisations and contacts who were willing to send the survey out such as the National Youth Agency.

Ethical Considerations

There were a wide range of ethical issues to consider.

Informed consent – we provided all necessary information about the project in the introduction to the survey and embedded consent questions into the survey design.

Anonymity – the survey was entirely anonymous and we made sure young people understood we would not know who they were and so could not reveal who they were.

Withdrawal – we provided a contact address so young people could withdraw up to the point where the report was written.

Protection from harm – the online survey method ensured there were no physical risks to participating in the survey (e.g. from COVID-19 infection). The survey questions were reviewed to ensure they were sensitive, and debriefing information was provided at the end of the survey so young people knew where to go if they did need additional support. We also made all the questions voluntary so young people could skip them if they wanted to.

Data was saved in a password protected file on an encrypted computer ensuring data security.

Data Analysis

We used a mixed methods approach for the data analysis, using descriptive statistics for the quantitative data and thematic analysis for the qualitative data.

Findings

Q1: Current Self Image

On a scale of 1-10 how happy are you with your current self image?

(1 being you are not happy at all with how you look and feel, 10 being you are really happy with how you look and feel.)

On a scale on 1-10 how happy are you with your current self-image?

| Rating	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Count	13	19	15	27	17	26	33	8	5	1
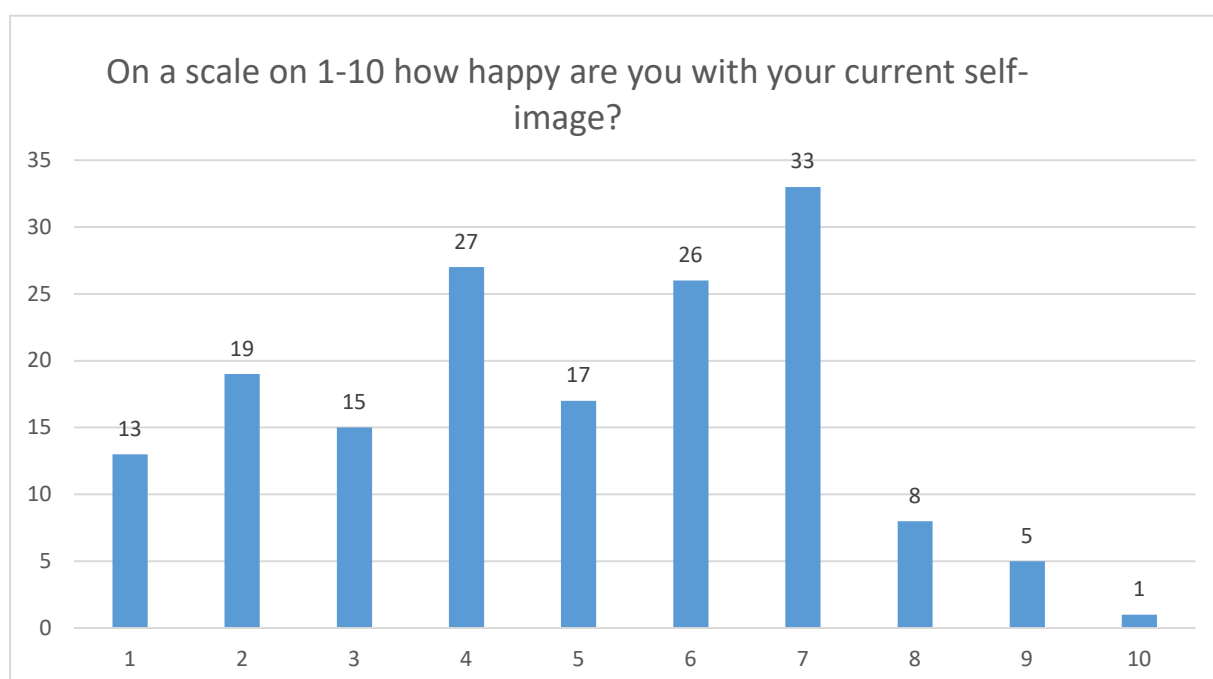
The most frequent rating on a scale with of 1-10 on how happy you are with your current self-image was 7, with 33 out of 164 participants. However, we found that that 91 out of 164 participants rated their happiness on self-image as 5 or below which is a majority compared to the 73 participants who rated their happiness as a 6 or above relating to self-image. The mean score amongst participants was a rating of 4.85, which is just below the median value of 5.

This data shows that a lot of young people have self-doubt and aren't as confident as they should be, as they may look at other people and make comparisons. I think to help people have more confidence in themselves schools and communities should show what real life is, for example a student achieving straight As is a good and respectable achievement but most people can work just as hard but not achieve this. If schools and people around you show what is real then I think a lot of people would have less self- doubt and believe in themselves more.

