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Digital Reflections

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

Digital Reflections:

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Content warning

This report includes discussions of young people's experiences with body image and online content. This includes content and experiences relating to eating disorders and other mental health issues relating to body image.

If you find any part of this report distressing or if you or someone you know needs to talk, the following resources are available to help:

- Free call Youthline 0800 376 633 or text 234 to talk with someone from a safe and youth-centred organisation.
- Visit Netsafe to complete an online form to report any online safety issues or free call 0508 638 723 for support.
- Free call or text 1737 any time for support from a trained counsellor.
- Free call OutLine Aotearoa 0800 688 5463 from 6pm-9pm any evening to talk to trained volunteers from Aotearoa's rainbow communities.
- For eating disorders support, contact the Eating Disorders Association of New Zealand (EDANZ) helpline on 0800 2 EDANZ / 0800 2 33269 or at info@ed.org.nz.

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Lastly, and most importantly, we would like to thank the rangatahi who participated in the research. To make this research possible, a total of 58 young people from throughout Aotearoa New Zealand shared their experiences with body image and online content. These conversations involved a range of sensitive topics and personal experiences, some of which had a profound impact on individuals. Their contributions provided us with invaluable insights, and showed courage, openness, and care for others' wellbeing. We are profoundly grateful.

Foreword from the Chief Censor and Netsafe Chief Executive

Understanding the impact of social media on youth body image in Aotearoa

We see the everyday impacts that the evolving online landscape can have on young people. While some issues, such as body image, beauty ideals and diet culture, existed pre-internet, the widespread reach of modern social media means that young people are growing up and learning from content in ways we've never experienced before.

We commissioned this research to better understand the complex online experiences influencing the mental and emotional wellbeing of young people in Aotearoa New Zealand. Online environments and social media are increasingly associated with shaping self-perception and body image. Young people talked about the positive benefits of social media, such as learning about health or fitness, or experimenting with ideas around style and appearance. Social media provides access to a range of content promoting diversity and challenging beauty standards or expectations.

Young people also talked about the negative impact of social media on how they feel about body image. Their stories tell us that online experiences encourage them to compare themselves to others, and often contribute to negative outcomes such as low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating.

By listening to the experiences and insights of rangatahi, we aimed to learn more about the extent of these impacts, identify contributing factors, and eventually develop informed strategies to promote healthier online environments. We see this research as a necessary and timely first step towards developing guidance for parents, educators, policymakers, and online service providers seeking to support young people's mental health and help foster more positive experiences with body image content in the digital age.

What makes the experience different for young people today is just that – the experience. The online world is a continuation of their real-world relationships.

Conversations, social time and learning spaces are not just online or offline. When it comes to impacts on body image and self-esteem, it's not possible to point to just one aspect of the online world that is going to positively or negatively impact a young person. There are layers to their online experiences which, combined with their unique worldview, determine how they might fare. We're talking about:

- The content that they see, hear and interpret. This could be the post from the impossibly attractive influencer and their daily food and fitness regime. Whether or not the content is achievable or even real is something young people grapple with every day. Most of it is not classifiable or able to be restricted, and individual posts on their own may seem safe, but the concern is the snowball effect of thousands of interactions.
- The way they give and receive communication – how they interact with others passively or actively. Is it welcomed? Is it positive? What are people saying about others?
- The way the platforms are designed for spreading content. Engagement algorithms make the experience compelling and tailored specifically to the user. Suggested content, the speed and frequency at which it arrives, how it is placed, is all designed with the user in mind, taking account of not only their previous activity online but that of their networks.

Imagine handling a car with no driving education, or diving into the sea for the first time without swimming lessons – accidents are bound to happen. In the same way, if young people are given devices with no boundaries, understanding, or media literacy, they are vulnerable while interacting with the online world and potentially harmful content. This is why it's crucial to teach rangatahi not only how to think critically about the content they see, but also where to get help when they do come across anything that might be confusing, upsetting, or makes them feel negatively about themselves.

Despite all of its challenges, the online world is not always an inherently negative place for rangatahi when it comes to body image and can have significant positive benefits for young people struggling with these issues. Young people talked about negative experiences, but also described how body-positive content helped them to build confidence and think about diversity and body image in more positive and healthy ways.

Young people think these issues are important, and they want to be able to talk about them.

They've shared how growing up online has affected their self-image, and this can't be ignored or dismissed as just part of growing up. Honest, non-judgmental conversations with trusted adults, role models, and online service providers are crucial to counter the negative influences they face. These talks are challenging and may take multiple attempts, but they are essential and can lead to positive outcomes. To support this, the Classification Office – Te Mana Whakaatu and Netsafe will use this research to build resources for parents and caregivers. Now is the best time to have open and honest conversations with your whānau about their online experiences.

We are sincerely grateful to the young people who generously gave us their insights for this research, and who genuinely want their experiences known so that others might have a safer journey.

We're proud to be contributing to the kete of research in Aotearoa New Zealand and starting conversations about what matters to young people online.

Caroline Flora
Chief Censor, Te Mana Whakaatu Classification Office

Brent Carey
Chief Executive Officer, Netsafe

Key findings

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

Most participants talked about social media as a primary source and influence as they began learning about body image. The importance appears to grow over time as they become more active online and engage with a variety of content, with many describing it as the most important single influence in their teenage years. The influence may relate to comparing themselves to others, and informing attitudes, beliefs and behaviour around appearance, fitness and style.

A wide range of content can have an impact on ideas, thoughts and feelings about body image

Young people talked about how a continuous flow of carefully curated content has an important influence on how they think and feel about body image, and can reinforce ideas about what's desirable in terms of physical appearance, lifestyles or trends. Young people also talked about content promoting diversity around gender or appearance, or challenging beauty standards or expectations.

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. This ranged from advice about losing weight and going to the gym to make-up, style, and beauty techniques. Active engagement with this content, and associated influences on lifestyle and behaviour (for example dieting and gym routines), was common for our participants and was considered typical and commonplace among young people generally.

Content promoting body positivity and self-acceptance was always described as positive by young people. This content celebrates diversity and different body types, and encourages people to feel good about themselves rather than offering advice on how to change their appearance to achieve a certain weight, physique or appearance.

Hateful or abusive comments and online bullying about people's bodies, appearance or gender identity appeared to be widespread and difficult to avoid. Seeing or engaging with content promoting eating disorders, or similar seriously harmful content, wasn't very common amongst our participants. However, those who do engage with this content may be particularly vulnerable to harmful impacts.

Some young people who shared experiences around mental health and eating disorders talked about content creators or online groups aimed at people with eating disorders or in recovery. Some of this content was seen as sometimes or partly helpful, but also potentially harmful depending on what was posted and how others are engage with it, for example comments on posts.

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

Most participants felt that online content and the impact on body image is an important issue.

Young people have always struggled with body image issues, but the online environment represents a significant change in terms of how rangatahi think and feel about body image, and the nature and impact of online activity and content on young people's health and wellbeing.

Engagement with this content isn't simply about entertainment or learning, it has a direct influence on young people's day-to-day lives in term of attitudes and behaviours relating to body image. The direct influence on behaviour appears to be common, normalised and generally accepted, and young peoples' thoughts, feelings and behaviour around body image need to be understood in this context.

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

Young people are likely to come across body image content whenever they're online. Participants talked about engagement with body image content as a mix of seeking content they're interested in, seeing related content in their feeds that may or may not interest them, and coming across unwanted content that they're unable to avoid and weren't actively looking for.

Young people have mixed experiences with body image content on social media. They post and share images to express themselves, boost their self-esteem and connect with friends, but may encounter and struggle with negative comments.

Almost all participants described seeing unwanted body image content online (rarely for some and often for others), and believe it is impossible to avoid it completely. Some considered this important and tried to take active measures to manage content; others didn't feel this was an issue for them, and so their ability to manage content wasn't seen as important to them personally.

A number of young people described more negative experiences with unwanted content when they were younger. Some talked about becoming more confident over time in relation to dealing with emotional responses to unwanted content. This might relate to greater experience and maturity, being more confident or accepting in relation to how they feel about body image, and being more able to think critically about what they're seeing, who it's coming from and the motivation or intent behind it.

In general, dealing with unwanted content was something participants managed on their own, and it was uncommon to seek support or discuss this with others.

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

Social media algorithms play a significant role in determining the content that young people see, and shaping how they see and engage with content.

Most describe scrolling through feeds in a more or less passive way based on platform design. Some mentioned being more active in terms of influencing or shaping what shows up in their feeds. This could be by liking things they want to see more of, or blocking types of content they don't want to see. More often, young people would look at what comes up in their feed and then move on.

Young people also talked about the negative aspects of algorithms, and some expressed a lot of frustration about the type of content being served up to them. For example, interacting with a post about nutrition could lead to further content about dieting or weight loss, which then leads to further content unless they take active steps to influence what's coming up on their feeds.

Engaging with online content is often about entertainment, leisure and communication, and it appeared to be uncommon for participants to spend significant time and effort on checking whether information is accurate or reliable. Participants who hadn't thought much about the potential impacts of what they see and engage with, or who didn't feel this was particularly important, were less likely to take any active steps to check or verify information.

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.

Some talked about this in a matter-of-fact way. Instead of being negative or positive, it's just assumed to be normal. These young people might describe potential downsides, but appeared to take it for granted that having specific goals around changing their physique or appearance, and taking active steps towards those goals (with the assistance of online influencers) is just the way things are.

In contrast, many participants talked about the pervasiveness of body image content, and how this has led to changing norms and increased pressure around body image in a way that's different to earlier generations who didn't grow up with this.

The pressure to meet this standard is a shared experience, but the resulting impacts can vary dramatically. Some described feeling dissatisfied or unhappy with their body and appearance, and how online content can foster insecurities about their own appearance. In some cases this starts a negative feedback loop of engaging more with content that reinforces feelings of inadequacy.

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

The ways in which body image content impacts or influences young people can vary significantly amongst individuals. We can't make assumptions about the type of content individuals engage with and why, or about the nature of impacts and the importance of this in their lives.

While there are many similarities, everyone is ultimately seeing different types of content, engaging with it in different ways, and doing so for different reasons. Content could be seen as positive or negative depending on who is engaging with it and how they feel at that point in time.

An individual's level of experience, knowledge or maturity was often seen as very important in terms of the impact of content and how young people manage this. Participants felt that less mature young people (whether children or teens) were more swayed by what others thought, trying to please others and fit into the idealised norms promoted online.

Amongst the young people we talked to, reported experience of negative impacts varied on a spectrum from little or no perceived impact for some to quite severe impacts for others. Likewise, some described personal impacts as mostly positive, some as mostly negative. Some described 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. Some described specific content as having a profound impact on changing perceptions around body image that led to long-term benefits to their mental health and wellbeing.

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

Young people of all genders can be influenced by body image content, though the impact can differ.

Boys often engage with fitness-related content and feel pressure to measure up, but they generally talk less about negative effects. Girls often see unrealistic beauty standards and dieting tips. They frequently discuss negative impacts, such as dissatisfaction with their bodies and mental health issues, and feel that they face more intense scrutiny of their appearance and bodies.

Trans and gender diverse participants turned to social media to seek advice and support. However, this wasn't always seen as helpful, and even LGBTQI+ friendly spaces often featured transphobic and abusive comments from other users. They talked about facing heightened scrutiny around how they looked, and about challenges around gender norms and expectations relating to body image.

Cultural and ethnic backgrounds shape how beauty standards are perceived, and these impacts can be different for young people who feel they don't fit the dominant beauty standards of their culture or the global media landscape. On the positive side, some young people talked about the positive impact of content from influencers or other users who celebrate differences in appearance, culture, style and body types.

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 talk about body image and online content in casual ways, such as discussing workout routines, fashion or make-up trends they see online. However, they don't often have more open conversations around how they feel about body image.

These can be deeply personal and sensitive topics, and some worried about being judged by others, and potentially compounding the issues they're struggling with. Some thought their concerns wouldn't be understood or taken seriously. Others felt that having these conversations would be awkward and could place a burden on others who may not know how to help.

Although some young people have found support through close friends or family, many struggle alone until they receive professional help in safe, non-judgmental environments.

Young people want more understanding and supportive dialogue from adults

Young people are looking for more genuine and informed conversations about body image and social media. They feel that adults often misunderstand their experiences and prefer discussions that are empathetic, validating and less critical.

Family comments about weight or appearance can be hurtful, and young people wish adults would be more thoughtful about how they speak on these topics. They also find it challenging to trust adult advice if it contradicts the information they see online.

Young people want adults to offer supportive and non-judgmental guidance rather than imposing strict controls on their online activities and to be open to learning from the young people themselves.

Young people want better educational resources and support

Young people want school environments to address healthy body image in a more detailed and engaging way. Instead of broad group talks, young people prefer personalised, one-on-one counselling sessions where they can discuss sensitive topics in a private and tailored manner addressing their diverse needs. They feel individual support is more effective and less intimidating than generic group discussions.

Young people who have experienced significant mental health challenges often highlight the importance of accessible professional support, such as counselling or therapy. They recognise the value of having a safe and confidential space to talk about their issues.

Young people want social media to offer better content control and more realistic and diverse portrayals of body image

Young people also want better tools to control what they see online, including options to block harmful content and accounts. This involves improving social media platform functionalities to help users manage their exposure to content that negatively affects their body image.

Young people want to see more realistic and diverse portrayals of body image in media and on social platforms. They believe that seeing a variety of body types and experiences can help counteract the negative impacts of unrealistic beauty standards.

Who we are

The Office

The Classification Office – Te Mana Whakaatu (the Office) is an independent Crown entity responsible for classifying publications that may need to be restricted or banned. The legal definition of a 'publication' covers a wide range of mediums such as films, videos, music recordings, books, magazines, video games and online content. The Office prevents exposure to harmful content while upholding the right to freedom of expression and empowering New Zealanders to make informed choices about what they, and their rangatahi and tamariki, watch. The Office conducts research and produces evidence-based resources to promote media literacy and positive engagement with media content.

Learn more about the Office by visiting classificationoffice.govt.nz/about

Netsafe

Netsafe is New Zealand's independent, non-profit online safety organisation. Embracing a technology-positive approach, Netsafe aim to help New Zealanders take advantage of the digital opportunities available while managing online challenges. Netsafe do this by providing practical tools, support, and advice. Netsafe operate independently, adjacent to government and law enforcement, with an unwavering focus on online safety. Netsafe's mission is to keep people of all ages safe online by providing free support, advice, and education.

Learn more about the Office by visiting netsafe.org.nz/aboutnetsafe

Background and context

What we know about young people, body image and online content

Evidence[1–4] shows that body image issues, eating disorders and disordered eating affect individuals of all genders from a young age. However, eating disorders are more common in men and boys than previously thought, and their presentation often differs from that seen in women and girls.

A 2022 study published in JAMA Paediatrics[5] addressed this gap by analysing data from 11,878 children, ages nine to 10, collected between 2016 and 2018 as part of the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development study. The study found that both boys and girls were equally likely to engage in such behaviours, contrary to previous assumptions.

Recent research[6] suggests that eating disorders have risen globally during and since the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, there has been a decrease in the age of patients presenting with eating disorders over time, with teenagers being significantly impacted. For example, a 2021 study[7] observed a 25% increase in hospital admissions for adolescents aged 12-18 with eating disorders during the pandemic. A 2022 analysis[8] from the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCPSYCH) highlighted a rise in hospital admissions for eating disorders in the United Kingdom with an 84% increase over the previous five years.

Social media and body image

Historically we have understood the impact of traditional forms of media such as films and magazines on young peoples' self-image in general. In recent years the movement towards online spaces and social media for news, socialising, gaming and entertainment content consumption means we need to understand the impact of these increasingly popular environments on young people today.

Research[9–14] shows that social media plays a significant role in the development of disordered eating and body dissatisfaction. For example, it is shown that exposure to images of attractive peers on social media is linked to negative body image[13]. The research[14–16] also highlights potential correlations between social media use, negative body image, low self-esteem and eating disorder concerns.

Image and video sharing social media platforms are more strongly linked to users' negative body image compared to other types of social media[16–18]. Both 'fitspiration' and 'thin-ideal' content on these platforms have similar negative effects on body image and contribute to disordered eating behaviours.

Recent research[19–21] shows that social media algorithms and AI-generated content on these platforms amplify harmful material, including content related to eating disorders. For example, a 2022 report[19] by the Center for Countering Digital Hate found that new social media accounts created for young people were quickly recommended eating disorder and self-harm content. Additionally, accounts with names like 'loseweight' received significantly more recommendations for such harmful content compared to others.

A review of New Zealand-based research on body image

Studies on the impact of social media on body image, eating disorders, and disordered eating are limited in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, we found a few studies that looked into related issues such as mental wellbeing and positive body image. For example, an online survey[22] conducted by YWCA and Pretty Smart between March and June 2020 with 209 young women in Aotearoa (aged 18-24) revealed that a significant majority struggled with negative body image.

Another study[23] conducted in 2018 by ActionStation Aotearoa and Ara Taiohi collected views from over 1,000 young people (aged 12-24) and youth workers and policy experts in New Zealand to understand youth wellbeing. Nearly half of the young people cited "body image" as one of their biggest concerns, underscoring the need to further understand this issue.

Consultation to inform our research design

As part of the preparation for this research, we engaged with stakeholders, researchers and experts on eating disorders, body image and mental health and wellbeing in New Zealand. We consulted professionals who work directly with children and young people dealing with eating disorders and body image issues. We also talked to young people between the ages of 15-19 who are members of the Classification Office Youth Advisory Panel. This engagement aimed to ensure that the research:

- is relevant and provides practical value
- addresses gaps in the evidence base in New Zealand
- addresses key issues
- is methodologically robust
- includes the most appropriate target age group.

We heard:

- There isn't a lot of research about this issue for young people in New Zealand.
- There has been an increase in eating disorders in recent years, including both new cases and individuals returning for treatment. More boys and gender diverse individuals are seeking care.
- While the majority of young people are not actively engaging in dangerous behaviours, there are some young people who are acutely at risk.
- 'Body image' involves a wide range of topics. It's not just about eating or weight.
- Online body image content is something almost all young people encounter.

Why we carried out this research

Netsafe

As the leading online safety organisation in New Zealand, and a respected member of the global network of helplines and regulatory-adjacent organisations, Netsafe are regularly asked to be part of important discussions about online safety, both as part of legal and policy development, as well as by the tech platforms themselves, leveraging our trusted brand to reach decision makers. Netsafe Lab is the part of the organisation that funds research and tool development. Netsafe Lab operates independently but works closely with government agencies, educational institutions, and civil society groups to ensure our initiatives are comprehensive and impactful. One of the research priorities outlined by Netsafe Lab was the need to better understand the youth experience online, in order to develop effective harm prevention education on this topic. This became increasingly pertinent in our global engagement, as legal, policy and platform developments were focused on protecting youth mental health, but too often we found the youth voice itself was missing.

