TE MANA WHAKAATU
Classification Office

Watch carefully. Think critically.

netsafe

Digital Reflections

The online experience and its influence on youth body image in Aotearoa New Zealand

The Classification Office – Te Mana Whakaatu and Netsafe commissioned research to speak with young New Zealanders about their experiences with online content and the impact on body image. Rangatahi told us that social media and other online content can have a significant influence on young people's lives and self-perception. They noted that while such content often promotes unrealistic ideas about what's beautiful or attractive, it can also foster positive body image by promoting diversity and challenging traditional ideals.

This research provides valuable insights that help the Classification Office – Te Mana Whakaatu and Netsafe in their efforts to create safer and more supportive online environments.

Read the full report to better understand these insights and support healthy online experiences.

> "I do think boys can worry about similar things like, "am I getting a bit too fat?", or like, "are my muscles big enough?", or "am I strong enough?" That's the sort of the thing that media has pushed about what's attractive to the opposite gender."
>
> **TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE 16, NZ EUROPEAN**

> "For me it was when I started getting muscle definition and that, you always just wanted more, you wanted to look stronger, look stronger than your mates and bigger, broader."
>
> **MALE, 16, MĀORI**

Key findings

PART 1
How young people engage with body image content

Young people are seeing and engaging with a variety of body image content, often from an early age.

They usually start thinking about body image in their early teens, and social media plays an important role as they get older.

It's common for young people to engage with fitness, gym, or dieting content.

Young people see and engage with various forms of online content that influences ideas, thoughts and feelings about body image. Most participants, regardless of gender, had seen or engaged with content aimed at directly influencing or informing people about body image and how to change their appearance.

Young people think the influence of body image content is a big issue.

The online environment today has resulted in a significant change in how young people think and feel about body image, and can have a big impact on their health and wellbeing.

Young people use social media to express themselves and connect with friends, but they face significant challenges managing unwanted and harmful content.

Many feel they don't have enough control over what they see online. Unwanted body image content can be hard to avoid, and this can significantly affect their wellbeing.

Young people can find both helpful and harmful online content, but algorithms sometimes make it hard to get positive and reliable information.

Even when they realise that some content isn't real, it can still affect how they feel about their bodies.

PART 2
Body image content affects all young people, but in different ways

Young people are facing increasing pressure around how they look, regardless of gender.

Young people talked about a variety of impacts, but the most common theme was the belief that online content is adding to pressures around body image and comparing themselves to others.

Body image content impacts young people differently depending on their personal experience, self-confidence, and emotional state.

Impacts or influences vary significantly amongst individuals, and we can't make assumptions about the type of content they engage with or the importance of this in their lives.

Body image content affects everyone, but gender plays a key role.

Boys often engage with fitness-related content and feel pressure to measure up while girls often see unrealistic beauty standards and dieting tips. Trans and gender diverse individuals use social media to find support for their gender identity but often face unreliable content and negative comments.

The impact of body image content can be both positive and negative.

Some describe seriously negative experiences when they were younger, but now engage with body image content in ways that help them feel positive and comfortable with their appearance.

PART 3
What young people want

Young people often discuss body image and online content in general terms but struggle to have deeper conversations about their personal feelings and concerns.

Young people often casually discuss body image and online content, like workout routines and fashion trends, but they feel uncomfortable talking about the negative impacts of body image content for fear of being judged or misunderstood.

Young people want more understanding and supportive dialogue from adults.

They feel that adults often misunderstand their experiences and prefer discussions that are empathetic, validating and less critical.

Young people want better educational resources and support.

Young people want to be able to talk about body image issues at school and also to be able to discuss sensitive topics privately and address their individual needs.

> **"I was always constantly on social media since I was in year 7, so I've been just consuming these images of the perfect body. It just subconsciously made me think that I should be looking like that."**
>
> | FEMALE, 17, ASIAN