The data from this open ended question was coded and thematically analysed.
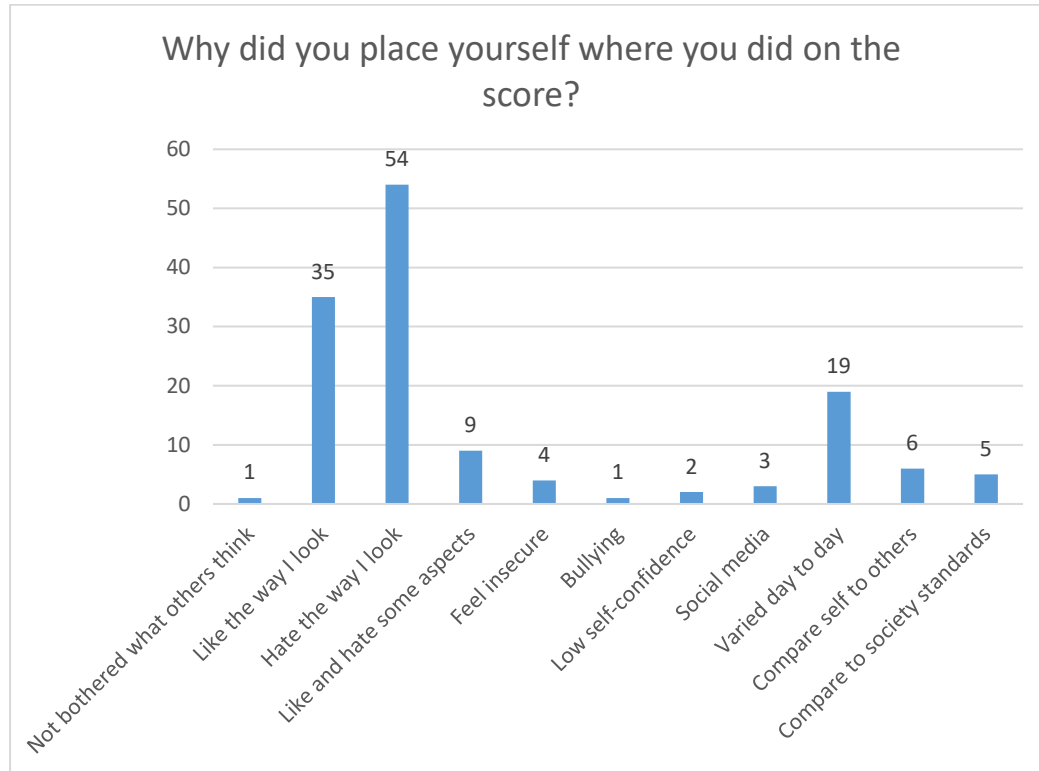
The data shows that that 54% of respondents have negative thoughts on their self-image. 'Hate the way I look, had 54 votes, this means that body image is a main factor in how people feel about themselves and didn't mention their intelligence or capabilities. The following quotes exemplify the strength of negativity expressed in the survey:

"I despise the way my body looks and suffer with multiple eating disorders."

"I am not happy with how I look to the point I do not want to leave the house".

However, 26% of respondents have positive reasons for having a good self –image either because they like the way they look or because they are not bothered what other people think:

"I feel like I am pretty happy with my body image but there are things I can do to make it better"

"I don't tend to care too much about what others think of me, but I do think I could be in better shape".

Nine people said they liked some parts of themselves and disliked others, showing that self -image is a dynamic topic and people sway either way:

"Some days I look in the mirror and love myself and other days I just wanna curl up in a ball and cry over my appearance".

Social comparison was also a relatively frequent theme, six people stated they compared themselves to other people and five people said they compared themselves to the standards in society:

"I constantly compare myself to others and I'm not happy with my weight and just generally how I look"

"Societal standards make me feel like I should want to be different and so I do".

To combat so many people having negative opinions on their self-image there should be a disclosure message on photo-shopped images letting people know the image has been altered and doesn't reflect a real-life picture. Schools could also do more with focusing on celebrating diversity and that people are different and that is a good thing instead of always focusing on intellectual topics.

Q3: Ideal Self Image

Where would you want to be ideally on the scale of your future self-image? (1 being you are not happy at all with how you look and feel, 10 being you are really happy with how you look and feel.)

Where would you want to be ideally on the scale of your future self-image?

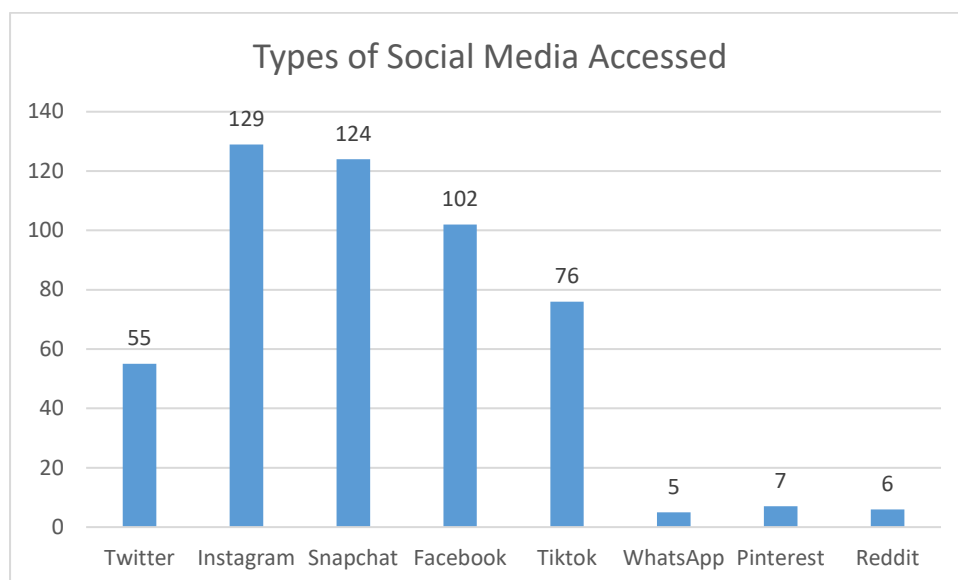| Rating	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Count	0	0	0	0	3	5	12	37	40	68
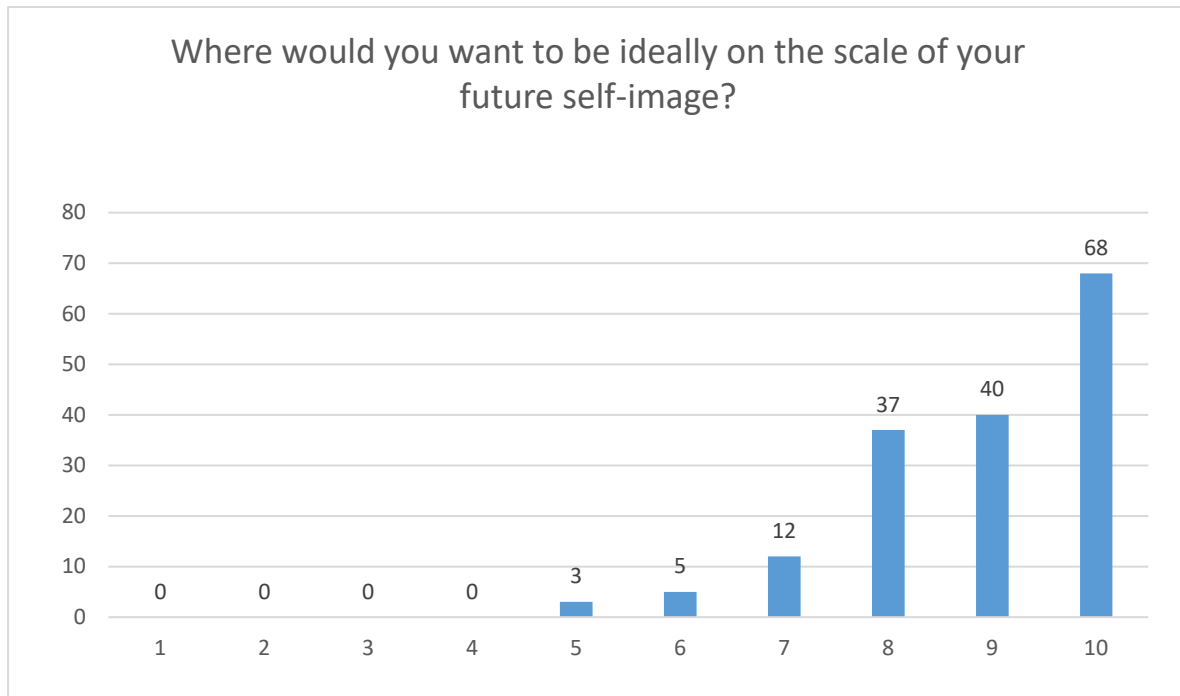
The most frequent rating on a scale with 1-10 where you want to be ideally with your future self-image was 10, with 68 out of 165 participants. This is an increase from an average score of 7 for current self-image, which shows the majority of participants want to be happier, however there are a couple of participants that have voted a lower rating compared to the first question.