The Classification Office – Te Mana Whakaatu

Following research on pornography, misinformation, online misogyny and broader content harms, we're continuing our focus on content harm issues of concern to New Zealanders, especially in relation to young people. The Office has identified body image and associated health and wellbeing concerns as a key issue where further research would be valuable in addressing harms and ensuring the wellbeing of rangatahi in New Zealand. In addition to awareness raising and resource development, the research should also provide useful evidence for future online safety policy work.

HOW YOUNG PEOPLE ENGAGE WITH BODY IMAGE CONTENT (PART 1)

Now that I'm starting the gym I search up 'the gym' and a few things on YouTube or whatever, and now my Instagram feed is full of it.

MALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

Sometimes you cannot avoid it just by blocking the creator. There can be always another creator that makes the same kind of content. You can report it and express how you're feeling about that content. But if you're already in deep with that kind of content, and you've already manipulated yourself into thinking that, it will be really hard to turn away from that content and think otherwise.

FEMALE, 14, MĀORI, PACIFIC & NZ EUROPEAN

I think it is a big issue. But it does differ from person to person because of the algorithm. The more that you interact with something, the more that it shows up. So, someone's social media can be completely taken over by body image stuff, and some people might not have anything about it. I would say it does affect quite a lot of young people online.

CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

I felt like it was an expectation. To grow up looking a certain way, not acting a certain way. Which impacted how I grew up thinking. It was more about looks than how I actually acted.

TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 14, NZ EUROPEAN

A lot of people go deep into the rabbit hole of good-looking people and compare themselves to them and try to make themselves look like that. People go to extremes to get what they want, and it's not always healthy.

MALE, 15, MĀORI, PACIFIC & ASIAN

The place of online activity in young people's lives

How/when/why young people start using social media

Engaging with online content in some way during their childhood was the norm for young people we talked with, but the age they began using social media varied. It was common for participants to start using social media around age nine or 10, but some recalled using it as early as six or as late as 14.

Like teenagers or adults, children use social media as a way to connect with friends and family, be entertained, play games, seek information and explore their interests. Children are also attracted to social media because they see others using it, and some of our participants talked about the desire to fit in with others around their age.

Social media platforms have minimum age requirements, but the young people we talked with usually described these as easy to get around for children. However, restrictions put in place by parents appeared to be effective for some. Some participants were introduced to social media by their friends and given tips on how to bypass age restrictions put in place by social media platforms or parents.

Social norms, along with easy access, make using social media acceptable and normal regardless of age.

> **"I'm not sure if it's 12 or 13 at the moment, but you see nine-year-olds on social media, you see eight-year-olds definitely. It's getting younger as the years go by and the thing is, it's so easy to get social media for a nine-year-old. They just change their birthday when they sign up, you don't have to tell the truth. There's nothing checking that you are"**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

How and why young people use social media and other online content

Young people engage with social media and other online content for the same reasons adults do. This includes making and maintaining social connections, entertainment, getting news and information, and self-expression. Most young people we heard from grew up with access to some form of online content, and use of social media is seen as a normal part of life that is taken for granted by most.

> **"I could certainly live without social media. But I think when I get older it's gonna be really important because that's how we talk to each other, and maintain relationships, and how we start plans."**
>
> FEMALE , 15, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"I do spend a lot of time on my phone and on social media, but I don't think I really need it. I just do it for fun."**
>
> FEMALE, 14 MĀORI

Many of the young people we talked with felt that social media and other online content was a big part of their lives and was important to them personally, but views about this varied. However, almost all participants regularly engaged with social media and online content in some way. Nearly everyone used social media or messaging apps, most used movie/TV or music streaming services, and a majority regularly went online for shopping or gaming.

> **"I use Snapchat to talk to my friends. Occasionally I watch spotlights and spotlight videos. On Tik Tok I'm not creating, I'm just watching things. And on Instagram I'm just seeing my friend's posts and stuff."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Use of a variety of social media platforms was common amongst our participants, the most popular being Instagram, followed by TikTok and Snapchat.

How young people talked about body image and online content

What 'body image' means to young people

At the beginning of interviews we asked young people about the term 'body image', what it means to them and the kinds of words they would usually use in relation to the topic.

Most (but not all) participants were familiar with the term, and understood the concept in a way consistent with how we described it in interviews, meaning:

Thoughts, feelings, and beliefs we have about our bodies (or the bodies of others) and our appearance/ how we look.

Participants generally understood the concept of body image as multifaceted, encompassing ideas about how they look and how they're perceived by others, self-esteem or self-confidence, sexual attractiveness, gender or cultural identity, mental and physical health, fitness and dieting, and expressing themselves (for example in clothing or make-up).

Some young people talked more about specific topics they saw as especially relevant, while other were more wide-ranging. A common element participants talked about was the idea of comparison, in that body image was related to how people compare themselves with others both online and offline.

Participants didn't usually use the term 'body image' when talking with friends, family or others. However, the term was often used in interviews as a shorthand way of describing issues relevant to the topic. Regardless of whether young people were familiar with the term, they understood and were able to talk about topics relating to it.

> **"Body Image? I haven't heard it used too much myself."**
>
> MALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

"I've heard people use it to be like 'what you think your body should look like' or 'how it should be' or what the ideal body type is."

| MALE, 16, MĀORI

What is 'body image content'?

This section outlines the broad scope of body image content based on our interviews with young people. The scope of content is diverse and wide-ranging, but can be categorised as follows:

Content seen as broadly relevant to or influential on ideas, thoughts and feelings about body image

This includes:

- Photos or video posted on social media, especially if they're perceived as reinforcing or challenging ideas around physical appearance, lifestyles or trends. This might include content from celebrities or influencers, or people more generally (such as friends or other young people). This was usually mentioned in relation to young people comparing themselves to others on social media who appear to be attractive or successful.
- Content promoting clothing or other consumer goods relating to style or appearance, whether influencers or more traditional advertising.
- Other forms of media content, for example how people are portrayed in movies, TV shows, videogames or pornography. These types of content were talked about in relation to things like beauty standards, sexual attractiveness or gender stereotypes, but were mentioned much less often than social media.

Content that aims to directly influence or inform people about body image, or how to change their appearance

This includes:

- Makeup, style or beauty routines/advice.
- Gym routines/advice, physical health and fitness.
- Dieting advice (this includes weight loss, but can also relate to gym or fitness).
- Eating disorders or other mental health issues relating to body image.
- Content promoting body positivity and self-acceptance.
- Content and advice relating to gender transition and gender identity.
- Commenting on individuals' physical appearance, for example via messaging apps or comments on posts in social media.

These types of content are primarily found on social media including sites like YouTube, but other websites or apps were sometimes mentioned. During interviews, all conversations defaulted to social media as the biggest influencer and most relevant to the discussion of body image.

Views on positive or negative content

This section explores participants' views about different types of content and whether these have a more positive or negative impact in relation to body image. The focus here is on types of content. In Part 2 of the report we discuss in more detail the nature of impacts young people talk about, and why the impacts are different for everyone.

Some types of content were always described in a positive way, and some were always perceived as having a negative or harmful impact. However, most of the content young people talked about sits somewhere in between.

Types of content described as both positive and/or negative

In relation to the impact or influence on body image, most types of content young people talked about weren't perceived as being wholly negative or positive by participants. This includes types of content that are:

- Considered to be more negative by some and more positive by others overall.
- Both positive or negative in different ways, depending on how the content is presented.
- Sometimes positive or sometimes negative, depending on who is engaging with it and why.

Young people often expressed nuanced or somewhat ambivalent views about content and the impact it has. For example, it was common for girls to express concerns about the negative impacts of body image content, but at the same time hold positive views about dieting or beauty-related content they find helpful or entertaining.

Social media content broadly

> **"I mean, maybe it could be positive for people who are obese, maybe, and have to lose weight, but I think that for the majority people who actually have healthy bodies and have a healthy weight, I don't think that it's really beneficial. It could have a positive impact in encouraging more young people to exercise, because a lot of people don't exercise enough. And I think that can be positive, but there's a thin line between healthy and excessive habits."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Young people often talked about social media content in a broad sense in relation to the impact or influence on body image. This includes everyday posts from people they knew, from influencers or well-known people, and other social media users whose content they might follow or come across.

Posts about what people are doing, places they've visited, how they're feeling, what they're wearing that day and so on are seen to have an influence on body image because young people viewing that content naturally compare themselves to what they see. Young people often mentioned photos posted on Instagram as an example of this.

Young people were very aware that what people post on social media doesn't necessarily reflect reality, and that people will often post content that shows themselves in the best light in terms of looking fit or attractive, or being successful and so on.

For the most part, this sort of content was considered normal, and many participants posted content like this themselves (though not always publicly). Young people talked about the positive aspects of posting content, including how it might give people ideas about style, appearance and so on, and help build confidence around body image.

While most of this content wasn't seen as negative as such, young people did think it could have a negative influence or impact in various ways. This was usually mentioned in relation to young people comparing themselves to others on social media who appear to be attractive or successful.

Young people talked about how a continuous flow of carefully curated content has an important influence on how they think and feel about body image, and can reinforce ideas about what's desirable in terms of physical appearance, lifestyles or trends. Young people talked about content promoting stereotypes or ideals of what's considered beautiful or attractive for men and women.

They felt that this inevitably leaves an impression on people viewing this content, and it can feel hard to measure up to this.

On the other hand, young people also talked about content promoting diversity around gender or appearance, or challenging beauty standards or expectations. For example, seeing influencers challenging beauty standards by sharing their unedited, real-life photos can make a difference.

As with most of the content discussed in this report, a lot depends on the different types of content people are seeing.

Dieting content

> **"A friend did go online to try seek out dieting tips and I think inspiration there wasn't quite healthy or positive. It was a strict dieting type thing. That sort of spiralled a bit and it led to more very restrictive or almost dangerous dieting."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Many participants talked about content relating to dieting. This includes content promoting weight loss, either for assumed health or fitness benefits, or for appearance reasons. This was often described as having a more positive or negative impact depending on various factors relating to the nature of the content itself, and also how people engage with it and why.

Young people were likely to describe this content in positive ways if the focus was on healthy eating, nutrition and fitness. Some participants talked about meal plans and nutrition tips being helpful, if they're seen as authentic and reliable.

Some dieting content was seen as potentially helpful or beneficial depending on who is engaging with it. A number of participants mentioned that a diet might work for some people, but be unrealistic or unhelpful for others – for example, due to their body type or metabolism.

Young people were more likely to describe this content in negative terms if the primary purpose was promoting weight loss for appearance reasons. Some talked about how online advice might be helpful in a practical sense, but at the same time reinforce unhelpful messages about beauty standards or ideas about an ideal weight or figure.

Dieting content seen as fake, misleading, or promoting unhealthy eating behaviours was always seen as negative. A number of participants mentioned the negative impact of "What I Eat in a Day" videos and fitness content, which can promote unrealistic diets and exercise regimens. More extreme content promoting restrictive diets is discussed below under 'harmful content'.

Dieting content was also talked about in relation to working out and gym/fitness regimes, which is discussed in the next section.

Fitness and gym content

Content about fitness, working out and going to the gym was often described in positive ways by participants. Young people talked about this content giving practical advice and inspiration to people who wanted to get fit, lose or achieve a certain weight, or build muscle.

Potential downsides were similar to content about dieting. Fitness influencers often showcase their physiques, emphasising strict diets and intense workout regimens. This could be seen as motivational for some, but unhelpful or unrealistic for others, for example by reinforcing ideas around beauty standards, fitness, and physique.

A number of young people talked about dieting advice when discussing gym and fitness content, which could be aimed at losing weight, gaining weight, improving fitness or building muscle. In this context it was mostly seen as positive, in particular for boys aiming to achieve a certain body type.

As with dieting content, fitness and gym content was seen as negative if it was perceived as misleading or inaccurate, or promoting unhealthy behaviour such as steroid use.

> **"For boys, the videos are like, 'oh, you should be muscley and you should be like this'. For girls it's like, 'oh, you shouldn't be too muscley because you'll look like a boy', so it is different."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Content supporting eating disorder recovery or other mental health issues relating to body image

> **"I look for people that I know have shared that they've gone through similar things. There's certain influencers that are very public with their struggles and how they go about remedying them. And then that is also the same with people who struggle with eating disorders. There are people who are very open about their journeys and recovery, sharing tips and their experiences. Sometimes you don't feel like you can talk to your friends or it's uncomfortable to ask people about their personal situation."**
>
> FEMALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

Some participants talked about content directly relating to eating disorders and similar issues. Some of this content was seen as sometimes or partly helpful, but also potentially harmful depending on what was posted, and how others are engage with it, for example comments on posts.

Content relating to gender identity

Some participants who identified as trans or gender diverse turned to social media as an anonymous and safe space to look for information, engage with like-minded people and seek advice from known and trusted influencers from the community. While this was seen as a positive thing overall, young people we talked with described negative aspects, either because information itself was seen as unhelpful or unreliable, or because even queer-friendly spaces often feature transphobic and abusive comments from other users.

> **"I think there is quite a lot of trans content about people not liking their bodies, but you know, that's just because that is the concept of being trans to begin with."**
>
> TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

"Just general queer stuff being online is definitely really, really good for being a safe space for queer people. Obviously you can go into the comments of a queer post and there are transphobes everywhere, but it's good just knowing that there are other queer people around."

| TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

Makeup, style or beauty routines/advice

> **"I would say the average teenager is probably experiencing more negative stuff. I look at some of my friends feeds and it is absolutely abysmal with skincare routines, and makeup, and workouts. I get scared when I was look at my guy-friends Instagrams because some of them are just traumatising because it's woman who are absolutely drop dead gorgeous. But that's not what your average teenage girl's gonna look like mate."**
>
> FEMALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

This sort of content (almost exclusively viewed by girls) was usually described in positive ways, relating to group activities, confidence building, and expressing themselves. However, it could also be described as negative in relation to pressures around beauty standards, especially regarding the influence on children.

Other forms of online content

> **"Um I wouldn't really say movies or TV shows because I think that they are quite inclusive now with all body types. But maybe music videos sometimes. A lot of the women that you see in it fit a certain body type and you don't really see much diversity in that."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Content such as movies, TV shows, music videos, or advertising was mentioned by some participants as having positive or negative impacts on body image, though to a lesser extent than content on social media.

This was more often described in a negative way, for example shows like Love Island featuring slim women and muscular men and perpetuating narrow or often unattainable ideals around beauty standards, sexual attractiveness or gender stereotypes.

On the other hand, young people also mentioned content featuring people with diverse body types, and how this was presented in a positive and inclusive way.

The impact of comments and other online behaviour

> **"There are a few things on social media where people will post pictures of themselves and then people comment things about their bodies. Just yesterday I saw somebody posted a video on TikTok of her just dancing and then the comments were filled with people making fun of her body type and like her size and stuff. That's upsetting but also then you compare yourself to those people who are getting the comments on their videos."**
>
> FEMALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

Young people often talked about content having a negative impact due to the behaviour of other users, rather than the content itself. For example, a dance video on TikTok might receive abusive or derogatory comments about the content creator's appearance or weight. In this sense, a wide variety of content can have an impact even if it's not directly related to body image. This will be discussed further below under 'harmful content'.

This was usually talked about in a negative sense, but some young people also mentioned how supportive comments could have a positive impact, or mitigate the impact of negative comments.

Positive content

> **"I'm seeing quite a few influencers on social media platforms talking about their flaws and how it's okay to have this and this and this. And those personally and for my friends have helped us. It's uplifting having somebody else in the same kind of situation talk about it. It makes you feel better about yourself knowing that you're not the only one."**
>
> FEMALE, 16, MĀORI

Content promoting body positivity and self-acceptance was always described as positive by young people. This content could be found on various social media sites including YouTube. This content celebrates diversity and different body types, and encourages people to feel good about themselves rather than offering advice on how to change their appearance to achieve a certain weight, physique or appearance.

Young people mentioned a variety of content relating to this, for example creators with disabilities, or people recovering from eating disorders.

Girls often talked about this content and saw it as personally helpful in relation to how they thought about body image, but it was almost never mentioned by boys during interviews.

Young people also mentioned comments and messages that promoted body positivity. It was common to see comments like these when viewing body-positive content, but these could also be found on a variety of content, sometimes in response to negative comments by others.

Some talked about this type of content becoming more common or visible over time on their social media feeds.

Harmful or inherently negative content

Various types of body image content were described as harmful or inherently negative by participants. This included content that directly encouraged or glamourised eating disorders or other harmful behaviours, which was mentioned by a number of participants. Young people also mentioned related content that promoted body-shaming, "thinspo", or extreme measures to change appearance such as plastic surgery and "looksmaxxing".

> **"There are a lot of glow up sort of channels and looksmaxxing - that's a big one. You know, people are starting to work out and do stuff outside to improve the way they look. Sometimes when you don't have the resources or options you try to find something else and you might not find something that is achievable I guess."**
>
> MALE, 15, MĀORI, PACIFIC & ASIAN

> **"If you search up 'thinspo' on like Reddit or X it will come up with pictures of girls that are literally just skin and bones. It's meant to help people who want to starve themselves or want to get skinnier. A lot of people put these harmful pieces of content on the internet and use it as inspiration for people to lose weight, because that's what they should want to look like."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

It was much more common for young people to talk about negative or abusive online behaviour related to people's bodies or appearance. This included hateful or abusive comments on social media posts, and other forms of online abuse or bullying targeted at individuals – whether by strangers or people they knew.

> **"There's lots of hate and bullying online for people with darker skin. Like our culture and the way we do stuff, like who we pray to. I think our culture is really beautiful but people just bring up the negative and it has affected me a lot. At one point the negative stuff really got to me, and I'd go along with the negative stuff like "oh yeah that culture is not good", and all that, but then I stopped and I was like, "it's my culture, I should embrace it."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, PACIFIC & ASIAN

> **"It can be something that starts as harmless, but it can very much impact people's lives and then result in extreme cases of bullying, which can result in people thinking that they're not good looking. It can also mean that people can get really depressed by it."**
>
> MALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

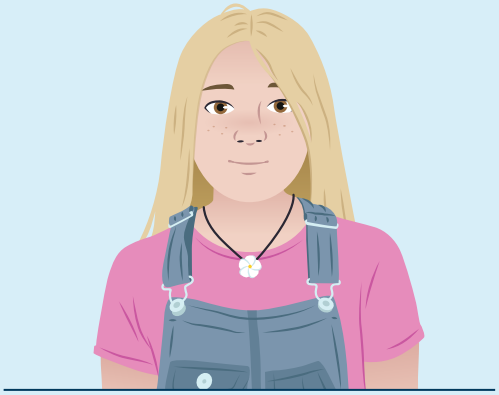
Abusive comments relating to someone's body or appearance could be found on otherwise positive content, for example posts promoting body positivity or discussing gender identity. Young people often raised homophobic and transphobic comments as something that could negatively affect body image, especially for trans people.

