

BE REAL

BODY CONFIDENCE FOR EVERYONE



The Curate Escape

A report investigating young people's body confidence and the content they post on social media

May 2019

In partnership with

YMCA

Dove
self-esteem
project



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Methodology

This research was undertaken by YMCA on behalf of the Be Real Campaign.

The fieldwork for this research was conducted by YouthSights, a specialist youth research agency.

The sample consisted of 2,189 young people aged between 11 and 24 years-old from across the UK.

The fieldwork for this research was carried out in April 2019.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Amber Vesty and local YMCAs for their help shaping the research. A ‘thank you’ also goes to all the young people who shared their opinions as part of this research.

The *Be Real Campaign* is a national movement made up of individuals, businesses, charities and public bodies.

The *Be Real Campaign* was formed in response to the Reflections on Body Image report from the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Body Image. Chaired by Mary Glindon MP, and co-ordinated by YMCA, the campaign was founded in partnership with Dove.

The Be Real Campaign focuses on three areas in which it strives to bring about real change:

- ▶ ***Real Education:*** We want to give children and young people a body confident start to life.
- ▶ ***Real Health:*** We want healthy living and general wellbeing to be prioritised over just appearance and weight.
- ▶ ***Real Diversity:*** We want the advertising, fashion, music and media industries to positively reflect what we really look like.

Introduction

Young people today have to navigate a world that bombards them with messages about what they should look like and how they should behave.

These pressures surrounding their appearance can be all encompassing. Indeed, three quarters of young people (75%) said they cared what people think about the way they look, as they spend their time trying to match up to the ideals that are placed on them.

The result is more than two thirds of young people (67%) often worrying about the way they look. This worry increased with age as nearly three quarters of 17 to 24 year-olds (72%) said that they often worry about the way they look, compared to less than three fifths of those aged 11 to 16 (59%).

Importantly, as illustrated in our previous research '*Somebody Like Me*', these worries go beyond the narrow concerns of shape and size that are traditionally presented. Instead, for the majority of young people, an importance is placed on the wider image they present to the world, of which their body shape and size were just one element.¹

Young people's worries are broad, as are the places in which they manifest. As such, these pressures extend beyond the physical world and, therefore, their circle of friends and family. Through mediums such as social media, young people are now also facing challenges associated with how to present themselves in the digital world. A world in which many have not even met the people they're seeking to satisfy.

As such, more than three fifths of young people (61%) said they felt pressured to look their best in the content they posted online. The pressure was felt more markedly among females with nearly three quarters (74%) saying they felt pressured, compared to less than half of males (47%).

In many cases the pressure young people feel to look their best in the content they post online is an extension of their every day insecurities. However, when coupled with photo editing tools and public approval systems through the form of 'likes', social media provides young people with a focal point for their insecurities.

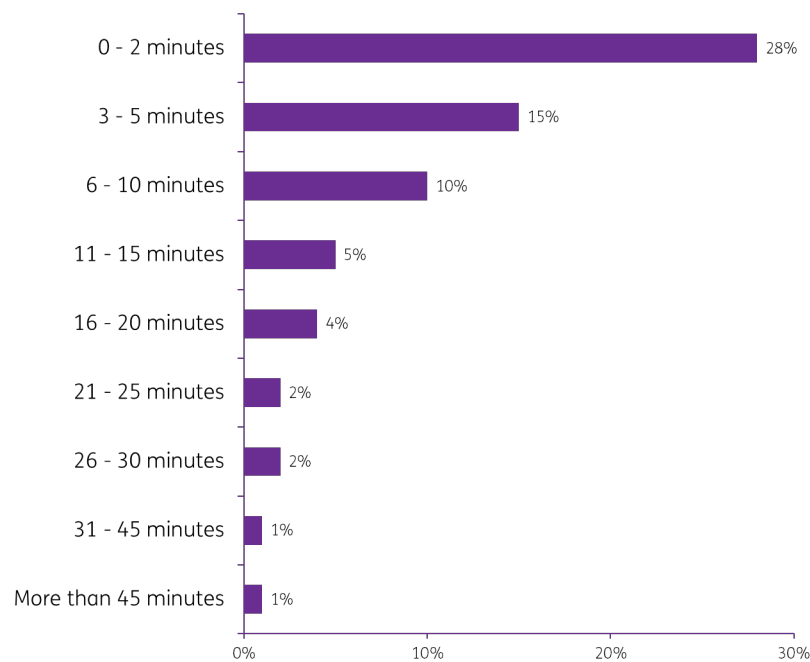
'*The Curate Escape*' examines how these insecurities manifest themselves through the content young people post on their social media channels, and what can be done to help ease the pressures they face.

Great curators

Social media presents young people with the opportunity to hone their image, curating a perception of themselves that they think will be acceptable in their digital world. Altering and adjusting the photos they post of themselves online provides young people with a key means for curating this online image.

More than two thirds of young people (67%) edit pictures of themselves before posting them on their social media platforms. This is higher among those in the older age groups with nearly three quarters of young people (73%) aged 17 to 24 taking time to edit pictures of themselves before posting them, compared to 57% of those aged 11 to 16 years-old.