A small number of respondents chose a lower rating to their ideal self-image compared their current self-image. This could mean people want to be less confident. However, 68 people want to be ideally rating themselves a 10; to do this social norms need to be scrapped to an extent. If people see unrealistic targets they will feel worse about themselves than if targets are more realistic.

Q4: Social Media

The data from this open ended question was coded and thematically analysed.

Types of Social Media Accessed

Platform	Value
Twitter	55
Instagram	129
Snapchat	124
Facebook	102
Tiktok	76
WhatsApp	5
Pinterest	7
Reddit	6

The young people reported using between one and seven forms of social media each. On average young people use three types of social media each.

"I use facebook, twitter, Instagram, snapchat, WhatsApp, Youtube and Tiktok".

Instagram is the most frequently used social media with 129 people using it. This high usage could contribute towards poor self-image opinions as Instagram is all about uploading pictures. The platform also doesn't have any protocols on editing photos, which sometimes can be heavily used on bodies. WhatsApp is the least frequently used, this shows people are on types of social media where you interact with strangers and often see things you don't chose to see.

During lockdown 47% of children and young adults had seen content on social media that they wish they hadn't seen (Woodhouse, 2021). People do choose to be on social media but often celebrities can misuse their platforms with an audience of young adults and children. To improve social media, users who heavily edit their photos should have to declare that they've edited it, this will make other users feel better about themselves as they know what they are seeing isn't 100% natural. Legal reform for social media would also be very helpful, and the White Bill intended to regulate social media by Ofcom would help reduce inappropriate content.

Have you ever been made to feel more confident in what you've seen on social media?

(no, unsure, to some extent yes, yes)

Have you ever been made to feel more confident in what you've seen on social media?