> **"Some people don't care about how other people view their sexuality, but others can be very impacted by it. An online community can be a really helpful place, but there can be a lot of bad people who infiltrate those communities because it's just recommended to them by the algorithm. So there's a lot of people who are unwelcome, and they just comment negative things which might make a person feel worse or might make the other person defensive and fight back."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Most participants raised this in interviews, and it appeared to be the most common type of negative or harmful body image content young people came across online. This was seen as particularly problematic because it often targets individuals, and because it is so prevalent and difficult to avoid.

A few participants also mentioned harmful online behaviour such a sharing nudes without consent, revenge porn, and deepfakes as examples of particularly harmful content, especially for those targeted.

> **"I have seen some revenge porn posts, and the comments are always about the person's weight. It's always about their looks. It's all super mean."**
>
> TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 14, NZ EUROPEAN



"My best mate got all her nudes sent to this account and they got posted all over social media. Now she doesn't leave the house because she feels too embarrassed to go out."

FEMALE, 14, NZ EUROPEAN

We didn't ask questions about pornography directly in our interviews, and young people generally focused on social media rather than other types of online content. Nonetheless, a few participants mentioned pornography as having a negative impact on body image, and gender stereotypes or behaviour.

> **"I believe it does have an effect. Some examples are the typical ones, influencers online photoshopping themselves, but another one is porn. Some boys see it's as normal and think that girls/women are objects and girls feel like it normal to be treated that way and don't speak up. Same could go the other way I suppose."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"There are definitely a lot of examples of how people, or young people especially, could get an impression of how they are supposed to look from online sources. Pornography would be a quite a big factor in that, because that's usually the age that young people get exposed to it."**
>
> TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

In our previous research [Growing Up With Porn], young people often mentioned porn's negative impacts on body image and self-confidence. These young people thought it would be common for girls to feel bad about their bodies after watching porn because they did not match up to the 'ideal' bodies portrayed in porn. For boys, the main focus of this concern was on comparisons of penis size.

These young people were aware that most people don't look like professional porn stars – for example, boys were aware that men in porn tend to have larger than average penises. However, this awareness didn't lessen feelings of inadequacy, as they still worried about the perceived expectations of potential partners.

Which social media platforms have the biggest impact?

TikTok and Instagram were the most popular platforms for young people we talked with, and they tended to talk about content on these platforms as having the biggest impact on body image. These and various other social media platforms were described as being the major source of content seen as positive, and also content seen as negative.

> **"I'd say that Instagram is for sharing photos. TikTok is for sharing videos and stuff."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"I usually see things that are kind of harmful to body image on Instagram. People say things on Snapchat, maybe on Twitter. Maybe Twitch."**
>
> MALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"If you go on to like Reddit or Twitter their contents aren't very regulated, so you can see a lot of stuff on there."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"I definitely do think a lot of rangatahi including myself will go to online instead of people in person to help with any problem that they have, especially with body image. I feel more at ease using that option. But yeah, it was mainly just TikTok and YouTube."**
>
> FEMALE, 14, MĀORI & PACIFIC

The key takeaway was that individual platforms weren't usually described in wholly negative or positive terms. Everyone is seeing different types of content, and the impact of content varied amongst individuals.

The importance of body image content in young people's lives

The normalisation of body image content

Is it common for young people to engage with this content and how often?

> **"There's quite a few young people who are taking it upon themselves to post about body image and normalise body types and stuff. I think there's a new wave of people who are trying to improve the way that people see themselves and improve the way that they treat their body so I think that young people are taking control and trying to make productive change for themselves and everyone else."**
>
> FEMALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

All participants had experience of seeing and engaging with some form of online content seen as relevant to or influential on ideas, thoughts and feelings about body image. Body image content is everywhere on social media, so most young people are frequently engaging with it in some way.

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. How often they engaged with this type of content varied depending on an individual's screen time habits and interests. This ranged from advice about losing weight and going to the gym to make-up, style, and beauty techniques. Active engagement with this content, and associated influences on lifestyle and behaviour (for example dieting and gym routines), was common for our participants and was considered typical and commonplace among young people generally.

Seeing or engaging with content promoting eating disorders, or similar seriously harmful content, wasn't very common amongst our participants. However, those who do engage with this content may be particularly vulnerable to harmful impacts, such as normalising unhealthy eating behaviours. This is consistent with our previous research, What We're Watching, which found that 15% of 16 to 17-year-olds reported seeing online content that promotes or encourages eating disorders in the previous 12 months (18% female vs 12% male).

> **"It's hit or miss because it really depends on what you do online. Even if there's safe spaces there can still be a lot of toxicity. Just being able to think critically about what you're seeing online is really important. Because I'll be like looking at recipes or fitness stuff and then I'll go into my 'for you' page and the fourth video down is this person with an eating disorder being like, 'I ate ice with cucumbers for breakfast,' and then there'll be thousands of likes. And I'm like, 'holy shit. Why is that there?' So just being able to scroll past and block the video and not look into that. I feel like it depends on your ability to think critically about what you're looking at."**
>
> TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"Um, yes, sometimes I'll see like, like promoting or just like, like, normalising like, kinda negative behavior. Like excessive dieting, even mental health issues. People see as a positive thing. I don't like when I see that, it's quite disturbing almost."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Hateful or abusive comments and online bullying about people's bodies, appearance or gender identity appeared to be widespread and difficult to avoid. On the positive side, girls we talked with often mentioned body-positive content, and saw it as personally helpful in relation to how they thought about body image.

Why it's different to previous generations

> **"I definitely think they're missing something because they are not living in this generation. They cannot fully relate to it, so I do think that they cannot actually fully understand how we are feeling because they are not us, and they will never be us and they will never experience what we are feeling in this generation because they will not live in this generation."**
>
> FEMALE, 14, MĀORI, PACIFIC & NZ EUROPEAN

Young people have always struggled with body image issues, and felt pressures around comparing themselves to others and to unrealistic standards around what's considered beautiful or attractive. While this is true, the online environment young people grow up with today represents a significant change in terms of how young people think and feel about body image, and the nature and impact of online activity and content on young people's health and wellbeing.

A number of participants talked directly about the idea of generational differences, and how attitudes and behaviours around body image have changed over time. Some other young people talked about current norms around social media and body image in a more matter-of-fact way, and didn't appear to have reflected on how this might be different to previous generations or to see this as particularly important.

Overall, young people's experiences and the way they talk about these issues shine a light on the complex and fluid interplay between online and offline life. They reveal important differences compared with the experience of previous generations around body image, and the different impact or influence of more traditional media content.

Partly this is to do with the nature of content available to children and young people. Engagement with a variety of influencers promoting diets, fitness and gym routines is seen as commonplace, but the popularity and availability of this type of content is relatively recent and represents a generational shift.

Engagement with this content isn't simply about entertainment or learning, it has a direct influence on young people's day-to-day lives in term of attitudes and behaviours relating to body image. The direct influence on behaviour appears to be common, normalised and generally accepted, and young peoples' thoughts, feelings and behaviour around body image need to be understood in this context.

During interviews, participants were encouraged to answer questions in whatever way they felt most comfortable, and it was up to them whether they wanted to talk about personal experiences, the experiences of young people they knew, or about young people more generally. As such, we didn't ask young people direct questions about, for example, dieting or workout behaviour, but young people often chose to talk about this.

Amongst the group of young people we talked with, it was common for boys to mention going to the gym or having been to the gym, and to talk about the role of social media in motivating or informing them. Some of these boys also mentioned dieting and meal plans informed by online content.

> **"You like one thing or you look at one picture or search up one thing, like how to eat healthy, and then your whole algorithm will have something to do with dieting and fashion and all that stuff. It definitely plays a big role. Now that I'm starting the gym I search up 'the gym' and a few things on YouTube or whatever, and now my Instagram feed is full of it."**
>
> MALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"I'm trying to go to the gym and I wanna like gain weight, but it's really hard because I've got a high metabolism. We just call each other fat as banter, but we're not really. I want to gain weight to bulk cos I wanna have a bigger physique. I would like to be able to build a bigger physique."**
>
> MALE, 16, OTHER EUROPEAN

A number of girls mentioned dieting behaviour in their own lives and the influence of social media, and when they did so it was more likely to be framed around health, fitness and nutrition, rather than weight loss.

> **"When I first started looking at dieting and fitness, I fell into a really deep trap of fad diets or just really unreasonable amounts of eating like because I believed that's what would work, and that's what was gonna be good for me. But that's not the case. It rarely ever is because one thing that works for one person might not work for another, because everyone's body is different, obviously. So you don't have to follow whatever they're eating, just so you can be skinny. But there's another aspect of it where people are genuinely trying to just share their journey of getting fit and getting healthier."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

The impression we got from interviews was that dieting, whether for weight loss or other reasons, was seen as relatively common for girls. It was unclear how common this was amongst the girls we talked with in the general group of participants, and they may have been less inclined to talk about their own experiences. This is in contrast to the boys, who generally seemed very open about fitness and working out, sometimes describing this in great detail.

Girls in the clinical group of participants were more likely to talk about weight loss content and the influence on their own behaviour. Today's online environment has a significant influence on how young people experience mental health issues relating to body image, such as eating disorders. In addition to content promoting working out or dieting more generally, young people now have easy access to a variety of content promoting unhealthy or harmful behaviour relating to restrictive or extreme diets. They can access this from a young age, and engagement with this content can be reinforced due to algorithms and what comes up in their social media feeds.

> **"I would say if you're already struggling with something, and you see a post but it's a post encouraging that negative behaviour instead of trying to resolve it, that can be quite harmful."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"People love to share information, whether they're being malicious or not. They just want to share about their lives and what they think is useful and what has worked for them. But that's what creates a lot of misinformation because everyone is different. And people don't recognise that and they're like, 'here's the miracle way that I lost 30 pounds in two days!' And then everyone's like, 'that's actually really bad.'"**
>
> TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

Aside from content directly promoting changes in body or appearance, young people are growing up with a continuous flow of content featuring people looking good, attractive, healthy and stylish. Earlier generations grew up surrounded by media featuring models, celebrities, sports stars and so on, but social media expands this to include a vast number of influencers and regular users creating and sharing content showing up in young people's social media feeds. This online world extends young people's basis for comparison in a way that wasn't possible before the rise of social media.

Do young people think this is a big issue?

Amongst the young people we talked to, experience of negative impacts varied on a spectrum from little or no perceived impact for some, to quite severe impacts for others. Some young people reported sometimes feeling bad about themselves because they're not measuring up to ideals of appearance and physical attractiveness they see online, which can add to pressures around body image. Some described feeling dissatisfied or unhappy with their body and appearance. Others had personal experience of depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues relating to body image, including eating disorders.

> **"I would say a lot of the time when people see an unrealistic type, a goal or an image online, it almost makes you feel as though 'oh, I'm not doing anything right' or 'I'm putting all this effort it, but I'm not seeing these results."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"When it comes influencers showing how unrealistic their lifestyle is, and telling us, 'I eat unhealthy too' and they still go to the gym 24/7? It's positive to see them going to the gym and getting out of it things that they want to be, but it could shine a negative light on other people because they think the only way that they're going to ever be like that person is to go to the gym and eat how they eat."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

When asked about young people in general, most participants felt that online content and the impact on body image is an important issue. All trans or gender diverse participants expressed this view, and it was common for boys and very common for girls. Some were unsure, but almost no-one felt it wasn't a big issue.

> **"I think it is a big issue. But it does differ from person to person, because the more that you interact with something, the more that it shows up. So, someone's social media can be completely taken over by this body image stuff, and some people might not have anything about it. But I would say it does affect quite a lot of young people online."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"Oh, it's definitely a big deal. It's a big deal for like, everyone."**
>
> TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

"For me and my friends and people that I know, the impact of the things that they see online have life-long effects to their mental health and it can be pretty detrimental for a few people. It has affected people that I know in terms of eating disorders, and also self harm, and I know that it really has been one of the primary reasons that they think that it's happening to them."

FEMALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

Learning about body image

When young people started thinking about body image

Participants were asked about when they personally became more aware of or started thinking about body image.

Perceptions of heightened body image awareness tended to coincide with puberty and noticing people comparing others (or themselves) based on appearance. This tended to happen between late childhood and early teens. However, it was different for everyone, and some experienced this earlier in childhood (as early as age six).

> **"I think that as a child I didn't care about my body that much, but I do know other people who have grown up a bit bigger than other people. They have had those ideas about themselves and were told this by other people, but the majority of young children don't care about their body. I would say younger teenagers, it can have quite an effect just because they're just starting puberty and they're experiencing changes. They are quite vulnerable too. Their body's just starting to change, so obviously they're not going to look like a 20-year-old supermodel."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"I think that men can think maybe I should put on a bit more muscle and stuff but they're only starting this thinking in their mid-teens. I remember it being pointed out to me when I was about seven. I couldn't care any less that it was pointed out to me, but my sister, who at eight years old, was already thinking maybe 'I need to lose weight."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, OTHER EUROPEAN

Becoming more aware of their bodies and appearance was sometimes described as a more gradual process, while others described this awareness in relation to specific events that were memorable and sometimes confronting.

Several participants talked about social media as a catalyst or influence when first becoming aware and starting to think more about body image, and the age at which young people start using social media or get their first phone marks a significant shift.

> **"I would say maybe intermediate in year 7 or 8. I think that's when I got most of my social media. That's the time kind of where all my friends are getting into, like, clothes and makeup and all that, so we kind of looked online for inspiration."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"I think when it was my second year of high school. I started to feel like I was unattractive, I guess, until I started becoming a little bit more slim or skinny, and you know."**
>
> MALE, 15, MĀORI & ASIAN

Social media was seldom described as the only, or necessarily the most important, factor. However, the importance of social media for learning about body image increases significantly over time, which is discussed further below.

Where and how young people started learning about body image

How young people learn about body image is multifaceted, and a number of participants contextualised ideas around body image as being deeply rooted in history and societal changes over time. Young people mentioned a variety of influences on how they think, feel and learn about body image during childhood and their early teenage years.

> **"I think that body image stuff goes back a while, even though they have changed through decades and centuries."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Peer comparison: Comparison with other young people was often raised as a significant influence on learning about body image, with or without the presence of social media. This was linked to a desire to conform to perceived social norms and fit in with peers.

> **"It was a lot of comparison, like comparing myself to my friends, because, at the time, I didn't really have social media. I was kind of oblivious to the fact that social media could affect my body image. It was mostly just me comparing myself to my friends."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"Well, it wasn't really online, it was more in my school. People thought I was ugly and called me that and it took ages to come back from that because I believed it. But online people called me pretty because I was younger, and I posted photos with filters."**
>
> FEMALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"I think it was social media as well as the people around me as well, like all my friends. At the start of this year most of my friends they go to the gym and, they're like, 'oh yeah brother, you should come join us blah, blah.' I was a bit chubby, and I thought I'll do it for myself because I didn't like the way I look."**
>
> MALE, 17, PACIFIC & ASIAN

Role of family and other adults: Family members, particularly older ones, play a role in shaping body image, either through direct comments or by modelling behaviour. Parents particularly can project their own body image issues onto their children, influencing their perceptions and behaviours from a young age:

> **"Even simple comments to a young child really affects the way that they see themselves. Especially if it's from their parents or a person they're meant to listen to, or a person that they're meant to see as a role model."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"A lot of like adults I knew when I was in primary school or going into middle school were going on diets and were talking about what they were taking to be skinnier, and how much they're eating, and dieting, and stuff. There was adults talking about how they were afraid their kids were eating too much or weren't eating enough."**
>
> TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 14, NZ EUROPEAN

Traditional media content: Content like TV shows, movies, and music videos were described as an influence in the sense that children would subliminally start to learn ideas about body image; for example, that being pretty, slim, handsome or muscular are linked to ideas of happiness or success. This wasn't usually described as consciously affecting children's feelings around body image, but that early exposure helps form views on what is the 'norm' regarding looks for successful, popular and happy adults.

> **"All of those people on magazines and stuff it's all so like artificial. They'll be doing so much stuff to keep themselves looking that way but the average person can't do that. So everybody has different things and we all don't look like those models."**
>
> FEMALE, 14, NZ EUROPEAN

The role of social media

> **"Through social media, specifically fitness influencers, I would definitely say that's the primary thing, and the recent upsurge of what I eat in a day videos and people who body check."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"I feel like nowadays how we feel about ourselves is based on what people post on the internet. It's nutrients and fashion, or if someone comes out with a new product to try and make your skin better. It does affect us a lot which I don't really like. Because before when we were young it didn't really affect us much, we could just be ourselves. But now we've had to change to fit in with this generation."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, PACIFIC & ASIAN

Most participants talked about social media as a primary source and influence as they began learning about body image. The importance appears to grow over time as they become more active online and engage with a variety of content, with many describing it as the most important single influence in their teenage years. The influence may relate to comparing themselves to others, informing attitudes, beliefs and behaviour around appearance, fitness and style.

Young people described positive aspects to this learning experience in relation to attitudes and beliefs. Social media can provide a window into a range of diverse body types, gender identities, and forms of self-expression within a vast online community. This can help young people learn about health or fitness, or experiment with ideas around style and appearance. In this sense, it has the potential to challenge traditional ideas around body image and self-expression during a period of heightened awareness and developing identities.

However, participants were more likely to talk about negative influences of social media in relation to learning about body image during these early developmental years. This is connected to ideas of maturity and experience, and the nature of the content they see and engage with. Participants often talked about engaging with more body-positive and diverse content as they got older, while also gaining the ability to think more critically about what they were engaging with. They also talked about gaining confidence in managing their emotional response to unwanted content, such as abusive content which denigrates individuals or groups based on their physical appearance.

How and why young people engage with body image content

How young people engage with body image content

As discussed earlier, young people use social media for social connection, entertainment, seeking information and exploring their interests. In general, young people talked about engaging with body image content in a similar way to content more broadly.

Young people were likely to come across body image content whenever they were online, with this content generally seen as pervasive in some form. This tends to be the case regardless of whether they're actively looking for content they're interested in, and it will often come up in posts, messages and comments.

Why young people engage with body image content

As covered earlier, young people engage with a wide range of content, some of which is seen as broadly relevant to body image, and some that's aimed more directly at influencing or informing people about topics like health, fitness, dieting and appearance.