13%   23%

15%

49%

■ No   ■ Unsure   ■ To an extent yes   ■ Yes
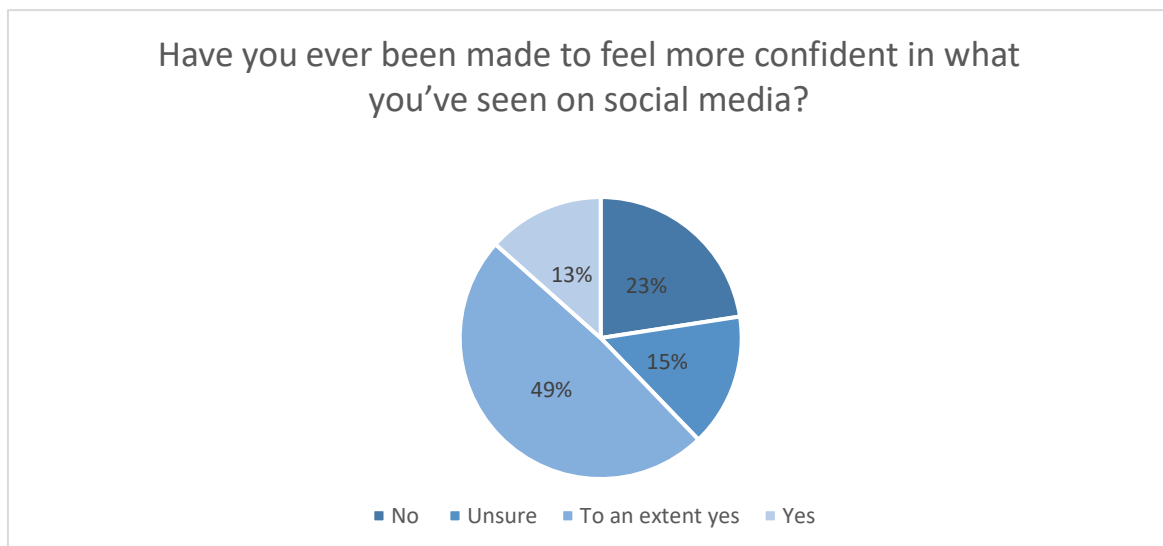
The answer with the highest percentage was to an extent yes, with 80 votes out of 165. The answer with the lowest percentage was yes with 22 votes. This shows a big range of 58 between the two answers, which shows the impacts of social media. To an extent yes is the most popular because some social medias are trying to improve their platform by stopping trolling as many people in the public eye receive a lot of hate from annoyomous accounts. However there is still a lot of trolling and undisclosed photoshopping.
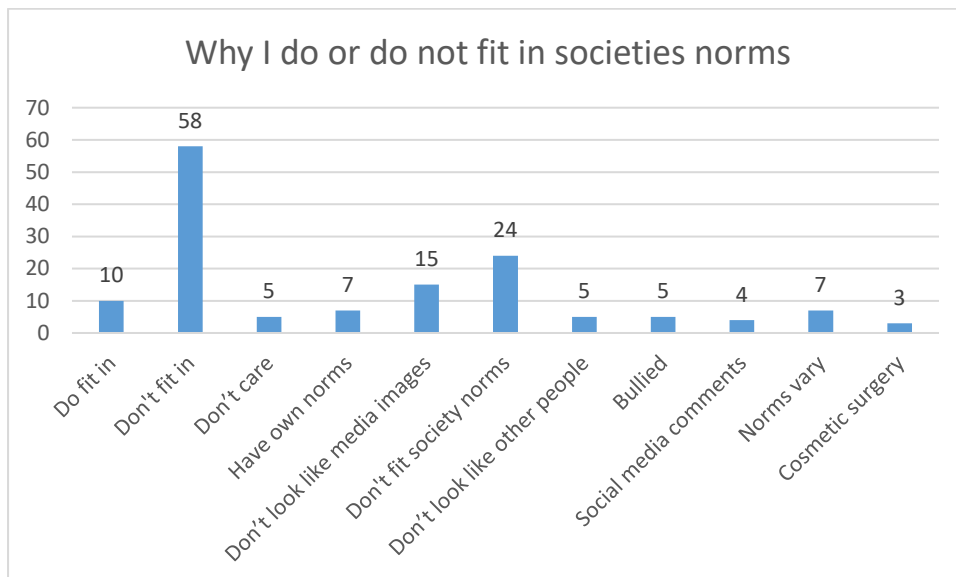
Have you ever been made to feel like you meet society's norms or beauty standards? (in terms of appearance, personality and your abilities.)
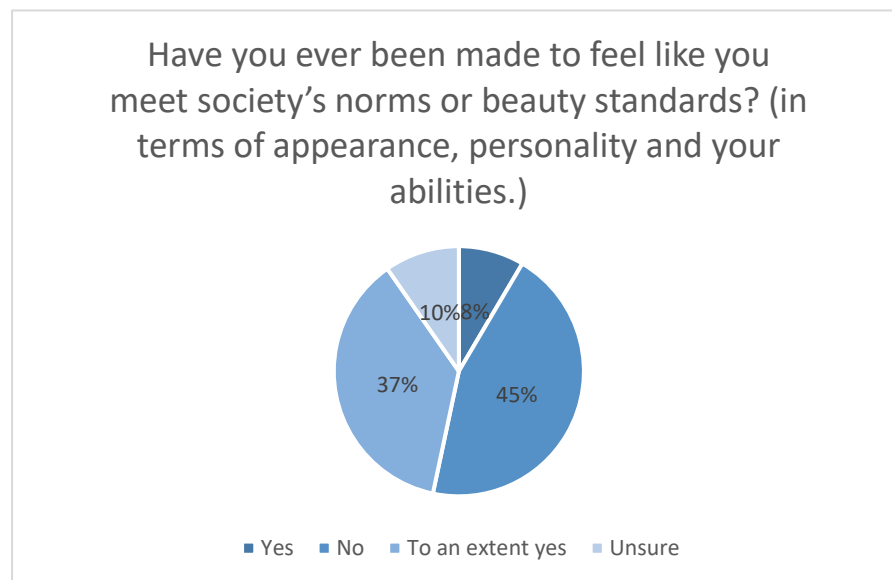
The answer with the highest percentage is no with 74 votes meaning the majority of respondents are feel they don't meet society's norms. This leads us to question why the society's beauty standards are seen as normal when a majoity feel they don't identify as fitting in the beauty standards. The answer with the lowest percentage is yes with 14 votes which highlights our point that the beauty standards aren't accessible for the majority. This is a considerable large range of 60. The findings of this question were as expected relating to the results of the 'how happy are you with your current self image'. As a society we should either scrap beauty standards as part of society's norms or focus on making society's norms accessible without the basis of appearance.

Q7: Why?

The data from this open ended question was coded and thematically analysed.

Why I do or do not fit in societies norms

Category	Value
Do fit in	10
Don't fit in	58
Don't care	5
Have own norms	7
Don't look like media images	15
Don't fit society norms	24
Don't look like other people	5
Bullied	5
Social media comments	4
Norms vary	7
Cosmetic surgery	3

Only 7 people have their own norms and disregard societal norms, which shows many don't hold an individualist mindset and rely on validation from others in society in order to feel good about themselves. Young people could be kinder to others, especially on social media as some people stated that comments on social media are the reason they believe they don't fit in societal norms. Uplifting comments from others has proven to increase confidence and if the individuals who have their own social norms tried to spread their minority view, society could be a lot more accepting as a whole. If this was supported by schools through campaigns, it would have the opportunity to be more successful as learning to be accepting from an early age can help implant an accepting mindset long-term.

Most young people felt they did not fit into societal norms:

"…because I am not the right body shape, not curvy enough, my face isn't pretty due to acne, etc."

"I do not look the same as the expectations and lots of the things I have are considered to be huge insecurities".

24 young people explicitly stated they were different to societal norms:

"My options are limited to a certain extent by the society I live in and I see no other ways of living that are clearly available out there"

*"I'm a sheep, I do anything that's popular so that I don't stand out".*

Media images for 14 of the young people delivered a clear message about societal standards, however unobtainable or unreal they might be:

"Societies beauty standards are so high. They want models who have been snatched from the front page of a magazine, which is impossible to live up to as even that's been photo-shopped".

Have you ever felt you want to change your body in a cosmetic way?