Young people talked about engagement with body image content as a mix of seeking content they're interested in, seeing related content in their feeds that may or may not interest them, and coming across unwanted content that they're unable to avoid and weren't actively looking for.

Social media was often described as sparking interest or awareness about different topics relating to body image, which can then lead to further engagement with similar content. In this way, how young people engage with content can start out as more passive or unintentional, but can then lead to more active engagement as they seek or come across similar content. We discuss this further below in the section on algorithms.

Young people talked about engaging with more body image-specific content in various ways. This was sometimes as a more personal activity, and sometimes described as more social, for example watching videos together or sharing content, advice, or information amongst friends.

> **"I think with a lot of people, they will come across it accidentally. From there, if they have kind of these negative views on themselves, then they will start seeking it out more intentionally [...]. With things like social media being prominent these days I don't think it's necessarily all that easy to avoid. Regardless of whether or not you want to see it, at some point, I feel like the majority of people will at least accidentally come across it with how social media is now."**
>
> FEMALE, 16, OTHER EUROPEAN

Advice and ideas about things like make-up, beauty techniques, clothes, fashion, or hairstyles were often mentioned by girls, and described as partly about experimenting with looks and expressing themselves, but also as a form of entertainment or a social activity, especially relating to make-up routines. Some boys also talked about content relating to clothing, style, haircuts and so on. This was more likely to be described in a more practical sense of experimenting and getting tips and ideas, and inspiration from celebrities or influencers, rather than a form of entertainment or social activity.

> **"At this point, it's not just seeing bad stuff. It's being the one posting and getting involved in things that negatively affect body image for your entire life."**
>
> TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"Recently, there's been a lot of TikToks for guys. Videos and stuff that are like 'this is how you gain muscle. You have to gain muscle.' But for girls, it's like, 'oh, you need to lose weight. Do these exercises, get abs.' I think it's a similar message, but I guess just for different genders."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"When I first started looking at dieting and fitness, I fell into like a really deep trap of fad diets or really unreasonable amounts of eating because I believed that's what would work, and that's what was gonna be good for me."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Fitness or workout content was popular amongst participants, seen as a way to increase health and fitness, and also enhance your physical appearance or attractiveness. It was much more common for boys to talk about this type of content, and to talk in more detail about the type of content they were engaging with and the influence on their own behaviour, which could also include diets and meal plans to help them achieve a desired physique.

> **"I think it's from people talking about it in school. They go 'oh bro I've been hitting the gym. So, you know, I've been watching this YouTuber, I think you should watch them as well.' So, I'd go home search them up. I start watching similar, and then when you watch more fitness content, you'll start getting recommended a lot of fitness content."**
>
> MALE, 17, PACIFIC & ASIAN

"Maybe they see some really tough dudes and want to get in shape as well, so they start going to the gym or whatever motivates them to do better."

| MALE, 16, ASIAN

A number of girls also talked about engaging with dieting content. The desire to lose weight was one reason for this, but it was often talked about in terms of general health, fitness or appearance rather than weight specifically.

How and why young people engage with this content could be described in positive terms if it related to achieving goals around health or appearance. However, young people often talked about this in terms of negative or harmful engagement, for example engaging with content that encourages restrictive diets or extreme weight loss. Some participants described their current engagement with dieting content as positive or helpful, while acknowledging that, in hindsight, past experiences with dieting content were harmful or unhealthy.

> **"Health and fitness, for the right demographic, and if it reaches the right people, definitely can be helpful. Because realistically, there's people trying to go to the gym and trying to get slimmer in a healthy way and or trying to get bigger muscles and stuff. It just depends on what audience perceives it."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

The common factor in engaging with this sort of content was an interest in changing something about their body or appearance, but this doesn't necessarily imply a lack of self-confidence or dissatisfaction with how they look.

Some described a lack of confidence or dissatisfaction with their appearance as a driving factor in why they engaged with this content. However, some of the young people seemed pretty confident about their appearance, but enjoyed experimenting with new looks for the sake of it, or liked the feeling of having a goal they could work towards. It was also common for young people to talk about mixed feelings in terms of the reasons why they engaged with content, and how the experience could sometimes be more positive, and sometimes more negative.

Girls often talked about engaging with more body-positive content, especially as they got older. Rather than a desire to change how they look, the key drivers for engaging with this content were about self-acceptance. They sought out content that promoted health and wellness, and helped them feel more confident about their bodies and appearance.

> **"People are recognising that social media has played a big part in a lot of people's eating disorders and their struggles with their body image, and so a lot of influencers and people are trying to reverse that. I guess, like it's called like de-influencing people, just kind of teaching people not to take everything they see as 'that's what it is', because it's usually highlight reel and they want to be portrayed a certain way."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"There's a lot of movements in a lot of queer spaces online, they are good communities generally. And I think there's a lot of positive stuff coming starting to come through, specifically about loving yourself for who you are."**
>
> FEMALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

The role of algorithms

> **"Whatever will show up on the algorithm. You'll start clicking on it, and you'll get in deeper and deeper into that."**
>
> MALE, 17, PACIFIC & ASIAN

> **"Once you start watching videos, the algorithm kicks in - where if you're watching a lot of the same type of videos and all of that they'll start suggesting you more. That could send you on a spiral and just make you start watching more of the same type of content. For others I guess almost addiction forms."**
>
> MALE, 16, MĀORI

> **"You see one thing and you're like, 'oh, this makes sense.' Because it's a mild view of the sort of group. And then you're like, 'this is reasonable. And this makes sense.' Then you interact with it and then the algorithm goes, 'Oh, you like this thing. Here's this insane view from the same people.'"**
>
> TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

Social media algorithms play a significant role in determining the content that young people see, and shaping how they see and engage with content. Participants talked about how what they see relates to the frequency and length of time spent engaging with content, whether they watch, comment, click, like, share or search, as well as the behaviours of their networks and trending content.

Regardless of whether they were familiar with the term, most participants expressed some awareness of how algorithms work and commented on how their activity on social media shapes what they see in their feeds.

Most describe scrolling through feeds in a more or less passive way based on platform design. Some mentioned being more active in terms of influencing or shaping what shows up in their feeds. This could be by liking things they want to see more of, or blocking types of content they don't want to see. More often, young people would look at what comes up in their feed and then move on.

Young people talked about positive and negative aspects to this, and some expressed ambivalent views. On the one hand, young people recognised the positive benefits of their social media feed being individually tailored towards their likes and interests, particularly if they felt more confident in how the algorithms worked, and felt like they had a sense of control over what they saw.

Young people also talked about the negative aspects of algorithms, and some expressed a lot of frustration about the type of content being served up to them. For example, interacting with a post about nutrition could lead to further content about dieting or weight loss, which then leads to further content unless they take active steps to influence what's coming up on their feeds.

For some, this was more of a nuisance, but for others it could reinforce a negative feedback loop where they engaged with content even if they disliked what they were seeing or thought it had a negative impact on them.

Comments, messages and shares

Reposting and commenting activity can change the nature of content young people see and how they engage with it. Young people are likely to come across comments relating to body image regardless of the type of content coming up on their feeds, some of which they like and some that they don't.

> **"If someone like wasn't pretty, then you would know that the comments would be talking about their face."**
>
> FEMALE, 17, ASIAN

> **"It just feels like everything that influencers are doing is for social media. 'Oh, you have to wear make up to look pretty' and 'you have to have the perfect body' and 'you have to eat specific things' and 'go to the gym certain times of day."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"There's more emphasis on beauty and health than diet. Because when I see people talking about diet and stuff, most of the time it's millennials or older."**
>
> TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"My friend literally just posted something that said she saw guilt free ice cream. No food is like guilt worthy, so it's just little things like that kind of shame you for eating."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Everyone is seeing different types of content

When thinking about body image content, it's important to keep in mind that everyone is seeing different types of content, engaging with it in different ways, and doing so for different reasons.

Even when looking at specific genres, such as dieting or workout content, young people's experiences differ significantly. Some workout or dieting content may be based on well-informed advice and can be helpful to some, but have various negative impacts on others. Some content might promote unhealthy attitudes or behaviours, regardless of who engages with it.

This highlights the importance of listening to young people and having open conversations about body image and what they see and do online, and avoiding making assumptions about what a young person is seeing or the impact it might be having – either positive or negative.

> **"It's an algorithm thing. You can't be like, 'oh, I don't want to see like any fitness or anything' because there's overlap of like, fitness with other stuff. So, you can't filter by a specific topic or anything."**
>
> TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

Creating and sharing body image content

> **"You have those specific posts being like, 'this body is beautiful, this body isn't.' I think I had beef with those ones. I think they're really negative and just not helpful in any way, and I don't know why someone would post something like that."**
>
> FEMALE, 17 NZ EUROPEAN

> **"The internet can be as mean, or as nice as people want it to be without repercussions pretty much. You'll get plenty of people all the time just being cruel, because they can get away with it. Thankfully, for the most part, you can avoid people like that, just by not interacting with them. But a lot of the time if you're posting anything on social media with an algorithm, sometimes you can go so far that wherever you're trying to be, that it flips you over and puts you in the exact opposite place."**
>
> TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

Posting or sharing content of some kind was common amongst participants, such as photos, videos, memes and posts expressing their thoughts or experiences. This might include content seen as relevant to body image, for example selecting and posting photos where they think they look good. These young people tended to be careful about what they posted, and decided who could see this content (for example within a restricted group of friends, or publicly). In this way they could limit the risk of receiving negative comments, including comments about their body or appearance.

Some talked about creating content relating to things like make-up routines or fashion, and saw this as positive and fun. However, relatively few participants talked about creating or posting their own content specifically related to body image.

Speaking more generally, participants described a variety of reasons why young people (or people in general) might post content that's in some way related to body image. These included expressing creativity, to show off, to increase self-esteem, or simply as a way to communicate or pass time.

Some young people we spoke to said that creating positive content is motivated by the creator's desire to look good, make others feel good about themselves, and support friends. However, it was acknowledged that well-intentioned posts could be interpreted as judgemental and have a negative effect depending on who sees it.

Gaining followers and getting likes and positive comments could raise someone's self-esteem and make them feel good. However, young people often mentioned the inherent risk in posting content, and how cruel or abusive comments about someone's body or appearance could have significant negative impacts.

It was common for young people to talk about negative or abusive online behaviour. A number of young people talked about experiences with bullying or abusive behaviour, either involving themselves or someone they knew. This behaviour might come from people known to them, or strangers (including adults). Young people felt this was common, but no-one talked about engaging in this sort of behaviour themselves.

Some couldn't say why people did this, while others thought motivations could include gaining popularity, eliciting a reaction, or making themselves feel good by putting other people down. Some also thought that bullying behaviour might encourage further bullying by those affected.

Managing unwanted content

> **"I deleted Instagram a little bit ago, but before then, I'd just get random shit popping up on my for you page, and a lot of it was quite harmful. I mostly tried to stay on like things that I liked, like fashion and art. But it always veered into stuff that would trigger me, because I didn't click off it or because I stayed on it a lot more."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"I used to look at it and dwell on it and feel shit for hours on end. But now I've tried to scroll past it and stuff. Like, I think yesterday, I got one of those dieting videos on my YouTube feed and I watched it for a bit, but just scrolled past it and forgot about it."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Unwanted content means anything online that young people would rather not see or engage with that relates to body image in some way. What young people perceived as negative or unwanted varied amongst individuals, as did the frequency of seeing this content, the extent to which it bothered them, and steps (if any) they took to avoid it.

Almost all participants described seeing unwanted body image content online (rarely for some and often for others), and believe it is impossible to avoid it completely.

Participants talked about seeing different types of unwanted content related to their interests and their network's activity. For example, boys interested in gym workouts may see content promoting steroid use, and girls may see a repost from a friend showing "What I Eat in a Day" dieting content.

Exposure to content promoting eating disorders or extreme dieting was relatively rare. This was always described as unwanted, although participants with experience of eating disorders may have sought out this content in the past.

Rangatahi see unwanted content in various ways. It could be a video automatically playing on YouTube, dieting content on TikTok, or abusive comments on an Instagram post. It could include content related to topics they've searched, or appear randomly on their feed.

Young people often talked about scrolling through most of the content on their social media feeds, taking at least a cursory glance at everything. They tended to think their ability to control what they see is limited, but they had different views about whether that was important for them personally.

Participants generally believed that monitoring and safety measures on social media platforms should prevent them from being exposed to content seen as especially negative or harmful. Some thought this worked reasonably well, depending on the platform or content type, but many expressed a low level of confidence in the ability of platforms to manage content in a highly effective way.

However, people used 'codes' within the language of content/comments to avoid restrictions and this was described as constantly changing, presumably in line with trends and to avoid detection.

A number of young people described more negative experiences with unwanted content when they were younger. Some talked about becoming more confident over time in relation to dealing with emotional responses to unwanted content. This might relate to greater experience and maturity, being more confident or accepting in relation to how they feel about body image, and being more able to think critically about what they're seeing, who it's coming from and the motivation or intent behind it.

Young people also described becoming more confident in their understanding of how social media platforms work, their ability to use online tools and features to manage what they see, and taking a more cautious approach to how they engage with content.

Some mentioned switching friend circles, for example actively pursuing new friendships with people who engage less frequently in social media, or whose attitudes about body image or online engagement are more in line with their own.

In general, dealing with unwanted content was something participants managed on their own, and it was uncommon to seek support or discuss this with others.

Tools and methods for managing unwanted content

> **"Definitely blocking people who you know have extreme harm on yourself and how you feel. You can also block out keywords."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

"TikTok has an 'uninterested' thing on it. It's a tool that you can use. You can block people, it just doesn't really work in the long run. But you know, if there's one specific person who's really bad, then you can block them. Or you can create a new account entirely. That's another option."

| MALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"You can choose who you want to follow, you can block and report, and you can delete followers."**
>
> FEMALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

When young people see content they don't like and do not want to see again, they tend to either block it or scroll past it. Blocking content was seen as at least partly effective for some but not for others.

Some participants had successfully blocked harmful content, and others had tried to block content but felt that similar content would still appear in their feed following the blocking attempt. Some mentioned how tags or descriptions of types of negative or harmful content are constantly changing, whether in line with trends or to avoid detection. Some participants talked about reporting content if they thought it was inappropriate, but this was less common.

Scrolling past content seemed to be the most common way of avoiding unwanted content. This was effective enough for people who didn't come across unwanted content that often, or who weren't especially bothered by it. The extent to which this is effective depends on the person and the type of content. Some could glimpse something they don't like and move past, while others tended to view content even if they might not like it.

Some tried to tailor their feeds by liking content they want to see more of or selecting content preferences. This can help them see more personalised or positive content and avoid what they don't want to see. However, this is never entirely effective and requires ongoing management to some extent.

One way of managing what they engage with is to follow or connect with people they feel they can trust, whether it's an influencer or someone they know personally. While this can be a good way to avoid unwanted content, it's not always effective and there's always the potential to see negative or abusive comments.

Ultimately, the only way to avoid unwanted content completely is to switch their phone off as a temporary measure, or to stop using specific social media platforms entirely. A few talked about doing this, which might also involve limiting the time they spend on social media in general.

Bullying and unwanted communication

> **"The the thing is, is if you're bullying someone online, there is a digital footprint following you out the door. If you're physically bullying someone, it's their word against yours. That's the difference. At 17 people start to get a few more brain cells. And they're like, 'Oh, what if I don't actually say that?"**
>
> FEMALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"The younger generations are gonna be growing up with people bullying them from whenever they're first born. I've seen Tik Toks about newborns, being like fat shamed for being chunky."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

As discussed earlier, abusive comments or bullying behaviour were always described as negative or unwanted, and it appeared to be the most common type of negative or harmful body image content young people came across online.

Content they otherwise like or enjoy can be negative or unwanted based on the comments of other users. It was generally seen as difficult to avoid this, and young people were likely to read comments even if they might be upsetting. Ways of dealing with this included trying to ignore comments, focusing on more positive comments, or (more rarely) responding themselves.

Bullying or harassment of individuals was seen as especially harmful or upsetting. Some had experienced this first-hand, or personally knew of friends who had been targeted. Dealing with bullying behaviour was seen to be especially difficult by some participants.

Sharing or posting content

> **"You can turn your videos private, or your whole account private and nobody sees it. Or they do see it, but they can't get in."**
>
> FEMALE, 17, MĀORI & NZ EUROPEAN

> **"If I come across something that don't find it interesting, I just sign out and just try and restart the algorithm, or just purposely search up stuff that I'm interested in, start watching it and then they kind of notice that I'm no longer interested in what they've shown."**
>
> MALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

Young people often talked about selecting their connections so they could have a trusted hierarchy of people with whom they share content. This involves decisions about what they share, where they share it, who they share it with, and how they interact with others' content. Content they share publicly is likely to be more curated and superficial.

This is partly about privacy, for example, wanting to share content with close friends rather than family members.

A number of participants did this out of concern for how others might respond to their content, or their appearance. It was a way to avoid unwanted or negative comments they might get if posting more publicly. Those who did post more publicly were aware this could open them up to negative comments relating to their appearance (especially girls), which might have nothing to do with the content they posted.

Do young people have enough control over what they see online?

> **"There are actions you can take to avoid it, like saying 'I'm not interested in this content.' But it doesn't always fix the algorithm, and it doesn't always hide all that content so it can be quite daunting to escape from."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"I think it's quite hard to avoid it. There's no real escaping it because it's always going to be out there on the social media website. There's no real way that you can stop that stuff from being there."**
>
> FEMALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"I think we do have like, a good amount of control over what we see."**
>
> FEMALE, 17, ASIAN

Participants had different views about whether they (or young people generally) have enough control over what they see online, and whether unwanted or harmful content is easy to avoid. None felt they had complete control or could avoid unwanted content entirely.

Some considered this important and tried to take active measures to manage content; others didn't feel this was an issue for them, and so their ability to manage content wasn't seen as important to them personally. Some had tried various ways of managing content but saw little benefit from their efforts, and had more or less given up trying.

How and why young people engage with harmful (inherently negative) content

It was rare for participants in the general (non-clinical) group to talk about actively engaging with more harmful body image content relating to eating disorders, extreme dieting, enhanced bodybuilding and so on. However, a few participants were able to talk about how and why young people engage with this content.

A common factor for engaging with this content was low self-esteem and dissatisfaction with how they look – which isn't necessarily the case for young people engaging with other forms of body image content.

Often those seeking out harmful content are looking to find like-minded people who will not judge them. It can be easier to make these connections remotely than to find these people in real life, plus a degree of anonymity can be retained.

Some participants with a history of eating disorders or related health issues described their experience of seeking out and engaging with this content regularly. Reflecting on past behaviour, they described how content they engaged with could validate, reinforce, or help to normalise potentially harmful attitudes and behaviours.

They described actively searching for content that interests them, with all the social media platforms enabling searching by topic or hashtag. Platforms have various content and moderation policies around harmful body image content. However, young people described how these restrictions can be circumvented, for example with spelling changes or alternative search terms. In other words, content can still be posted and viewed if someone knows what to look for. They might learn about this from others looking for the same content, or from stumbling across it while searching.

Several participants discussed how algorithms can lead users down harmful paths by showing related content once they engage with it. In some cases this leads to increasingly harmful content appearing in people's feeds.

> **"Negative videos show up. You get one, you like it, and then they keep showing up. So I guess if you like one positive video you can also have the same outcome where it starts showing up, but I think it is really dependent on how you interact with it."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Some described personal struggles with how they engaged with content, including seeking content they knew was upsetting or potentially harmful, but feeling compelled to seek it out.

Guidance and support material, information, and resources

Participants were asked about online resources providing guidance and support for people struggling with issues around body image, and whether young people sought these out.

Some participants responded to these questions by talking about social media content that promoted body positivity or health and wellness information. Engaging with this type of content was common amongst girls we talked to, sometimes mentioning specific influencers who had helped them personally.

Some young people who shared experiences around mental health talked about content creators or online groups aimed at people struggling with eating disorders, or in recovery. This is partly because they were initially unlikely to talk about this with family or friends, and were looking for a non-judgemental space to turn to for support or information. Some of this content was described as wholly positive, for example content creators who were providing advice to assist with recovery and posting content about their own experiences. Some of this content was seen as sometimes or partly helpful, but also potentially harmful, depending on what was posted and how other users engaged with it.

> **"There's lots of videos online. People are going through the same things and they need information to help the people that need help."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, PACIFIC

> **"There's so many accounts out there now, if you you can literally just pop in a few keywords, you can pop in, like positivity, you can put just positive things on there. You can find quotes that might help you, you can find an account that will try and work you through these things."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, OTHER EUROPEAN

However, other types of content appearing to offer 'support' in relation to eating disorders was considered harmful, as it promoted and reinforced unhealthy attitudes or behaviours. This sort of content might be considered helpful for those who have not started on a recovery pathway, but in hindsight is recognised as harmful.

Some described workout or dieting content as being a helpful source of information, in the sense that people who are dissatisfied with their bodies or appearance can find advice or motivation. However, some also acknowledged that this sort of information is not always reliable, and could in fact be counter-productive and reinforce negative ideas around body image.

Participants often struggled to think of other examples of online guidance, resources and support more specifically aimed at helping people who were struggling with issues around body image, and felt it was uncommon for young people to seek this out.

Views about realism, accuracy and authenticity

This section explores young people's views about types of content seen as real, fake, authentic, accurate or realistic in various ways.

How young people talk about realism, accuracy and authenticity

This is a complex topic and participants expressed a range of views about different aspects relating to realism, accuracy and authenticity in the body image content they engage with.

> **"I think it's a force for bad, because I think it kind of gives like an unrealistic image of like, how people are supposed to look like, without like, actually being realistic, especially with like Photoshop and stuff."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"When something is real, they usually start saying facts about it, you know, like giving you information about how this will help."**
>
> MALE, 15, MĀORI, PACIFIC & ASIAN

The key things young people talked about can be categorised as follows:

Representation: Does the content reflect the reality of someone's lifestyle or appearance?

Young people are aware that photos, videos and other content can be, and often are, altered or doctored in various ways. This is particularly relevant to body image because the content people see doesn't necessarily provide an accurate representation of someone's physical appearance.

> **"I would say do your own research because you never know. Most of the stuff people blurt out can be completely fake, and only to get attention and more views on their social media platform."**
>
> MALE, 15, MĀORI, PACIFIC & ASIAN

> **"It can still have an impact on body image because even if it's not real or realistic for them, it can make them feel like 'Why isn't it realistic for me? Why can't I be like this? it makes you think really negative, obviously."**
>
> FEMALE, 14, MĀORI, PACIFIC & NZ EUROPEAN

Young people also talked about the selection or curation of content, and how this can give an unrealistic impression of someone's lifestyle or appearance, regardless of whether images are edited or altered in some way.

> **"I feel like a lot of creators and a lot of influences. Try to base their life as such a perfect image and like to share only the good parts of their life, which makes the their followers and the people that watch their content look at them on a pedestal and see them as such a perfect person, when in reality, they're actually not."**
>
> FEMALE, 14, MĀORI, PACIFIC & NZ EUROPEAN

> **"It's very hard to see if it's real. It's a lot of common sense, and if you don't have a good common sense, and it's really easy to social engineer someone into believing that this is true."**
>
> MALE, 16, ASIAN

Altering and curating content, such as using filters or photo editors or selecting the best selfie from a large number of photos, was seen as common and not necessarily viewed as negative. Rather, these tools can be seen as a way to express yourself or feel good about yourself.

Even so, young people thought that the prevalence of altered and curated content can potentially have negative impacts on body image, even if the content itself isn't seen as negative as such.

Young people were more likely to view content as negative if it was altered in a way perceived to be clearly misleading or fake. A number of participants also mentioned AI content, which is entirely fake but is sometimes presented as real.

Authenticity: Is the content creator being true to who they say they are and what they believe?

The idea of authenticity is most relevant for content that aims to directly influence or inform people about body image, or how to change their appearance (for example, fitness or dieting content).

The perceived authenticity of content is key to whether young people were likely to trust advice or information online or hold a positive opinion about content. Young people were more likely to trust content creators or influencers who appear to be motivated by a genuine desire to inform or inspire people towards some kind of positive outcome.

> **"I think in your mind like what you see online isn't like true. Like, everything you see isn't real, you know, you know like it's not true that people aren't just naturally going to always look how they look online."**
>
> FEMALE, 14, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"It's definitely curated and often biased. It's always kind of drifted one way or the ignoring the other sides of things as well."**
>
> TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

Young people were generally aware that influencers earn money from their content, but this was taken for granted and only seen as problematic if the primary motivation of a content creator is commercial – for example, repeatedly plugging products within content tends to give the impression that a content creator is less authentic.

Accuracy: Is information or advice factual or misleading?

This also relates to content aimed at informing or influencing people. Participants were aware that a lot of information online is false or misleading and this was often mentioned in relation to body image content, as well as content more generally.

> **"I think that those videos are very easy to lie about. And I think that, like, you know, comparing like those videos to like normal people, like, it's not near the same, like, not all people eat salads for every meal. And like, it's, it's like, really far from the truth of like, normal people, plus, like, with the cost of living, like, not people, not many people can afford to live like that and eat like that. I think that it's very unrealistic for like the normal people."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

This includes, for example, information about health or dieting, or beauty techniques, that is false or misleading but presented as true.

Content seen to be false, misleading or dishonest is always viewed negatively, and false information relating to health or dieting (mentioned by a number of participants) is seen as potentially harmful.

Realism: Does the content provide realistic advice or goals, or does it encourage unrealistic expectations?

Young people also talked about content that might be technically factual or true, but can nonetheless be misleading in the sense that it encourages unrealistic expectations, or promises outcomes that might be possible for some people (such as the content creator themselves) but may not be realistic or attainable for other people for various reasons.

Examples include diets or a gym routine that might be motivational or helpful for some people to achieve a certain weight or physique, but potentially have a negative impact or be unhelpful for others depending on the nature of the content and who is engaging with it.

Related to this is content featuring people who have altered their appearance or physique by, for example, using steroids or having cosmetic surgery. Young people who mentioned this type of content generally (but not always) viewed it as negative.

> **"Obviously, probably a lot of dieting and like restricting what they eat. And then like, potentially like plastic surgery and like, like lip fills and like botox and stuff, like hair dye and hair straighteners and hair curlers."**
>
> FEMALE, 14, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"I see a few people on my following pages that have like big hips, big breasts and very small waist and I can kind of tell that they've had surgery on it because of how, you know, petite and perfect their body looks."**
>
> FEMALE, 17, MĀORI & NZ

Do young people know what's real or realistic?

Participants were aware that a lot of content could be unreliable, unrealistic or fake in some way, and many described a level of scepticism and lack of trust in online content. Some participants expressed a high level of confidence in their own ability to determine what is real or realistic, and some (though less common) indicated a low level of confidence. More often, young people felt somewhat confident and acknowledged that it can sometimes be difficult to tell how real something is.

> **"Well, like I always think that how social media is, it's like, very different from our normal life. And not like what everything shown on social media and stuff is like, true, I guess, can be like, I don't know, edited, like, seemed, to like, show the good side of it."**
>
> FEMALE, 17, PACIFIC & ASIAN

> **"I haven't seen them in real life but I guess we just trick our minds into thinking that it is real. I mean, sometimes it is, but it takes a lot of hard work."**
>
> FEMALE, 14, MĀORI

Participants were less likely to express confidence about determining what is real or realistic when talking about young people more generally. This would depend on an individual's level of understanding, maturity, or experience.

A number of young people talked about children not being equipped to understand what is real or realistic, but others also noted that false or misleading information is a broader issue that could affect anyone, including adults.

Determining whether content is real or reliable requires time and effort, and participants' views and behaviour differed in terms of the importance they placed on this. Some did not appear to think much about this or consider it particularly important when engaging with content, while others appeared to be more active or inclined to check whether content is trustworthy.

This also depends on the nature of the content they're viewing and the extent to which they consider potential negative impacts. For example, some young people took time to check or learn more about advice relating to dieting, working out, or health because they acknowledge that unreliable information may have a significant (and potentially negative) impact.

Whether or not young people make extra effort depends on various factors, including their level of trust and familiarity with specific content creators or influencers.

Some mentioned how sophisticated AI-generated content would likely make it increasingly difficult to determine real from fake. The next section goes into more detail about how they tell if information is real or reliable.

How do they tell?

> **"When I think this content is real, I just treat it as real. If I don't think it's real, it's not gonna be real, but yeah, that's one way."**
>
> FEMALE, 16, ASIAN

> **"To be honest, I don't think you can tell If it's real or not, I don't know if you can tell. I don't know if I'm watching real kind stuff, people come up with fake news and stuff like that and that's very dangerous as well, because people really believe it. They make it seem real, but it's really not. And that's what is kind of concerning about my apps now."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, MĀORI & NZ EUROPEAN

People rely on their pre-existing knowledge and understanding when determining if information is accurate, and are more likely to check information if it challenges their beliefs, or comes from a source they perceive to be unreliable. This is the same for young people, and participants often talked about realism or accuracy in relation to trust and familiarity with specific content creators.

The ability to determine accuracy or reliability requires knowing what to look for. For example, a number of young people mentioned the prevalence of advertising or product placement within content, and how this content was perceived to be less authentic and trustworthy. Young people also talked about visual markers that suggest content may be doctored or altered, in images.

Engaging with online content is often about entertainment, leisure and communication, and it appeared to be uncommon for participants to spend significant time and effort checking whether information was accurate or reliable. Participants who hadn't thought much about the potential impacts of what they see and engage with, or who didn't feel this was particularly important, were less likely to take any active steps to check or verify information.

Those who did check information talked about various measures, including checking different sources of information, and seeking subject matter experts perceived as trustworthy. Others relied on the comments of other users within content posted on social media. These participants were more likely to trust information if it was supported by others' comments, and less likely to trust information that was challenged.

Some described finding it easier to discern over time, while others struggled, especially if the content was well-crafted and well-designed.

Most participants had some awareness of how algorithms work. However, it was uncommon to talk about this in relation to perceived accuracy of information, and the role algorithms play in amplifying content that reinforces certain attitudes and viewpoints based on previous engagement with content.

Insights – the diverse experiences of young people

Our diverse group of participants shared broadly similar experiences and views about a range of topics relating to body image. There were some important differences relating to the impact and nature of content they engage with, but the key takeaway is that these issues are seen as relevant for young people regardless of gender, ethnicity or cultural background.

Body image content and gender

It was common for participants to think online content and its impact on body image is an important issue for young people, regardless of gender.

All participants expressed views on content seen as more negative or positive, and young people felt that negative or abusive comments targeted at individuals could affect anyone regardless of gender.

Some types of content are more popular with boys or with girls, but they describe patterns of engagement in broadly similar ways. All participants had engaged with body image content of some kind, and most had engaged with directly relevant content such as gym, dieting, or beauty routines.

Seeing and engaging with some form of body image content – and the associated influence on lifestyle or behaviour – is considered a normal, taken for granted aspect of young people's lives regardless of gender.

Gender differences in engaging with content

Girls and women

> **"Yeah, there's a few girls or you know, people, but it's just people that I see on my For You page that are like, very pretty girls or, you know, whatever. It does make me feel bad about myself because I don't look like them. But at the end of the day, I can't do anything about it. God gave me my body and how I look, so I'm thankful for that."**
>
> FEMALE, 17, MĀORI

> **"Sometimes. I see that it more often girls that don't feel good about their weight and are anorexic, I never really hear about boys being worried about their body image."**
>
> FEMALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

Online content and the impact on body image was considered a big issue regardless of gender, but was often described as more important for girls overall.

A common perception amongst participants was that girls are more likely to see and engage with content which promotes or reinforces unrealistic beauty standards, facial features, or body types.

Abusive comments or behaviour around body image were seen to target girls and women more often than boys and men. Girls were also more likely to express concerns around negative or unwanted content in general, and to talk about difficulties in managing this.

> **"I do think that girls, they definitely get more negative comments about the body and like get told to lose weight. Or change things when guys don't really get that."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, MĀORI.

This was sometimes described in relation to social media algorithms, with girls more often getting served content around dieting and weight loss, for example, regardless of their personal interests and likes.

Content promoting extreme weight loss or encouraging unhealthy behaviour, such as eating disorders, was discussed by girls in both the general and clinical group of participants, while none of the boys mentioned personal experience of this.

On the positive side, girls were much more likely to talk about engaging with content specifically around body positivity and self-acceptance.

Boys and men

> **"And then you look at yours and you're like ok my muscles are forming but why do mine look this shape as opposed to his which are that shape, and then you're like 'aww man really'."**
>
> MALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"That can happen because the algorithms try and recommend different things, which is not a bad thing to try and recommend different videos and a bit more variety into what you watch. But sometimes it can backfire with like, gym videos of people that were jacked, saying this is how men should look and how duh-uh-duh should be."**
>
> MALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

Participants talked about boys engaging with content around fashion, clothing, hairstyles, and fitness. This is more likely to be tailored for a male audience, with popular content more often created by male influencers.

Boys were much more likely to engage with content relating to working out, the gym and building muscle, and were often comfortable talking in detail about how they engaged with this content. Some content was more directed at promoting physical fitness, while some was more focused on building muscle as the primary goal.

> **"Like kind of comparing myself in general I don't actually look that good. So it's good that I got motivated to go to the gym, eat right. I reckon it's pretty good that I got a phone in general and just doing stuff for myself."**
>
> MALE, 15, ASIAN

It appeared to be rare for participants to engage with more extreme forms of bodybuilding content, for example from content creators who are using enhancements such as steroids, and some expressed negative views about this type of content.

Other types of content promoting changes to men's physical appearance, such as looksmaxxing, were seldom mentioned in interviews.

Trans and gender diverse

> **"Oh, yeah, definitely. For me, personally, my body image is like, goes hand in hand with my like, queerness because I am trans. So unfortunately, that's kind of together. But in general body image is a pretty hot topic. And I'd say yeah, in general, like, there are people who have a fairly good view of themselves and I would like to say that I'm one of them. But even people like even people like me who are generally pretty happy and able to recognize that we look okay, you still struggle a bit with it, especially with everything online."**
>
> TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN & OTHER EUROPEAN

> **"I feel like, in general, the trans community is pretty like, open with body image a lot more than the cis community. There's a lot more exploration of the self, which is encouraged, whereas it's not particularly in cis spaces. And they don't have a unifying factor to begin with. So you know, that's also important."**
>
> TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

Some trans or gender diverse participants talked about content and advice relating to gender transition and gender identity. Social media can provide an anonymous and safe space to look for information, engage with like-minded people, find pathways for further resources, and seek advice from known and trusted influencers from the community.

However, content relating to gender identity was not always seen as helpful or reliable, and finding helpful content was sometimes seen as a 'trial and error' exercise for those questioning or wanting to learn more about their gender identity.

Transphobic online content and behaviour appeared to be common and was mentioned by participants of all genders. Trans and gender diverse participants felt this was impossible to avoid, and that otherwise supportive posts or online spaces often received abusive comments.

Culture and ethnicity

Young people's experiences and ways of engaging with content were broadly similar regardless of ethnicity or cultural background. Young people from diverse backgrounds provided different perspectives on this, but most participants didn't seem to have thought much about potential differences, or feel they knew enough to say much about it.

A number of young people mentioned that different cultures or groups often have different beauty standards and ideals, which can influence body image perceptions.

When thinking about ethnic or cultural differences, a number of young people (especially people of colour) mentioned racist online content or behaviour. This was important in relation to body image because this content often focused on physical characteristics (for example skin colour) or appearance (for example types of clothing), and presented these as unattractive or somehow inferior to other groups.

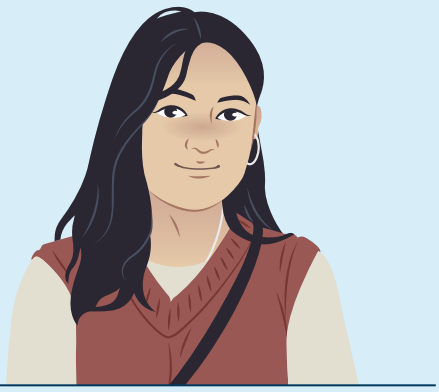
> **"Um since I'm brown, um, there's lots of like, hate and bullying online for people with darker skin and like our culture and all that, the way we do stuff, like who we pray to and, like, just our whole culture, and identity, so yeah, there's like, also bullying online which I really hate because I think our culture is like really beautiful and like, people like to show a lot about it. But people just bring up the negative and it just affected me a lot as well. There was one point where I would like, I don't know, like the negative stuff really got to me, and I'd just like go along with the negative stuff like 'oh yeah that culture is not good', and all that, but then I stopped and I was like, 'Its my culture, I should embrace it'."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, ASIAN

On the positive side, social media allows young people to engage with a wide range of content from influencers or other users who celebrate differences in appearance, style and body types. On the other hand, the dominance of some cultures or ethnic groups online can reinforce more narrow standards around beauty and appearance.

Our diverse group of participants shared a range of experiences and perspectives on body image content and how they engage with it, and we've shared some of these stories below.