(yes, no, to some extent)
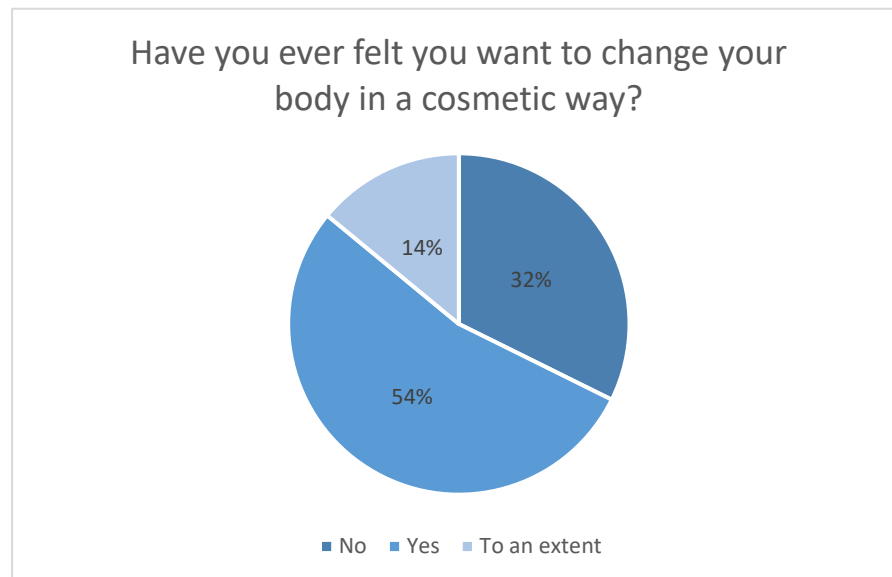
The mode answer was yes, with 88 votes out of 165. Cosmetic surgery has become increasingly popular in young adults, with many influencers either promoting it or secretly getting it. Decieving their followers of all ages can create resentment within their following as they may question 'why don't I look like that naturally?' promoting it can be just as damaging as well as it takes away the choice people make when deciding if they want to cosmetically alter themselves as they may feel peer pressure or societal pressure to change and keep up with the rapidly changing beauty standard. The range between yes and no was 35. 35 isn't a massive range compared to other questions which shows maybe people don't want a permanent change to their body even if they aren't happy with it. On the contrast, if cosmetic surgery increased someone's self esteem and their self-image, they should be able to do so without feeling guilty or facing criticism for peers. We believe being honest about any cosmetic alterations without promoting it would benefit young people with because it would allow people to form realistic expectations of themselves and wouldn't feel pressured to change if they didn't want to.

Do you worry about how other people you spend time with perceive you?

(yes, no, to an extent yes, unsure)
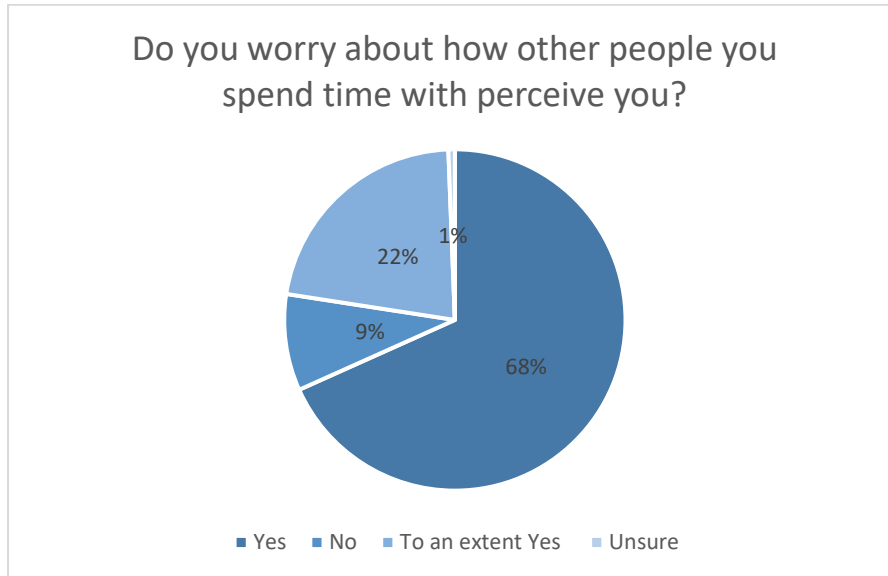
The highest answer was yes with 112 which is nearly 75% of particiapnts and the lowest was 15, this has the biggest range of 97 which shows how much people care about what others think about them. This highlights the point we made earlier that many lack an individualist mindset and require validation from others in order to feel confident within themselves. This means the majority of people are more concerned on what others think of them rather than what they think about themselves. In this research, we intended to discover young people's perception of themselves and this makes it clear that it is very closely linked to how other people's opinions. In British culture, children aren't encouraged to be accepting of their peers and often told to 'ignore them' or 'if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say it at all'. While this attempts to reduce hateful comments, it still allows these negative views of others to form and for this to stop, schools need to teach children from a young age to be accepting of others rather than resent them privately.

Do you think your local area contributes negatively or positively to your self-image?

(positively, negatively, unsure)
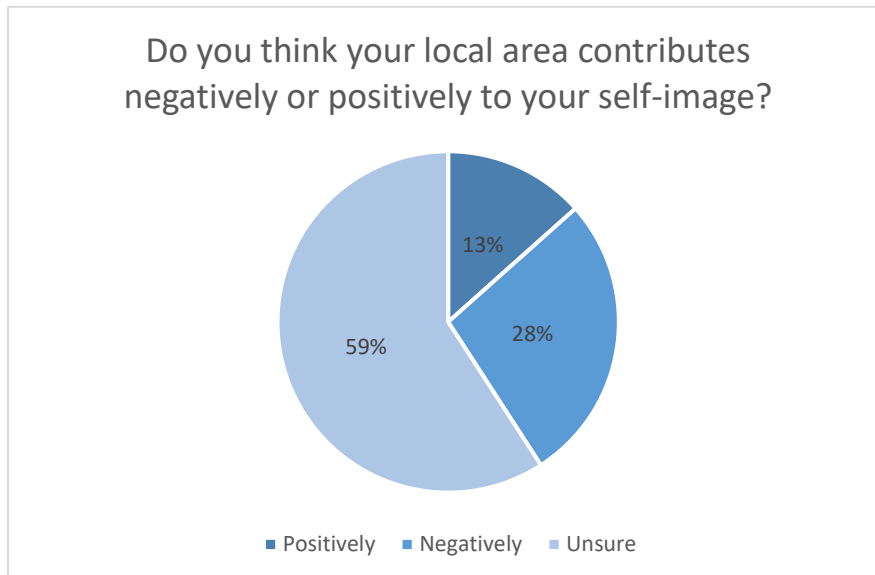
The mode was unsure meaning people maybe didn't have an opinion on it and hadn't thought about it before. However between the choices positively and negatively, negatively had more votes with 45. This means local communities aren't making a concious effort to increase the amount of young people who's self image is positive. Only 22 respondants believe their local area affects them positively, showing it varies within the UK. We discovered factors that create this positive and negative atmosphere in our following question on the survery 'Why do you believe your local area impacts you positvely or negatively?' Without the follow up questions it would be hard to advise on how to make a positive change within local communities.

Q11: Why?

The data from this open ended question was coded and thematically analysed.
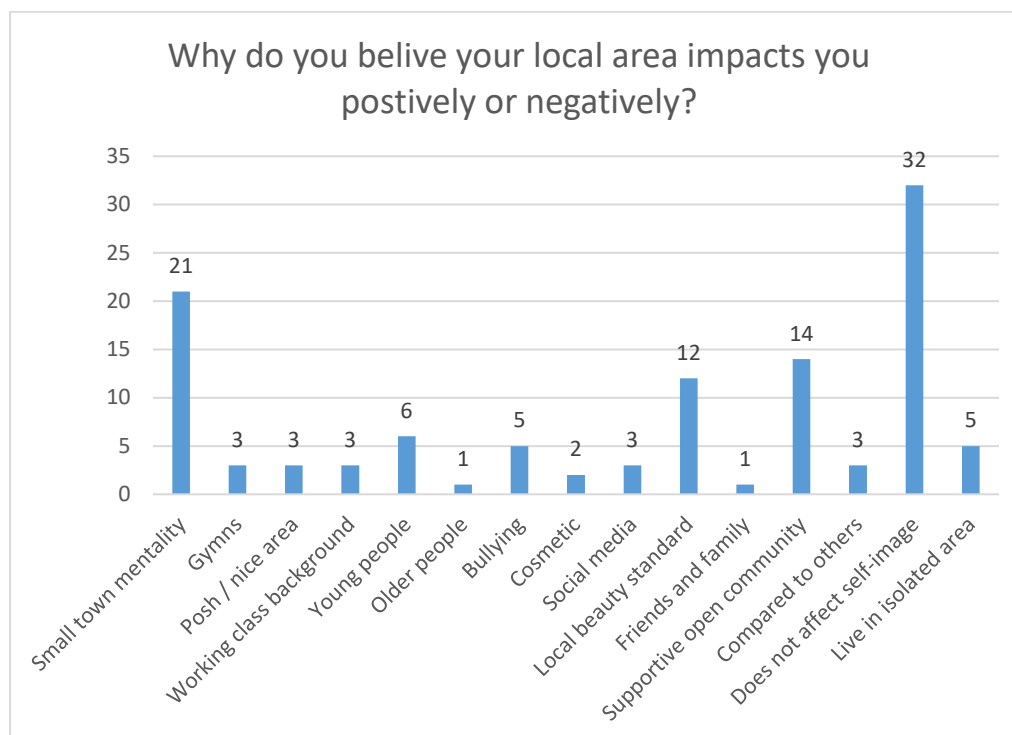
The most common answer was that they believe that it doesn't affect their self-image, which suggests they external factors do not influence their self-image. However, a majority of people believe their local area has some influence as our respondents gave a range of different reasons as to why their local area impacts their self-image, whether that was positively or negatively. A contrasting finding was that people who lived in smaller isolated towns believed that had a positive impacted them positively as they had time for self-reflection but other believe that the small-town mentality that comes with living in a small area causes self-doubt. This suggests that people living in small towns are often prejudice to people who don't fit the 'girl or boy next door' stereotype. Support from friends and family or a community that were supportive were reported to positively impact an individual's self-image, which again brings us back to the conclusion that other people's perception of us is a huge factor in our own perception of ourselves.

The majority of respondents said where they lived did not affect their self-image at all:

"I don't think my local area has any influence".

21 said they lived in an area with a 'small town mentality', this is illustrated in the following quotes:

"Cumbria is much more narrow in terms of people's ideals that other places"

"The majority of people in the local area have very specific and similar image whereas I have never fitted into it, as a result of this sometimes people will judge me".

And further, 12 people felt there was a high beauty standard and judgemental attitudes where they lived:

"Lots of the girls in my local area try to fit in with the beauty standard"

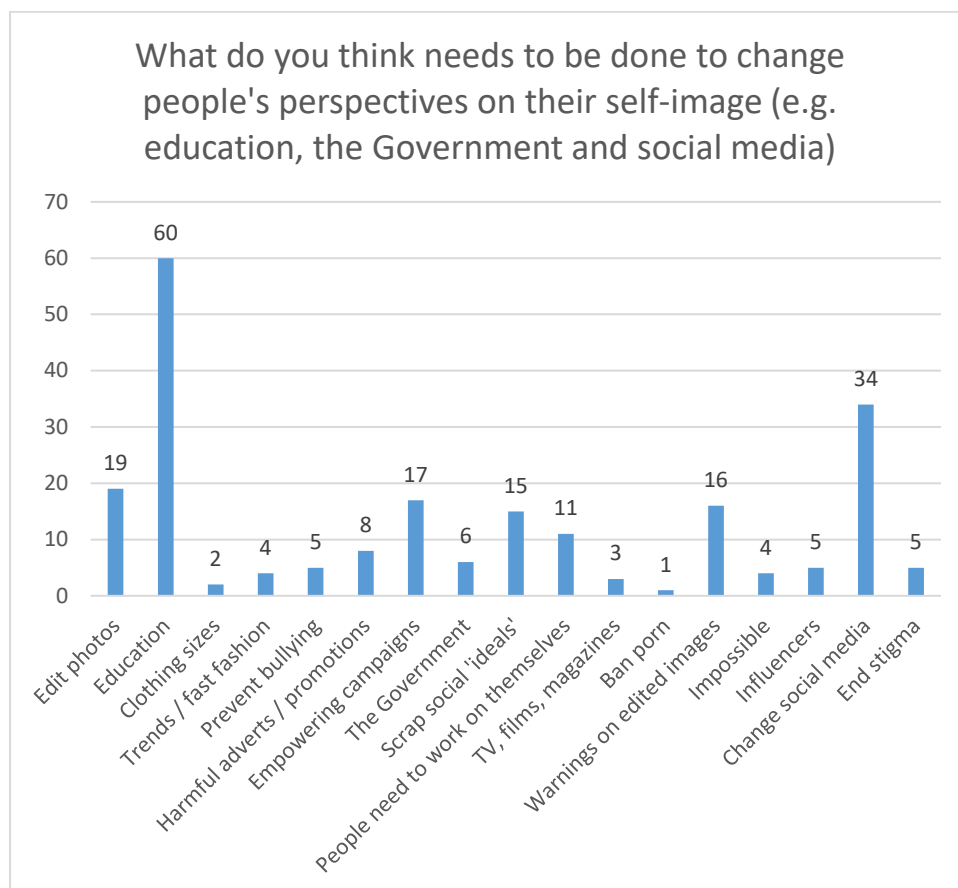*"Everyone looks you up and down if you wear something that isn't skinny jeans".*