> **"You definitely see more stuff online around your culture if you pay enough attention to it, and you keep liking and commenting and stuff, and it keeps coming up on your 'for you' page."**
>
> MALE, 15, MĀORI

> **"It's certainly experienced in a different way because, for example, Pasifika women, I have a lot of poly friends, and from what I've heard is that it's really good to be curvaceous, to have curves, to have a big like, big hips and like, big boobs. You know what I mean for, like, I'm Asian, and for me, it's always been like you have to be really skinny, with being skinny is the only way to be considered pretty. So it is like culture definitely affects your body standard."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT



"For Koreans you have to have like really, really pale like, white skin. And a small pinched nose, like Korean standard, is really specific and not too tall or not too short, but you have to be super skinny."

| FEMALE, 17, ASIAN

People with disabilities

Participants were asked about how experiences and views about body image content might be different for people with disabilities and neurodiverse young people. Some participants talked about how people with disabilities or diverse body types are underrepresented in general, which may reinforce norms or standards around beauty or appearance, and add to a sense of exclusion.

A few mentioned positive content that promotes acceptance of diverse body types including people with disabilities. However, a number of participants mentioned content aimed at mocking or deriding people with disabilities.

> **"Say someone's like, in a wheelchair, or they have, like, Down's Syndrome or autism. People just hate on them for the disability and make them feel bad about themselves. Just because of disability that they can't control."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, MĀORI

> **"I mean I've learned from myself and my other peers with neurodiversity that it's a lot harder to influence them and most of the neurodiverse people I've met don't care quite as much what people say. But then again neurodiverse people still have insecurities even if it's not about physical appearance. I think the insecurities are more about how people perceive or personality."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

Sexuality

> **"Um I think straight people are a little bit more concerned with being normal. Because by being gay, you're already not normal. So why, ya know, why would you bother? That's effort that's not necessary. People aren't gonna like you anyways."**
>
> TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"How other people see them, and like some people don't care about how other people view their sexuality, but some people can be very impacted by it. Especially people who have very like homophobic parents, you can really put a lot of pressure on them, And a lot of people online also feel the same way. So at the same time, where a community can be a really helpful place, connecting with people with the same as you also can be a lot of bad people who infiltrate those communities because it's just recommended to them by the algorithm. So there's a lot of people who are unwelcome, and they just comment negative things which might make a person feel worse, might make the other person defensive and fight back."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Similar to comments about transphobic content or abuse, young people often talked about homophobic content online. This relates to body image in that it denigrates people's appearance or how they act, and can reinforce ideas and stereotypes around masculinity, femininity, and what's considered to be attractive.

Some participants either hadn't thought much about how online content and body image might affect non-heterosexual young people, or didn't feel they knew enough to comment on this. Some commented on gender expectations in relation to body image and sexuality, and about differences in content young people engage with. Others, including LGBTQI+ participants, tended to think that sexuality wasn't a significant factor in how young people engage with content, and that gender differences were more important.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS ON THE IMPACTS OF BODY IMAGE CONTENT (PART 2)

> You've got anyone from movie stars to just regular everyday people. You finally get to see people in between and it gets a lot closer to home. And now you're going okay, well, that is something that reasonably I should be able to achieve.
>
> GENDER DIVERSE 17, NZ EUROPEAN

> It was about 'this is what you should look like.' Then as I got older, it was about 'this is how you do it.' You need to eat healthier. You need to go outside and, go for a run or something. You need to follow this diet. Growing up I started engaging with these things on social media, and realised how people could fall into that trap.
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> When you think about social media, it's all about people's highlight reels and you only really seeing the best of everyone. As a teenager, we're pretty insecure. I think that's pretty natural for most of us to feel not unsafe, but vulnerable when you're online. We're looking at what everyone else is doing and sometimes that's pretty pressurising.
>
> FEMALE, 15, ASIAN

> It depends if a person has been struggling with body, emotions, and eating issues... different for everyone and everyone's gonna have different experiences, but it really just depends on the person.
>
> FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

> If I saw a video once, I'd probably just go, 'Oh, that guy's probably just lying.' And then if I saw it a couple more times from other people, I'd be like, 'Oh, he must be telling the truth. So better go check this out.
>
> MALE, 14, OTHER EUROPEAN

What young people think about online content and the impact on body image

Does online content have a big influence on body image?

> **"Oh, it's definitely a big deal. It's a big deal for like, everyone."**
>
> TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

All participants believed that body image content online has an influence or impact on how young people think and feel about body image, in both positive and negative ways.

As discussed earlier, most thought the impact of body image content was significant and important for young people generally, especially for girls. Young people expressed different views about the relative importance of online content compared to the influence of friends, family and various other factors.

Young people talked about online materials of all kinds influencing perceptions of body image. From early exposure to the idealised characters featured in children's movies, games, and TV programmes, to the variety of content they engage with on social media as they get older, young people are presented with portrayals of what is acceptable or desirable.

Overall, most participants believed social media was a primary source of influence in shaping ideas about body image, that it becomes increasingly important over time, and can become the dominant influence during young people's teenage years, regardless of gender. The influence may relate to comparing themselves to others and informing attitudes, beliefs and behaviour around appearance, fitness and style.

They also expressed a range of views about how this influence could be more positive or more negative, and how and why the impact varies amongst individuals. Social media content can reinforce common ideals of what is beautiful, healthy or attractive. It can also help people explore their identity and express themselves, and promote awareness and acceptance of diverse body types and appearance.

How and why the impact is different for everyone

> **"Some people might see it as inspiring and life changing if it's to do with weight loss and maybe it'll help them reach their goals and stuff. But then for some other people, they'll compare what they do, to what the ideal way of doing it, like that might throw them off forever."**
>
> FEMALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"Like, personally, I don't really get passionate when I see people that are skinny and stuff. If I saw something like that, I wouldn't really like mind because it just makes me want to get motivated and look like that."**
>
> MALE, 14, MĀORI

> **"It just depends on the person. Like, some people will just take that kind of thing to heart. And then there's other people, like me, who just kind of ignore that kind of thing."**
>
> MALE, 16, MĀORI & NZ EUROPEAN

The ways in which body image content impacts or influences young people vary significantly amongst individuals. One of the key takeaways from this research is that we can't make assumptions about the type of content individuals engage with and why, or about the nature of impacts and the importance of this in their lives.

While there are many similarities, everyone is ultimately seeing different types of content, engaging with it in different ways, and doing so for different reasons.

Differences in personal impact

Individuals' experiences and perceptions of personal impact or influence vary significantly. Some expressed a high level of awareness in relation to the impact on them personally, while others hadn't reflected on this in depth, or they didn't think it was especially important.

Amongst the young people we talked to, experience of negative impacts varied on a spectrum from little or no perceived impact for some to quite severe impacts for others. Likewise, some described personal impacts as mostly positive, some as mostly negative. Some described 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. Some described specific content as having a profound impact on changing perceptions around body image that led to long-term benefits to their mental health and wellbeing.

Views about why the impact varies amongst individuals

Young people also expressed a range of views on why content might have more positive or negative impacts on others. The same content can be perceived as having a more positive or negative impact depending on who is engaging with it, how confident they feel regarding their own body image, their perception of whether advice or guidance is achievable for them, or how they might be feeling at any given time.

Participants described this in various ways, sometimes characterising negative impacts (if any) as resulting from the negative attitudes or beliefs of the person affected, or a lack of motivation, without acknowledging there might be something negative about the content itself.

Others talked about this in more empathetic ways. For example, content promoting changes in appearance, weight or physique might be unachievable for some people due to their body type. Some felt people might be negatively impacted due to low self-esteem and body confidence, experiences with bullying, mental health issues, or various other reasons. This view closely aligned with the personal experiences of other participants, some of whom described the personal impacts of content in relation to ongoing struggles with body image.

Differences in response to body image content

Due to these and other factors, young people's responses to content are highly individualised and personal. This means that content could be seen as positive or negative depending on who is engaging with it and how they feel at that point in time.

Being self-confident and in a positive mindset and environment makes people more likely to react to the content positively. They focus on self-care, enjoy experimenting with clothes and make-up tips, and are less likely to make negative comparisons. However, some talked about how even the most positive content could have a negative impact on someone viewing it from a vulnerable position. For example, groups of friends trying on clothes and having fun, while positive to most, can also cement feelings of failure and social isolation in others. As such, body image content isn't always easily or consistently categorised into wholly good or bad categories.

The importance of experience, knowledge or maturity

An individual's level of experience, knowledge or maturity was often seen as very important in terms of the impact of content and how young people manage this. Participants felt that less mature young people (whether children or teens) were more swayed by what others thought, trying to please others and fit into the idealised norms promoted online. Participants agreed that young people who were more knowledgeable or experienced could be more rational and critical about the content they see, thereby lessening its impacts, and more able to discern if content is trustworthy or reliable. They might also be more capable of implementing more effective strategies for avoiding or managing the impact of content considered negative or unwanted, which lessens the overall impact even further.

Additional factors that can change the impact of content

Does the amount and frequency of viewing content make a difference?

Participants generally agreed that the impact is likely to be increased if young people see or engage with content more often and over a longer period of time. In relation to this, some mentioned the idea of a feedback loop relating to algorithms and what people see in their feeds. They were aware that the more someone sees or engages with content, the more likely it is that they will see similar content and therefore increase the impact overall.

However, a number of participants also mentioned that the impact of negative or unwanted content can be significant even when engagement is fleeting.

Does it matter who created or shared content?

Participants were asked for their views about whether the impact or influence of content might be different depending on who created it, and how it was shared.

Some thought this wasn't especially important, noting that people will typically see content from a variety of sources and that content could be influential or impactful regardless.

More often, participants felt that who created content and how it was shared was significant for various reasons. Content was generally seen to have a greater impact (either positive or negative) if it came from:

Friends or other people they know personally

In general, content shared by friends is more likely to be seen as positive or trustworthy. However, negative comments, messages or posts can also have a bigger impact if they come from friends. Content from other young people in their wider peer group (such as people in their school) is also likely to have a higher impact compared with strangers or people they have no direct connection with. This can include unwanted or negative comments or posts, or bullying behaviour.

Influencers, celebrities or other content creators who are trending or have a large following

Content creators considered to be popular, or trusted by others, are seen to be more influential. This can relate to the number of followers they have, how well-known they are amongst friends or other young people, or the level of support or criticism they receive in comments. Some young people we talked with appeared to rely heavily on this, and were less likely to be mistrustful or critical if a content creator is viewed positively by others. This might include reviewing the number of likes on a post or the balance of positive and negative comments they've received.

Content creators they know and trust

Content from influencers and creators young people have followed for a long period of time, or they view as authentic and trustworthy, is seen to be more influential. Some young people relied more on their own knowledge and experience to determine if content is positive or reliable, rather than the number of followers or the opinions of others (for example comments from other users).

How content is presented – does the format/ type of content make a difference?

Participants were asked about the format or type of content and how this relates to its impact – for example images, videos, or facts and figures.

Young people often thought images and videos had a greater impact or influence. However, some thought this wasn't especially important, noting that people will typically see content in various ways and that content could be influential or impactful regardless.

Do perceptions of realism or accuracy change the impact?

> **"I mean, I've done a little bit more research when it comes to fitness stuff, outside of social media. So that, for me, I feel like it's a bit easier to tell than when I first started looking at that kind of stuff. But yeah, it can be hard to tell because everyone will swear on their mum that it's true. And then it won't be."**
>
> TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

When speaking about young people generally, participants often thought that content is more likely to have a significant negative influence if it is misleading, false, or unrealistic. This is because some people might not have sufficient experience or knowledge to tell what is or isn't true or realistic.

This was seen as especially important in relation to children and people younger than them. However, some also noted that distinguishing between reliable or false information wasn't only a problem for young people, but adults as well – especially adults who are less tech-savvy or experienced with social media.

Participants were also asked about the impact of content that they know or believe to be unrealistic, false or misleading. Opinions differed on this, but young people often thought that content understood as unreliable, unrealistic or fake was less impactful or influential.

However, several participants also acknowledged that unrealistic content, for example images featuring unattainable beauty standards, could have an impact even when young people (including themselves) are aware that it has likely been altered or curated in some way. They felt that continuously seeing this content in their feeds can still leave an impression on how they think and feel about body image, and can in some ways serve as an aspirational goal or basis for comparison, even though they know it's unrealistic or unattainable.

Some felt it was unavoidable for themselves and others to be influenced in some way by what they see as comparing themselves to others was natural and ingrained regardless of the type of content they're seeing.

> **"Even if it's fake, I think it can have an impact... people still think, ah, you know, these people think that I should be doing this much, so maybe I should be."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Views about age differences

As discussed earlier, participants felt that experience, knowledge or maturity was seen as very important in terms of the impact of content and how young people manage this. This was often, but not always, described as something that grows with age. Many talked about children, and to a lesser extent younger teens, as being more vulnerable or susceptible to the influence or impact of content.

Some felt that children were less likely to be influenced because they're less aware or concerned about body image compared with teens. The impact could also be described as more important for teenagers overall, but significant and sometimes harmful for some children who may be especially vulnerable to these impacts.

Some felt that body image content could have a strong influence regardless of age. Rather than describing this in terms of greater or lesser influence, some framed this around the evolving nature of content children and young people engage with, and how impacts change over time.

Children and younger teens

As mentioned above, some participants felt that children and younger teens were less likely to be impacted by body image content, while others felt the impact would be greater.

> **"Social media has a huge impact on body image. And I mean, I remember watching videos when I was probably six years old, just the videos come up on your feed, and you're bored. So you press on it [...] and little six-year-old me was learning about, like, how Victoria's Secret models would starve themselves and stuff. And I think all those things collected in my head."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"Well, I think children might be more impacted by it because they'll be less aware. Teens will have learned that a lot of stuff is fake, and you shouldn't listen to it, whereas younger people will be less aware of that and they'll believe more and so it can impact them more."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"I think for me, I think early internet access can be really harmful for people, because when I was very young and struggling with this, I didn't have a phone, but I still had access to the internet. Now we have AI that can control everything you see but it was basically humans doing that before. I remember just looking at it, and just comparing myself to all these models and things and that's kind of I think, what started to really affect it."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Many participants expressed concern about children being exposed to body image content too early, and the often negative influence this can have, especially for underage children who are using social media.

Their concern was often about young girls specifically. For example, young people talked about seeing three to 11-year-old girls adapting their appearance and behaviour to look like what they commonly see online. They had seen children presenting, on and offline, as much older in appearance than their true age. Several young people raised concerns over the perceived sexualisation of younger girls in real life, and that social media is an important influence due to the online content these girls are modelling themselves on. Some participants felt this was happening with younger and younger girls, as they have more access to social media channels.

> **"A lot of people, especially young people I see now, are posting videos that 20-year-olds post. And they get younger and younger. And these kids have been introduced to social media at such young ages, literally like five, six already making these videos that I wouldn't even do yet."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Some participants were able to talk about this from personal experience, describing sometimes harmful and highly impactful experiences with body image and social media when they were very young.

Older teens

> **"Coming out of my eating disorder - this was my personal preference, but facts too, I wasn't allowed much social media. But as soon as I got on there, I unfollowed all the accounts that I knew were bad for me. All the ones that have diet culture models, all of that stuff. There's this thing where if you're scrolling and you don't like a video, you can press 'I don't like', or you can do keywords. And you can do this on just one video or you can go into settings and this is with all apps. I've had it with Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, Pinterest, all of those. And you can go and you can put keywords of things that you can think of that you don't want in it."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, OTHER EUROPEAN

Participants generally agreed that young people are less likely to be uncritical or easily influenced by some types of content as they gain knowledge, experience and maturity with age. However, while the nature of influence and how they engage with content changes, this doesn't necessarily mean the overall impact diminishes over time or stops being important.

> **"I was way too confident in my younger self. It was just like, selfies of myself. Like random stuff. I don't know. As I grew up I just felt like it was so unnecessary to post this stuff. I don't think anyone wants to see your younger self. So I just deleted them. Because I don't know, they're just so unnecessary to me."**
>
> FEMALE, 17, PACIFIC & ASIAN

On the positive side, participants talked about how online content helps young people learn and grow more confident in their attitudes, beliefs, and identities. On the other hand, the nature of social media means that potentially negative or unhelpful attitudes and beliefs can also be reinforced over time, and that content can be used to validate these beliefs. A number of participants talked about their own experiences of changing impacts over time, which is discussed in more detail later in this report.

How content influences attitudes and behaviour

Pressure, comparisons, and the influence on body confidence

> **"Like, unrealistic appearances, sometimes there's photos that are artificially enhanced to make people, especially girls, look better. It's an unrealistic standard they seem to want to uphold. Same with men with like bodybuilding, people that are extremely jacked who say they've done it naturally and probably have done steroids or it's been an edited photo and people have to try and get to that standard."**
>
> MALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"I do know some other people my age that are definitely body inclined and they hate the way they look. And they keep comparing themselves to online standards."**
>
> MALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"There was one that was like, the ugly calculator, you'd take a photo of your face and it'd say Oh, you're 60% ugly, your eyebrows are wonky and this is wonky. I mean now I think about it I laugh, but at that time I went oh my god, I'm 60% ugly and it was a computer that was determining that your face is wonky, your nose is too big."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

As discussed earlier, all participants believed that body image content online has an influence and impact on how young people think and feel about body image, whether positive or negative. Young people talked about a variety of impacts, but the most common overall theme was the belief that online content is adding to pressures around body image and comparing themselves to others.

Social media provides a continuous flow of content featuring people looking good, attractive, healthy and stylish. This includes a broad range of content, including content directly promoting changes in body or appearance. Comparing ourselves to others is at the core of body image, and social media extends young people's basis for comparison in a way that wasn't possible for earlier generations.

Most participants thought this was having an important impact on young people generally regardless of gender. Many thought the overall impact tended to be greater for girls, while some felt the impact was just as important for boys, but that they were less likely to acknowledge how they felt about it.

During the course of the interviews it became clear that all participants had some experience of feeling pressure around how they looked, and comparing themselves to others online. Very few of the young people we spoke to felt they met the standard of how they wanted to look; all commented on something they felt needed to change – regardless of culture, ethnicity, gender, or age.

Some talked about this in a matter-of-fact way. Instead of being negative or positive, it's just assumed to be normal. Some, especially boys, framed it in more positive terms. Those expressing more confidence in how they look might consider body image content to be aspirational or motivational, even while acknowledging a sense of pressure and the need to measure up to standards around appearance and physique. These young people might describe potential downsides, but appeared to take it for granted that having specific goals around changing their physique or appearance, and taking active steps towards those goals (with the assistance of online influencers) is just the way things are.

In contrast, many participants talked about the pervasiveness of body image content, and how this has led to changing norms and increased pressure around body image in a way that's different to earlier generations who didn't grow up with this. For some, it wasn't just about people seeing positive or negative content, but that even content meant to be helpful or motivational can add to existing pressures by providing a steady stream of messages about how to feel better, be healthier, look better, be more popular, be fashionable, and so on.

> **"Most of the people [males] you see online are built and have good hair and stuff. I feel like if I start gaining muscle and getting a better physique, then I'd be happy with myself. Then, I can look at myself in the mirror and say like, ohh damn, I look good."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Young people talked about the continuous flow of content depicting the ideal standard as the norm, and how this sets an image in their head about how they and others should look. Even though most people don't match this ideal standard, young people talked about a sense of pressure to look like people they see online, and how this can encourage unrealistic expectations about themselves and others. There is a recognition that certain aspects of one's body cannot be changed, and there is a struggle between acceptance and the desire to fit into societal ideals.

The pressure to meet this standard is a shared experience, but the resulting impacts can vary dramatically. Some described feeling dissatisfied or unhappy with their body and appearance, and how online content can foster insecurities about their own appearance. In some cases this starts a negative feedback loop of engaging more with content that reinforces feelings of inadequacy. Some described a strong impact in relation to depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues relating to body image, including eating disorders.

> **"...definitely, like bust and butt size is definitely a really big one, but also, Like, actually, literally everything, like waist, hips, shoulders, arms, nose, jawline, eyes, ankles."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"...when you're on your phone all day, and you're scrolling, and you're seeing people who have the feature that you want. It's easy to be like, how come they have it? I don't."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

The influence on attitudes and beliefs

This section covers the influence of body image content on attitudes and beliefs about appearance, what is attractive, healthy, desirable, or achievable. This includes attitudes and beliefs around how people should look, whether people should take active steps to achieve goals and how, and attitudes about content and the messages conveyed or promoted.

It was generally taken for granted that online content has an influence on beliefs and ideas around body image, in positive or negative ways. The perceived importance of this varied amongst individuals. Some described this as one influence amongst many, for example friends and family. Others appeared to rely heavily on messages they get from like-minded people on social media, and don't consider alternative views as useful or valid.

> **"And just because for women, there tends to be like a lot more specific. You have to do this and we have to do this and we have to do this and you have to work with this. And you can't have this but you have to have this and you're not allowed to breathe. For men there's still an extremely unrealistic expectation of like how you have to look how you have to be like how much are you eating? Are you exercising daily? Because if you're weak then you're not a man."**
>
> TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN & OTHER EUROPEAN

Participants expressed a range of perspectives on this. Some felt that striving to change your appearance is normal, achievable, and generally positive. These perspectives often align with the messages conveyed in content around dieting and working out, and they tended to view this content more positively.

Some focused more on the importance of self-acceptance, and supported the idea that changing your body to achieve (often unrealistic) goals can be harmful or counterproductive. These participants talked about body-positive content, and the positive ways it has informed their attitudes and beliefs.

> **"This generation has really made an effort to make everyone more included and more comfortable, and just feel better about themselves personally, with a lot of creators really pushing positive self image while also being comfortable in your gender, whether that be female, male, they them, etc. Therefore, it is very inclusive nowadays, compared to maybe a couple years back. I think that has a positive impact on everyone's day to day. There are still some negatives because there is such a big platform where everyone can just share their opinion. And there can be some quite negative opinions."**
>
> FEMALE, 14, MĀORI, PACIFIC & NZ EUROPEAN

As discussed previously, the impact of body image content can change over time, and some participants described how their attitudes and beliefs have become more positive or healthy, which is in part informed by the content they engage with.

The influence on behaviour

Participants talked about how body image content influences young people's behaviour in various ways, both positive and negative.

> **"Doesn't matter if it's a really buff guy or really skinny girl, you're going to want to get to your ideal results as quick as possible."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Young people often talked about this from their own experience. 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. This ranged from advice about losing weight and going to the gym to make-up, style, and beauty techniques.

> **"I'm trying to go to the gym and I wanna gain weight, but it's really hard because I've got a high metabolism. We just call each other fat as banter, but we're not really."**
>
> MALE, 16, OTHER EUROPEAN

Active engagement with this content, and associated influences on lifestyle and behaviour (for example dieting and gym routines), was common for our participants and was considered typical and commonplace among young people generally. Young peoples' thoughts, feelings and behaviour around body image need to be understood in this context.

> **"I've actually gotten help dieting a lot through this. YouTube has really good videos on how to build your body and getting a nice shape. Or you could like, like, instead of social media, you can ask someone else. YouTube has like a really good videos on what to eat, what to not eat, so you could get into this shape. And yeah, I've done that for the last year. And I honestly think it was a good start for me, because I've changed a lot from that."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, PACIFIC & ASIAN

Young people talked about the influence on dieting and meal plans, workout routines, beauty and make-up techniques, style and clothing, and decisions about products to buy. This influence is often described positively amongst our participants. However, some also talked about previous experiences of how body image content contributed to negative or unhealthy behaviour, especially in relation to dieting. Girls in the clinical group of participants were more likely to talk about weight loss content and the influence on their own behaviour, which is discussed in more detail later in this report.

> **I'd look at, like, the workout videos. To figure out what I could do in my house without gym equipment...like, I'd use the information I saw on the videos.**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"I mean for me I think it's good because to be honest with you I'm over weight and I'm trying to build that down and trying to get muscles so I look better you know. That's why I really go to the gym."**
>
> MALE, 15, ASIAN

> **"I guess just always being reminded to just do better. Like I was always reminded to eat less, do more workout. And like every day, just think about how to make my body look better because of social media."**
>
> FEMALE, 14, MĀORI

The influence on emotions, mental health and wellbeing

> **"I think it's mainly something that people will just come across, but that's definitely the design of TikTok to put that kind of stuff in while you're scrolling. Because it loves sending you down pipelines, but just for the number of likes it has, or people who aren't as aware of what an eating disorder is, or just that kind of stuff. People might look at that and think, that sounds like a good idea to me. And then go down that kind of road without realising it."**
>
> TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"Even if they see this video, of let's say, a not real AI generated person. They'd be like, 'I know it's not real, but I would still like to be like that person.'"**
>
> MALE, 15, OTHER EUROPEAN

> **"It can be something that starts as harmless but it can very much impact people's lives and then result in extreme cases of bullying, which can result in people thinking that they're not good, they're not good looking. And it can also mean that people can get really depressed by it."**
>
> MALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"A friend did go online to try to seek out dieting tips. And I think the inspiration wasn't healthy or positive. It was very, I guess, strict dieting type things. And that spiraled a bit and led to more restrictive, very, like, almost dangerous, dieting. It's quite a negative thing for her"**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Many participants talked about how engagement with body image content can impact on mental health and emotional wellbeing, in relation to their own experience, people they know, or young people generally.

As discussed earlier in this report, body-positive content can play a key role in helping young people who are struggling with issues around body image. In addition, young people described a variety of benefits to their emotional wellbeing. This included feeling connected to others and sharing enjoyable experiences, building confidence and affirmation of their appearance or expressing themselves by trying out different styles, and a sense of achievement through reaching a goal around fitness or appearance.

Negative impacts described range from mild to severe. These include feelings of inadequacy, insecurity or dissatisfaction with their body, and obsessive thoughts and behaviours around dieting and weight. Engagement with body image content was seen as a contributing factor for eating disorders, which we discuss in more detail in the section about clinical participants.

Negative impacts were sometimes described as building subtly, relating to the frequency of seeing harmful or unwanted content, and exposure to content when very young. These included compounded feelings of increased isolation, feeling unable to talk about how they feel, and increasing engagement with potentially harmful content.

Young people talked about the pressure to conform to sometimes unattainable standards, and how this can encourage restrictive dieting, body checking, and obsessive monitoring of their appearance.

The proliferation of workout routines and "What I Eat in a Day" videos on social media platforms presents another challenge. While these videos can promote healthy habits, young people can also feel pressured to emulate these lifestyles, potentially leading to unhealthy eating patterns and exercise regimes. Young people talked about how social media algorithms further compound the problem by frequently recommending dieting and weight loss content, especially to users who have shown an interest in such topics. This can contribute to a cycle where young people, particularly those already vulnerable, are continually exposed to triggering or potentially harmful material.

Negative or abusive online content and behaviour relating to people's body or appearance was often talked about as having a significant impact on emotional wellbeing and mental health. Harmful online communications targeting individuals were seen as especially harmful. This included bullying, body shaming and sending nude or sexual images without consent. One participant shared an experience of a friend suiciding after nude images were shared without his content.

> **"I've been bullied by so many people. But I don't really listen to what they have to say. But I do still try to watch the things that I do post."**
>
> FEMALE, 17, MĀORI & NZ EUROPEAN

> **"Um it happened to my best mate on different accounts. She got to a point where she had to get the police involved, because we knew the person who was doing it and my mate got the police involved because he was posting stuff about her, putting her face on stuff and saying that she was a stripper."**
>
> FEMALE, 14, NZ EUROPEAN

Insights – the diverse experiences of young people

Young people think body image content can have an impact regardless of gender, ethnicity or cultural background, but also talked about some important differences.

Body image content and gender (impacts)

> **"Some boys might want to be really skinny. There's boys who suffer from eating disorders, but some boys who want to be really buff. There's some girls who want to be really buff there's some girls who want to be really skinny. The ideal pushing you might be different, but in the end, same result."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"Recently, there's been a lot of guy TikToks, videos and stuff that are like, you have to gain muscle. But for girls, it's, you need to lose weight. Do these exercises, get abs and stuff. And I think it's a similar message, but I guess just for different genders."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

All participants expressed views about positive and negative impacts. It was common for participants, regardless of gender, to believe online content can have a significant influence or impact on young people's attitudes, behaviours and mental wellbeing.

Feelings of pressure and comparing themselves to others was the most common impact discussed, and was seen as important regardless of gender. People of any gender face unrealistic expectations regarding body image, and constant exposure to ideals can lead to body dissatisfaction and negative self-perception.

Gender differences in impact/influence

Boys and men

> **"For me it was when I started getting muscle definition and that, people always just want more, they want to look stronger – look stronger than their mates and bigger, broader."**
>
> MALE, 16, MĀORI

Boys often talked about engagement with content relating to fitness, working out, and building their muscles and physique. Engagement with this content, and the direct influence on their behaviour, was generally seen as common. They were less likely to talk in detail about negative impacts and pressures around how they look, but all expressed desires or goals to change something about their appearance.

Girls and women

> **"When I wasn't on social media I never knew anything about body image. I never struggled with things like that and then as soon as I hopped on Tik Tok or Instagram, I think then the picture came into mind. Cause it's when you see all the girls that are your age, or supposed to be your age, or even just older. All of them looking unhealthily skinny and advertising stuff like that. And it kind of puts an image in your mind that you aren't like them and you're supposed to look like them. So I think just, some influencers are just known to be really thin."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN)

> **"I think it's when you see people posting only perfect stuff. You think to yourself, what am I doing. What could I be doing to make me look more like them? Even if that's not really what they look like?"**
>
> FEMALE, 15, ASIAN

Impacts of body image content were often described as important for everyone, but a bigger issue for girls. Girls were more likely to discuss negative experiences and to be deeply affected by these. Girls tended to be more self-reflective about these impacts, and more likely to seek out positive content.

Young people often talked about girls and women facing more intense scrutiny and demanding standards relating to their weight and physical appearance, and how this can be compounded by content on social media. This includes hateful and abusive comments or behaviour, which are seen to more often target women and girls based on their body and appearance.

Serious mental health issues, such as eating disorders, were discussed by girls in both the general and clinical group of participants, while none of the boys mentioned personal experience of this.

Trans and gender diverse

Trans and gender diverse participants all felt body image and online content was an important issue.

These participants talked about the important role of online content in shaping their views about gender identity, and sometimes faced heightened scrutiny about how they looked. Some talked about challenges in conforming to societal expectations of body image, particularly in relation to transitioning. This can be especially difficult when trying to align with stereotypical gender norms and expectations around masculinity and femininity.

They talked about social media as a place to find support, and to ask questions they were uncomfortable asking in person. However, social media was also described as a place of hatred and bigotry, and this appeared to be impossible to avoid.

Trans and gender diverse participants had all faced these challenges, and found ways to positively engage online while demonstrating resilience in managing the impact of negative content.

> **"With gender diverse people, lots of bigotry, transphobia, lots of people who invalidate who they are. A lot of things can make them feel gender dysphoria. For example, seeing a really skinny girl might be like, 'oh, I want to be like her'. Or seeing a really skinny boy and feel like, 'oh, I want to be like him'. So, you know, and at the end of the day, if you have an anorexic boy, anorexic girl, anorexic gender diverse people, I think they all want the same result. They want to be really skinny. Yeah, it just depends what they see."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Culture and ethnicity

Young people reported broadly similar impacts of online content regardless of culture or ethnicity, and the range of impacts sits along the same spectrum.

A number of young people talked about how different cultures or ethnicities can be associated with different beauty standards and attitudes around body image, which can influence body image perceptions.

Pressures around body image and comparisons with online content are an issue for all young people, and these impacts can be different for young people who feel they don't fit the dominant beauty standards of their culture or the global media landscape. The impact can be compounded by racist online content or behaviour.

Some young people whose parents grew up in a different culture can describe cultural differences between them and their parents as a barrier to communication and understanding in relation to body image issues. However, their peer group, and what they see most online, has a bigger influence on them.

On the positive side, some young people talked about the positive impact of content from influencers or other users who celebrate differences in appearance, culture, style and body types.

Our diverse group of participants shared a range of experiences and perspectives on the impacts of body image content, and we've shared some of these stories below.

> **"It doesn't matter what ethnic or cultural background you come from there will be if you're looking for something specific there will be something with that particular cultural or ethnic background for you."**
>
> MALE, 16, MĀORI

> **"Yeah, like it gets to a point where people seem like the same type of people. Blonde, skinny girl. Like, yeah, it gets annoying."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, PACIFIC & ASIAN

> **"As a Pacific Islander sometimes I see beauty standards which I don't feel very included in because nowadays the beauty standards are very different. And they are quite pākehā based with small noses or straight hair, fair skin, freckles, blue eyes, that kind of stuff. You just feel quiet hurt in some ways to see that because you don't feel the prettiest as yourself when you're just constantly seeing those beauty standards. Not you, like it can never be you. And body wise, it's quite thin or curvy in some ways. Which is really harsh. It's really hard to relate to that or try to live up to those beauty standards."**
>
> FEMALE, 14, MĀORI, PACIFIC & NZ EUROPEAN

> **"Nowadays social media is quite more inclusive of everybody. And there are much more Pacific Islander and Māori influencers making content to really include us and share their experiences that may we may relate to, which I'm very grateful to see so I don't feel excluded. Nowadays, there's more of the same kind of people like me that I can relate to. Especially with my Pacific Islander Māori whakapapa. So yeah, I think there are many positives to that. And I'm forever very grateful for it, and thankful."**
>
> FEMALE, 14, MĀORI, PACIFIC & NZ EUROPEAN

> **"Um, yeah, it affects everyone, no matter their race, gender or any of the sort like, it's something that a lot of people experience because it's normalised now. Like, you'll see people on social media sites complaining about a feature that you'd always wanted, and then you sit there thinking, 'I wish I had that, but you're complaining about it'."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

People with disabilities

Participants were asked about how experiences and views about body image content might be different for people with disabilities and neurodiverse young people, and expressed various perspectives on this.

Some participants talked about how people with disabilities or diverse body types might feel additional pressures around achieving unattainable norms and standards about bodies and appearance, and positive and supportive content was also mentioned.

Sexuality

> **"With gay people, or bi people, or transgender or something like that. There's always somebody out there that experienced the same thing as them and want to give other people advice, and try to help them get through it in a way that they couldn't."**
>
> FEMALE, 17, MĀORI & NZ EUROPEAN

It was uncommon for participants to think sexuality was especially significant in relation to body image content and its impact, with issues around gender identity being more important. Participants often talked about the impact of homophobic content and abuse when thinking about the question, and some noted how gender norms and expectations around masculinity and femininity could have an impact on how LGBTQI+people think and feel about their appearance and how they express themselves.

Insights from young people receiving clinical care

Participants receiving care for eating disorders and related mental health issues provided valuable insights on a wide range of topics covered in this research, and their perspectives have been included throughout this report.

The quotes below provide additional insights about their experiences with body image content and its impact, and we will be providing more in-depth information and analysis in our planned online resource based on this research.

> **"Looking back, I actually wasn't [big]. I was very normal for my age, and I was a very normal weight and size for my age, but it just made me seem quite a bit bigger than these girls that were smaller than me."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"Because they're [fitness videos] like, 'Oh, I eat so healthy. I do so much exercise', you know, and... just really... showing off their body and that, because that's... where they get their money, is from their body."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"I think it didn't really matter if it was bad or good, I'd still watch anyway. Like, it didn't matter the consequences. I still do it. Yeah, I still watch it."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"There's been like cases recently where people have gone wild for having the skinniest waist, and then you see another video, and people in the comments saying 'I want to be this skinny' and then you see the walls like moving and you realise that's it's not even real."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"...when you're on your phone all day, and you're scrolling, and you're seeing people who have the feature that you want. It's easy to be like, how come they have it? I don't."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"I think a lot of guys don't realise that men can get plastic surgery too to make them look more fit and strong. Like, get ab implants and stuff like that."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"When I was younger, it was just like, Oh, this is just how I am. I just have a big appetite. I just accepted that that's how I was. But when I started going online, I was like, oh, there's all these things. I can track my calories, and I can do more exercise, and I can just stop eating as much, and I can get smaller, like my friends are."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"I think it's a force for bad because I think it gives like an unrealistic image of how people are supposed to look. Especially with Photoshop and stuff, because it's difficult to tell if it's actually true, and so a lot of people end up like comparing themselves, even though it could just be all about angles or photoshopping."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"Because I'm anorexic there'd be a lot of stuff about dieting and food and all that because for some reason, whenever you mention something in real life, it just suddenly pops up you're your page. And so they always gave me things about, like, dieting, weight and stuff, which I would always have a panic attack."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"...there's quite a lot of videos on the internet of people who are struggling with anorexia or eating disorders, and they do something called body checking, which is basically just standing in front of the camera, but they are obviously very unwell, and you read the comments, aww you're so beautiful, I want my body to be like yours, like, and it's really bad on both sides, because first thing, the comments are endorsing this person's illness, when they really need help...some people are so deep in the eating disorder, they don't understand that they can be doing harm."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

The changing impact of body image content over time

Some young people talked about how their experience with body image and online content has changed over time, and shifted towards being more positive.

This could be described in a more general way, about increasingly seeing content that they like or makes them feel confident. Some talked about being less influenced or negatively impacted as they become more confident, experienced and knowledgeable, both in the way they engage with content, and in their own attitudes and beliefs.