In contrast 14 young people said they felt their community was open and supportive:

"I don't really think appearance is a big deal since nobody here really said that I should change it, most of the society here tended to focus on how the community could help each other"

"We are a very open and loving community and see past body image".

Q12: How can Self-Image be Improved for Everyone

The data from this open ended question was coded and thematically analysed.

What do you think needs to be done to change people's perspectives on their self-image (e.g. education, the Government and social media)

Four people thought it was impossible to improve self-image, but other 161 respondents suggested a range of 16 different solutions. The most frequent answer, from 60 people, was that education would help address self-image issues in society, which we endorse because it is clear that early ideals implanted into children, can remain with them throughout their teenage years and young adulthood.

 "I think its mostly to do with education, if children are taught from a younger age that variety is okay it would be more acceptable. For example, the presentation of people in the media that aren't always a stereotype".

"Education introduced by the Government through social media to celebrate individuality that is an on on-going thing, not just a single advert or session in school. It needs to be a regular thing to be able to make people feel happier about themselves, it needs to be introduced the same amount that negative body ideals are promoted through social media".

The next most frequent request, by 34 people, was to change or regulate social media:

"The Government needs to legislate to prevent advertising of losing weight and diet culture as more and more young people are using soci8al media. The younger you start to see paid promotions with

influencers or adverttinsig for 'skinny pills' and fasting th emore likely it is to affect you in the long run".

"Restrictions on social media for younger generations as it definitely dmanaged me using it for so long, like age restrictions should be higher".

Empowering campaigns were metnioned by 17 people:

"More social media personalities need to be honest about editing and retouching to show people that a lot of the bodies you see online are not real and unachievable for most people. Kids need to be taught about how to change their thoughts, how to make positive affirmations boost their self esteem and how to identify the good qualities in themselves"

"Attitudes need to change, specifically in education for younger girls since this seems to be a very vulnerable age. Girls are often targeted by teenage boys with insults about body types, not aiding the promotion of body positivity".

19 people thought images should not be edited and 16 people thought images should have warnings:

"Stop photoshop e.g, show realistic faces/ bodies and some beauty standards that promote EDS and other illnesses "

"Less photo shopping in the media, less glorification of people who are typically beautiful and less glorification of cosmetic surgery"

"It's starting to happen but more accurate and equal representation so not airbrushing stretch marks or cellulite as it's completely normal. I also think people with a large following should be made to disclaim when a photo has been edited so girls aren't under the impression that that's a natural and achievable look"

Whole scale attitudinal changes in social ideals were also a popular suggestion (15 people):

"less stigma around things such as eating disorders, perhaps also more honesty from models/influencers"

"The fashion industry needs to drastically change their ways of advertising by using more realistic models. Also, porno is really bad for us in many ways"

"Promote different body types, trolls being banned instantly, nasty comments about people's body being removed straight away, having a strict age limit on social media, education from young about trolling and the influence of social media"

Conclusion and Recommendations

Self-image is a complex phenomenon involving society, services, communities, media, and individual psychology. The rise in social media and hyper competitive marketing has led to unrealistic beauty ideals being promoted which are impossible to attain. Recent trends in education has led to increasing pressure and competition to attain academically which may be unrealistic for some or all young people.

As a result of these two significant changes many young people have poor self-image. Whilst tackling a national issue which is both collective and individual may feel challenging, there are opportunities for change. Many small scale and large scale changes can make a difference to how young people perceive themselves, and these are outlined below in full. Changes in what is celebrated as successful in all areas of life would be significant. Legislating for improved control of social media would reduce hard. Promoting greater awareness of self-image and the factors that contribute to it through education would also be impactful.

A full list of the findings and recommendations are listed below.

Question	Finding	Recommendation
1	A lot of young people have self-doubt and aren't as confident as they should be, as they may look at other people and make comparisons.	To help people have more confidence in themselves schools and communities should show what real life is, rather than unobtainable ideals.
2	Many young people feel very negatively about themselves, they have very low poor image as they cannot live up to the ideals promoted in society.	Schools could also do more with focusing on celebrating diversity and that people are different and that is a good thing instead of always focusing on intellectual topics, and media images of people could be more realistic and balanced.
3	Most young people want to have a better self-image than they currently have.	The ideals promoted by society are unrealistic leading to people feeling bad about themselves, more balanced images of a diversity of people need to be promoted and celebrated across society.
4	All young people access multiple social media channels.	To improve social media, users who heavily edit their photos should have to declare that they've edited it, this will make other users feel better about themselves as they know what they are seeing isn't 100% natural. Legal reform for social media would also be very helpful, and the White Bill intend to regulate social media

		by Ofcom would help reduce inappropriate content.
5	Despite the issues with social media, many young people reported that viewing it has sometimes increased their confidence.	Whilst social media, and the images it promotes, is problematic, it can also be a source of reassurance increasing young people's confidence.
6	The majority of young people feel they do not meet societies norms.	As a society we should either scrap beauty standards as part of society's norms or focus on making society's norms accessible without the basis of appearance.
7	The majority of young people don't hold an individualist mindset and rely on validation from others in society in order to feel good about themselves.	Campaigns to broaden societal views of 'success' and increased use of positive feedback could be promoted by schools and communities to improve self-image.
8	The majority of young people had considered cosmetic surgery showing it has become increasingly popular in young adults, with many influencers either promoting it or secretly getting it.	We believe being honest about any cosmetic alterations without promoting it would benefit young people with because it would allow people to form realistic expectations of themselves and wouldn't feel pressured to change if they didn't want to.
9	Most young people worry about what other people think of them.	Schools need to teach children from a young age to be accepting of others rather than resent them privately.
10	Opinions about the impact of communities on self-image were mixed with slightly more young people thinking they had a negative impact than a positive one.	It is hard to make recommendations from this finding, other than to suggest there is scope for communities to promote positive self-image.
11	Most young people believed their local area doesn't affect their self-image, however, people from smaller or more rural communities felt there were prejudices that affected them negatively.	Support from friends, family or a community can positively impact an individual's self-image, and should become part of all relationships and work with young people.