> **"I think now it's becoming more understood that it's not ok. A lot of people that I know talk about what is healthy and what isn't healthy in terms of what you're seeing on social media and now that I'm older I've realised what's good for me to be seeing and what's not. People who are younger and haven't had that experience, like maybe early teenagers, they're not going to realise that's initially how it's gonna be. As you get older, you mature and you see how things really are outside of social media. So I think yeah, that's kind of how it is."**
>
> FEMALE, 17, EUROPEAN

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

Young people told us that social media and other online content often played an important role in these negative experiences. This includes young people who described personal experiences with low self-esteem and body confidence, bullying, and mental health issues relating to body image, including eating disorders.

> **"I got a phone and I started engaging in content on it. At first, I would see other girls and see what they look like... it wasn't really about food or eating. It was just kind of about what you should look like. And then as I got older, it was 'this is how you do it'. You need to eat healthier. You need to go outside and go for a run or something. You need to follow this diet. Growing up, I always felt really stupid, but then I started engaging with these things on social media, and I realised how people could kind of fall into that trap."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

In this sense, body image content can be seen as a problem for young people struggling with body image issues, but it can also be viewed as part of the solution. Young people talked about engaging with more body-positive and helpful content as they got older, and how it has helped them deal with body image issues and their emotional responses to negative content. As noted earlier, some described specific content as having a profound impact on changing their attitudes and beliefs around body image that led to long-term benefits to their mental health and wellbeing.

> **"When I was dealing with my eating disorder I wanted to post my fitness videos. But after recovery, I decided that it wasn't what I wanted. I wanted to do everyday life stuff, but then also spread information about how to deal with eating disorders and stuff, just for more knowledge for people and helping people in a bad state of mind."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, OTHER EUROPEAN

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE WANT (PART 3)

I don't think that previous generations would be able to understand a lot of what younger people are going through. 'Cause they didn't grow up with those sorts of ideals, or the dump truck of information on the internet.

TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

What a healthy body looks like for one person, isn't what a healthy body looks like for you. I think that it's kind of been disregarded in school, and it's been left up to social media to educate people. But I think that it needs to be reversed and started quite young.

CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

If we talked about it more and actually learned about it, we wouldn't be so scared or so insecure about it. If it was commonly known about and commonly used in schools, it would become the norm to talk about these things with your parents and with people at school.

MALE, 15, MĀORI, PACIFIC & ASIAN

I wish there was more adults, like my sister, who are willing to just listen, or people who just want to listen, and not do anything crazy, but just listen to what I want to say.

FEMALE, 17, ASIAN

It's people showing that its normal to have insecurities, and harmless and safe ways to change mentally more than physically. Or even just ways to try make your insecurity better without going to the extreme with it. I feel if people openly discussed this sort of topic people would have more understanding towards each other and what they have to go through cause everyone goes through stuff.

FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

Talking about body image and online content – young people's views

Talking about body image and online content was common amongst our participants, at least in a general or relatively superficial way. For example, talking with others about workout or make-up routines they've seen online, commenting on people's style or appearance, and so on.

However, more open and in-depth conversations about their thoughts and feelings regarding their bodies and appearance wasn't a common experience for most. This was uncommon for girls, and especially rare amongst the boys we talked to.

Most young people did not talk to their friends about the more serious and negative implications of online body image content. If an individual is impacted, they often feel isolated and do not feel like talking about it.

> **"These things already cause you to have a bad body image, so you feel sad about yourself. And feeling sad about yourself can just lead you to more bad thoughts, which can make you feel really alone in it, and you don't realise that you can seek support from other people. Yeah."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Some don't consider these issues to be particularly important to them personally, and so may not see a need to talk about it. For others, their thoughts, feelings, and often insecurities around body image are important to them, but these deeply personal and sensitive topics aren't easy to talk about.

Some worried about being judged by others, and potentially compounding the issues they're struggling with. Some thought their concerns wouldn't be understood or taken seriously. Others felt that having these conversations could place a burden on others, who may not know how to help, and might also feel sensitive about the topic.

> **"Look, it just makes it awkward for everyone. Either my parents will laugh or say, 'what are you looking at online? What are you doing online? Why are you doing that online?' Or it gets my friends all really uncomfortable. And I don't I don't particularly want to make people feel uncomfortable."**
>
> FEMALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"I feel uncomfortable talking about what I'm ashamed of. So I feel comfortable telling my sister because I know that she won't judge me for it. She will just help me through it."**
>
> FEMALE, 14, MĀORI

Some talked about being aware that their friends might be struggling. They described seeing friends' workout routines and eating patterns and wondering if they could be obsessive, but they didn't broach this with the friend. The inference is that these are awkward conversations that are not easy for them to have. They talk about watching out for their friend and, to a lesser extent, feeling guilty because they have not approached them about it, but they do not want confrontation or to risk their friend walking away and becoming more isolated.

There were exceptions to this. Some had experience of talking to those they're closest to, such as siblings or close friends, and these conversations are often thought to be helpful.

> **"I think adults don't quite get it because they're not our age or my age, or someone younger than me. I'd rather talk to somebody that knows what I'm talking about or has been through it."**
>
> FEMALE, 17, MĀORI & NZ EUROPEAN

Young people who have been through an intensely difficult period with their mental health may have received support, counselling or clinical care, in a space where openly talking about these issues is safe, private, and non-judgemental. However, young people might have been struggling alone with these issues for a long time before finding the opportunity to open up and talk about how they feel.

Trans and gender diverse participants had thought deeply about body image issues as an important aspect of gender identity, and were more likely to have experience of open and personal conversations about this.

Having the conversation

Young people want more open and informed conversations

> **"Just be calm, don't be quick to judge or anger, and listen, and don't push too hard."**
>
> FEMALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"It just feels like we're being judged when they say, kids these days are looking at all the stuff on social media. Most adults aren't on the social media that kids are on, so it feels like, how can you judge when you're not even looking at the stuff that we're looking at?"**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"I would want to let adults know that. One, we aren't weak. Two, we aren't dramatic. And three, yes, times have changed. But the idea that we would still want to be heard and that we're confused and that we don't truly know our identities during our teen years. That's never going to change regardless of whether we have social media or if we don't have social media, people want to be heard. And we just want to be listened to."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, ASIAN

Participants talked about the need for more nuanced, understanding, and supportive approaches from adults when addressing these issues with young people. They often feel that adults don't fully grasp the complexities of social media and its impact on body image. There's a perception that adults oversimplify the issue or make judgements without truly understanding the content young people are exposed to.

Young people want adults to approach conversations about social media and body image in a more open, understanding manner. They want adults to listen and try to understand their perspective rather than immediately criticising or dismissing their experiences.

The young people we talked to often have difficulty discussing body image issues with adults because they may feel embarrassed, or fear being judged, leading them to keep these issues to themselves or only discuss them with close friends or siblings, if at all.

Some expressed a desire for understanding and validation from adults. When young people open up to adults about body image concerns, they want their feelings to be acknowledged and validated rather than dismissed. They appreciate when adults listen without judgement and offer support:

> **"Kids are quite embarrassed to talk to adults about problems like that. I think definitely if you have a kid come to you and kind of try to talk to you about their struggles, definitely, just like, try understanding that it's probably serious, the fact that they've come to talk to you about it."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Some just want someone nearby to listen, be supportive, and be willing to learn. They're not expecting immediate solutions to how they feel, they just want more open, non-judgemental conversations.

Education, information and support

> **"I think that when I was year 7 to year 10, I think probably those are your big developmental years, that's where you get massively humbled when you leave intermediate. And you kind of figure out who you are as a person. That's when we were kind of stepping into the world of social media and stuff. So I think just having more like education, I'm very much into educative tools."**
>
> FEMALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

> **"I definitely think people just need to think about what it's like to be the other person. Like empathy, people need a lot more of that on the internet, because a lot of people have no problem just telling some random person to kill themselves because they disagreed with something. So if people understood what other people could be going through, it could lead to a lot more people having a better view of themselves. And maybe even courses in school, for people who wanted to talk it about it."**
>
> TRANS OR GENDER DIVERSE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

Some wanted more comprehensive education on healthy body image, preferably starting at a young age and in school settings. They feel that current education is often lacking, and often consider online sources more helpful, including content creators on social media.

> **"I don't think that talks at school were so helpful. Most people are a bit bored at school, and they don't really listen. They kind of want to get it over and done with like they're not taking it to heart as they should."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Participants often mentioned online safety as something addressed in school, but discussions around body image and social media were rare:

> **"Yeah, a lot about safety online, like, just teachers talking about that, and also people coming into the school, but not really anything about body image online, but definitely safety, but that's more about passwords and stuff."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Some participants preferred more personalised approaches to discussing body image and social media issues. Group talks are often seen as less helpful than individual counselling. The subject of body image and social media is considered sensitive and challenging to discuss openly, especially with unfamiliar people:

> **"I don't really find it helpful because when it's in a crowd. The talks that I've had were in a crowd of people in my classroom, it would help if it was individualised. I have the luxury of having that, I have the counsellor on-site at all times, and that makes it really easy to just be like, 'Oh, I'm upset. I need to talk to someone about this'."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"Especially around people you don't know... it can be quite a touchy subject."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Young people recognise that health and body image are individual and want information that reflects this diversity rather than promoting a one-size-fits-all approach.

They also see a need for more and better resources and support for those struggling with body image issues, including funding for support services, educational programmes, and tailored resources.

Non-cisgender teenagers feel there is an even wider gap in understanding and supporting their realities when compared to cisgender teenagers; informed resources and support must encapsulate all needs.

"I feel like there needs to be like, say on Instagram, someone's texted you or sexually harassed you or something. I feel like there should be like a call for help thing."

FEMALE, 15, MĀORI & PACIFIC

The role of whānau and communities

> **"I don't think parents actually understand how serious it is to be on social media. They only see a little bit of it. But when they really actually explore the app, they will see how negative it is and the impact on their kid's life."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, MĀORI & NZ EUROPEAN

> **"Adults are very important people in our lives, and coming to them with these problems should mean something. It should mean that we're valuing them and we're bringing our problems to them. We value their insight, and we need it like because they've obviously lived longer life than us. So I think, take that as a like a compliment instead of being like, oh, that's so annoying that you want help from me. Or, why can't you just be ok? Or, why can't you just look at yourself the way I look at you? Because they can't. They can't see themselves through your eyes."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

> **"I think definitely, if you have a kid come to you and try talk to you about their struggles, definitely try to understand that it's probably serious, the fact that they've come to talk to you about it and not just gone to one of their friends, because they've been like, wow, this is like a mum and dad conversation, not a friend conversation, like, I need help with this."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Some participants noted that adults in their lives, particularly family members, perpetuate certain beauty standards. This suggests that body image concerns are not exclusive to younger generations but have been ingrained over time. However, there seems to be a lack of open discussion between generations:

> **"I've never really heard adults talk about their body image issues. The adults in my life have never talked about it. There's definitely been times where my family does comment on my body, especially when it comes to weight gain. I don't think they mean it out of disrespect, but it's just like they've learned to think that you have to be skinny to be pretty. So, it's not like it's just this generation's thing. It's been a thing for ages and ages and ages, but it hasn't really been addressed."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Additionally, family dynamics and early experiences play a significant role; some described parental criticism and bullying from a young age instilling lasting feelings of inadequacy.

Participants highlighted how seemingly innocuous comments from adults about food, weight, or appearance can be triggering or harmful to young people's body image. They emphasise the need for adults to be more mindful of their words:

> **"Sometimes, saying things like, 'Oh, that was a lot of food', or if you have a big meal together as a family, they say 'I won't need to eat again until next month!' And then I guess it just makes you feel guilty if you still feel hungry after that meal, because everyone else thought it was a lot of food, but you didn't."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Young people often find it difficult to trust adults' advice about social media and body image, especially if it goes against trusted online sources. This highlights the need for adults to find more effective ways to communicate their concerns:

> **"Yeah, they'll tell me one thing, but then online will say something else, and there's so much of it online that I am more likely to believe that."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Managing online use

> **"I recommend is parents actually go on Instagram and see what their child is seeing on it. Or have age restrictions."**
>
> FEMALE, 15, MĀORI & NZ EUROPEAN

Some talked about how simply restricting access to social media is not an effective solution. Instead, they want adults to provide understanding, support, and guidance in navigating the complex online world:

> **"Let them go through it, I guess. And I think they'll make a good decision for themselves, or probably get sucked into it, but there's no changing their minds, because if you try and change their minds, they'll just do it in secret... the more restriction the more you sneak around and do it secretly."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

However, some participants recognised the value of parental controls and age-appropriate content management, especially for younger children, to prevent early exposure to potentially harmful content:

> **"I feel like you need to have parental controls on. If I hadn't had basically unsupervised internet access that early, I think I would be quite different now. I mean, nothing really inappropriate, just looking at models and all that stuff. At a very young age, I think that affected me quite a lot."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Social media and content creators

Many young people want greater diversity and more realistic portrayals of beauty and body types online to counteract the negative impact of unrealistic standards. They recommend promoting more positive and supportive content online, including content that reflects shared experiences, offers professional advice, and promotes body positivity and self-acceptance.

They suggest improving the functionality of social media platforms to allow users to better control what they see and interact with, including improved options for blocking harmful content and accounts.

> **"I don't think people like your friends would send hurtful stuff to you. I think allowing these social media accounts to exist is a very big problem. I think if a platform or social media platform shows any sign of negativity or hate towards the body and your mental health it shouldn't be allowed to be on social media. I think that it's really toxic to consume this particular social media."**
>
> MALE, 15, MĀORI, PACIFIC & ASIAN

> **"It's easier to find content that's judging your body rather than content that makes you feel good about your body. And I think changing that would really make things easier, so that other kids don't fall into bad relationships with their body."**
>
> CLINICAL PARTICIPANT

Online Resource

This report is just the beginning of our commitment to understanding this issue from the perspective of young people in Aotearoa New Zealand. We are committed to expanding our findings and developing practical resources for rangatahi, whānau and educators. We are sincerely grateful to the 58 young people who generously gave their insights and perspectives so that we might all have a safer online experience.

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Research method

This section provides a brief overview of our research method. Further detail on the methodology will be available in future online resources based on this research project.

Our research explored the following topics

- Young people's views about different types of content that can influence attitudes, feelings or behaviour relating to body image.
- Their experiences and views about how and why young people create or engage with this content.
- How young people respond to unwanted content, and actions they take to avoid certain types of content.
- Young people's views about positive or negative impacts of body image content.
- Views about the importance of these issues for young people generally.
- Views about online content and the 'offline' world.
- Young people's views about the impact on genders, ethnicities, sexualities, and cultures.
- Young people's views about how to address these issues, including opinions about existing interventions or potential actions.
- Young people's views about societal messages and discourse surrounding body image, including their views on what is effective or could be improved.

Study design, data collection and analysis

Research First used a mixed-mode qualitative approach, emphasising the real-world experiences of young people participating in the research to shape the study's direction and insights.

Data was collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews in clinics, schools, and online. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes. The interview guide was developed in collaboration with Research First, Netsafe and the Office. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

For the qualitative data, Research First used both 'thematic analysis' and 'narrative inquiry'. The research team at the Office used this analysis to draft the final report for public release, in consultation with Netsafe and Research First.

Research advisory

Research First facilitated a Research Advisory Group consisting of experts from various fields, including Māori, Pacific, Asian, and LGBTQI+ cultural and research advisors, as well as clinical advisors from Te Whatu Ora Te Toka Tumai Auckland Tupu Ora Regional Eating Disorder Unit.

These advisors offered crucial guidance on cultural, ethical, safety, and clinical matters throughout the research process. They assisted with everything from the initial design and development of the question guide to facilitating interviews with rangatahi.

Sample details and interview process

The research involved 58 young people aged 14-17 years from across New Zealand, including metro-urban, other urban, and rural areas. The sample was inclusive of rangatahi of all genders, ethnicities, ages, sexualities, priority groups – migrants, neurodiverse people, and those with disabilities – and locations. Of the 58 respondents, 10 were most affected by serious health issues relating to body image (including eating disorders) from Te Whatu Ora Te Toka Tumai Greenlane Clinical Centre (clinical rangatahi).

Non-clinical rangatahi were given the option of either face-to-face interviews or online, while all clinical interviews were face-to-face.

Diversity of non-clinical participants (n=48)

Participant	
Ethnicity*	
Māori	14
Pacific Peoples	8
East and South Asian	12
Pakeha /NZ European	23
Other (incl. MELAA)	9
Age	
14-15 years	23
16-17 years	25
Gender	
Cisgender	42
Transgender/gender diverse	6
Sub-groups	
Disabled + neurodivergent	11
Migrant (parents and/or children)	18
Location	
Urban (Auckland/Wellington/Christchurch)	25
Provincial Urban	15
Rural	9
Total	**48**

*Note multiple ethnicity choices allowed

To ensure a supportive and respectful environment, rangatahi were given the option to choose their interviewer. A diverse panel of 11 interviewers was available, including Māori, Pacific, Asian, rainbow (LGBTQI+), younger and older individuals, and both male and female interviewers.

Recruitment of participants

Rangatahi were compensated for their participation. Prior to the interview, non-clinical participants completed a questionnaire to provide insights into their interests and online behaviour, which was used by interviewers as a prompt during the interview.

Participants in clinical care were recruited through their clinicians. Research First and the research team at the Office collaborated closely with Te Whatu Ora Te Toka Tumai Auckland to ensure a smooth and respectful process.

For non-clinical participants, consent forms were required before the interview. Parental consent was required for those aged 14-15.

For clinical participants, clinicians at Te Whatu Ora Te Toka Tumai Auckland first assessed whether the young person was competent to consent, considering their cognitive ability and understanding.

All rangatahi participants in clinical care required parental consent to participate, regardless of age.

Ethics approval for clinical participants

Ethics approval was sought for the cohort of rangatahi in clinical care as part of a larger study of New Zealand rangatahi. Ethics approval was received from the Central Health and Disability Ethics Committee through the EXP pathway (2024 EXP 18049) on 6 March 2024. In addition, low-risk research at Auckland DHB and a locality assessment were approved on 23 April 2024.

Notes on terminology

In this report, the term **body image** refers to thoughts, feelings, and beliefs we have about our own or other people's bodies or appearance. **Body image content** describes any form of online content, behaviour or activity that young people talked about as being relevant to ideas relating to body image.

Youth, **teen** and **young people** refer to people aged 14-17 years. **Child/children** generally refers to people aged 13 years and under. The term **rangatahi** refers to the younger generation or youth.

Trans or gender diverse refer to a range of gender identities provided by participants. More specific details about participants' self-identified gender is not included in the report to ensure privacy and anonymity.

TE MANA WHAKAATU
Classification Office

Watch carefully.
Think critically.

netsafe