12		
	Most young people had suggestions as to how to improve self-image.	The most frequent answer, from 60 people, was that education would help address self-image issues in society, which we endorse because it is clear that early ideals implanted into children, can remain with them throughout their teenage years and young adulthood. This coupled with social media regulation could have a profoundly positive effect on young people's self-image and wellbeing.

References

Be Real Campaign (2021) *Help Create a Body Confident Nation*. Accessed 30th April 2021 at https://www.berealcampaign.co.uk/

Burrows, N. (2013) *Body-image a rapid evidence assessment of the literature.* London: Government Equalities Office.

Cambridge Dictionary Online (2021) *Self-Image. Accessed 21/5/21 at https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/self-image*

Fardouly., J., Diedrichs, P., Vartanian, L., Halliwell, E. (2014) Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood, *Body Image,* 13(2015) pp.38-45.

Fein, S., & Spencer, S. J. (1997). Prejudice as self-image maintenance: Affirming the self through derogating others. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73*(1), 31–44. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.1.31

Her Majesty's Government (2004) *Children Act 2004*. London: Her Majesty's stationery office, http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/31

McCrory, A., Best, P., Maddock, A. (2020) The Relationship Between Highly Visual Social Media and Young People's Mental Health: A scoping Review, *Children and Youth Service Review,* 115, pp.1-14.

Oltmann, S., (2014) *Interpersonal Relationships and Social Interactions.* Accessed 27/5/21 at https://www.slideshare.net/suzaanoltmann/n4-interpersonal-relationships

Positive Psychology (2021) *Self-image*. Accessed 21.5.21 at https://positivepsychology.com/self-image/

Rosenberg, M. (1965) *Society, Adolescence and Self-Image*. New Jersey: Princeton Congress Library.

United Nations Children's Fund UK. (1989). *The United Nations convention on the rights of the child.* Retrieved from https://downloads.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_PRESS200910web.pdf?_ga=2.78590034.795419542.1582474737-1972578648.1582474737

Woodhouse, J. (2021) *Regulating online harms. House of Commons Briefing Paper 8743, 28th May 2021.* Accessed 12/6/21 at file:///C:/Users/kaz.stuart/Downloads/CBP-8743.pdf

Appendix 1: Survey

Self Image

We are focusing on self image in young people aged 16-21 in the UK to see the affects social media can have on how we perceive ourselves. We want to gain a wide sample so we can create a final report which we hope to publish. Any data collected will be anonymous to both the researchers and in the final report. None of the questions are compulsory so if you don't want to answer certain ones, you are more than welcome to skip. Any questions or enquiries please contact us at selfimageresearch@outlook.com

Have you read and understood the information about this study and believe you know enough to continue?

Yes

No

Do you understand you have the right to withdraw at any point from this study by contacting us at selfimageresearch@outlook.com?

Yes

No

On a scale of 1-10 how happy are you with your current self image?(1 being you are not happy at all with how you look and feel, 10 being you are really happy with how you look and feel.)

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

Why did you place yourself where you did?

Have you ever been made to feel more confident in what you've seen on social media?

Yes

No

To an extend yes

Unsure

Where would you want to be ideally on the scale of your future self-image? (1 being you are not happy at all with how you look and feel, 10 being you are really happy with how you look and feel.)

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

Have you ever been made to feel like you meet society's norms or beauty standards?(In terms of appearance, personality and your abilities.)

Yes

No

To an extend yes

Unsure

Why do you feel like you do or do not meet society's norms?

Have you ever felt you want to change your body in a cosmetic way?

Yes

No

To an extent

Do you worry about how other people you spend time with perceive you?

Yes

No

To an extend yes

Unsure

Do you think your local area contributes negatively or positively to your self-image?

Positively

Negatively

Unsure

Why do you believe your local area impacts you negatively or positively?

What do you think needs to be done to change people's perspective on their self image? (E.g. education, the government and social media.)

You can contact any of these helplines if this survey has affected you.

MIND: 03001233393 (local rates apply)

SAMARITANS: 116 123

SHOUT CRISIS TEXT LINE: Text SHOUT to 85258

Thank you again for your participation, we appreciate your time and your experience on self image.

Appendix 2: Dissemination

This report was distributed to:

Funders

NIHR NENC ARC public involvement and community engagement team

NIHR NENC ARC children and families theme

NIHR NENC ARC marginalisation and inequality theme

Policy Makers

British Youth Council

Children's Commissioner for England

Member of Parliament for Cumbria

Children and Young Person's Councillor for Cumbria County Council

Councillor for Brampton

Healthy City (Carlisle) Forum

Governing Bodies

National Youth Agency

British Youth Council

Centre for Youth Impact

Sixth Form Colleges Association

Providers of Statutory Public Services

Department for Education

Public Health England

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

Director of Education and Skills, Cumbria County Council

Assistant Director for Children and Young People, CCC

Voluntary, Community and Charitable Organisations

UK Youth

MIND

Young Minds

Regional Youth Work Units x 5

Cumbria Youth Alliance

The Children's Society

The United Youth Foundation

National Youth Advocacy Services

Be Real Campaign

Boing Boing Resilience Revolution

Princes Trust

Barnardos

The Francis C. Scott Charitable Trust

Place2be

Anna Freud Centre

Emerging Minds Network

North Children and Young People's Network