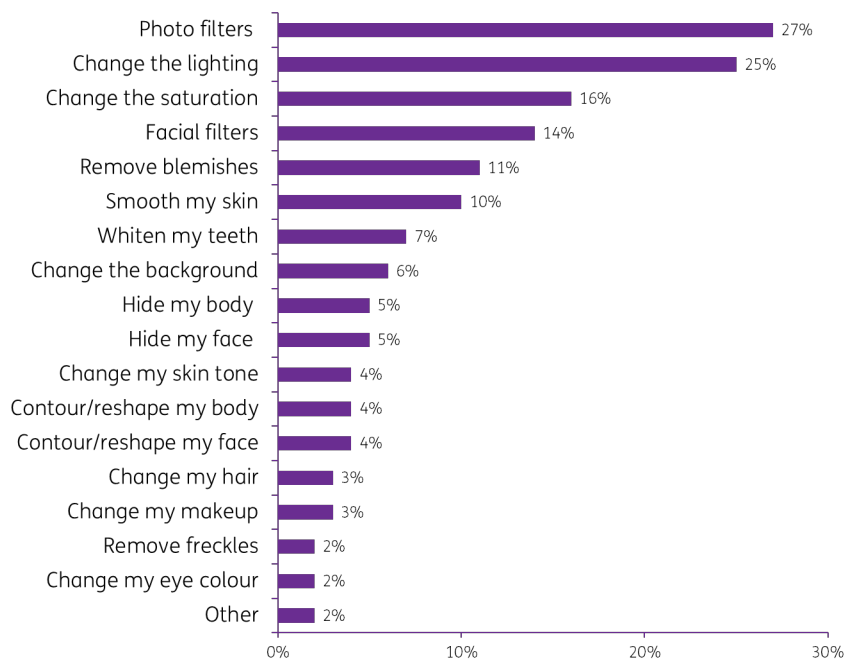
In general, how long do you spend editing a picture of yourself before you post it on your social media platforms? (n=2,162)



While the time spent editing pictures varied among individuals, nearly a quarter of young people (23%) spent more than five minutes editing pictures of themselves before posting them online.

The use of photo filters were the most common edits made by young people to pictures they post of themselves online. As such, more than a quarter of young people (27%) added photo filters to their social media posts in order to improve their appearance.

What edits do you usually make to photos of yourself before posting them on social media? (2,189)



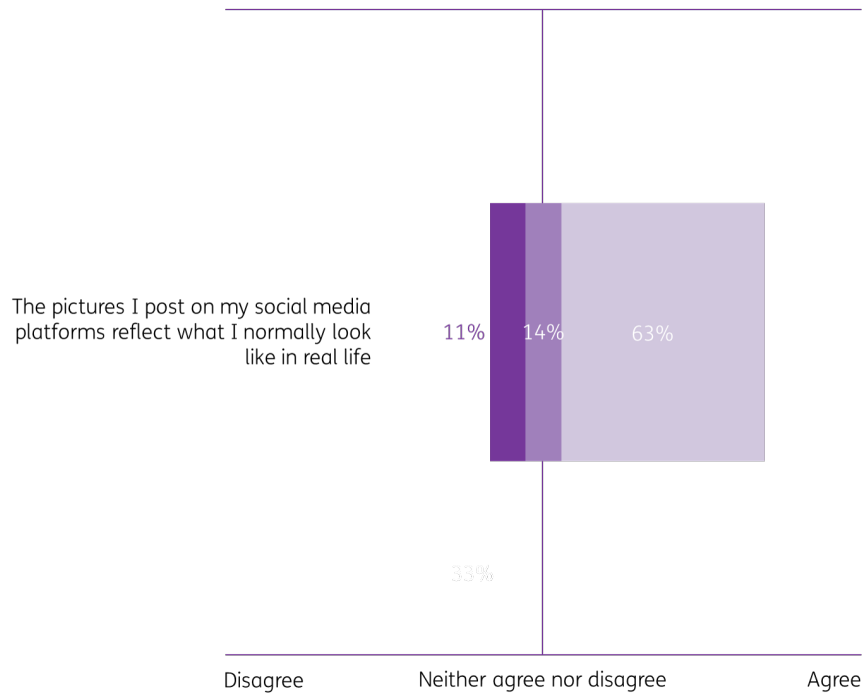
Although less widely used than photo filters, more than one in 10 young people (11%) chose to remove blemishes before posting pictures of themselves on their social media platforms and 10% smoothed their skin.

In addition to their skin, the whiteness of their teeth was found to be a concern in curating the image they present themselves in their digital world. As such, 7% of young people whitened their teeth in their pictures before posting them on their social media platforms.

In addition to editing photos, a number of young people actively tried to hide parts of themselves when posting pictures on their social media platforms. As such, young people reported using emojis and text to hide their face (5%) and bodies (5%).

The extent of the concern that some have about their online presence and the lengths they go to to change their appearance is illustrated by the fact that more than one in 10 young people (11%) said the pictures they post on their social media platforms do not accurately reflect what they normally look like in real life.

To what extent do you agree with the following statement..? (n=1,945)



It is clear from examining young people’s experiences as content producers, that they are often curating highly ‘idealised’ pictures of themselves in order to present a certain image online.

While much of the editing undertaken by young people is seemingly small scale, it helps contribute to an online world where people are feeling pressured to present a picture of ‘perfection’, even if in some cases it is completely unrecognisable from their reality.

Challenging the expectations

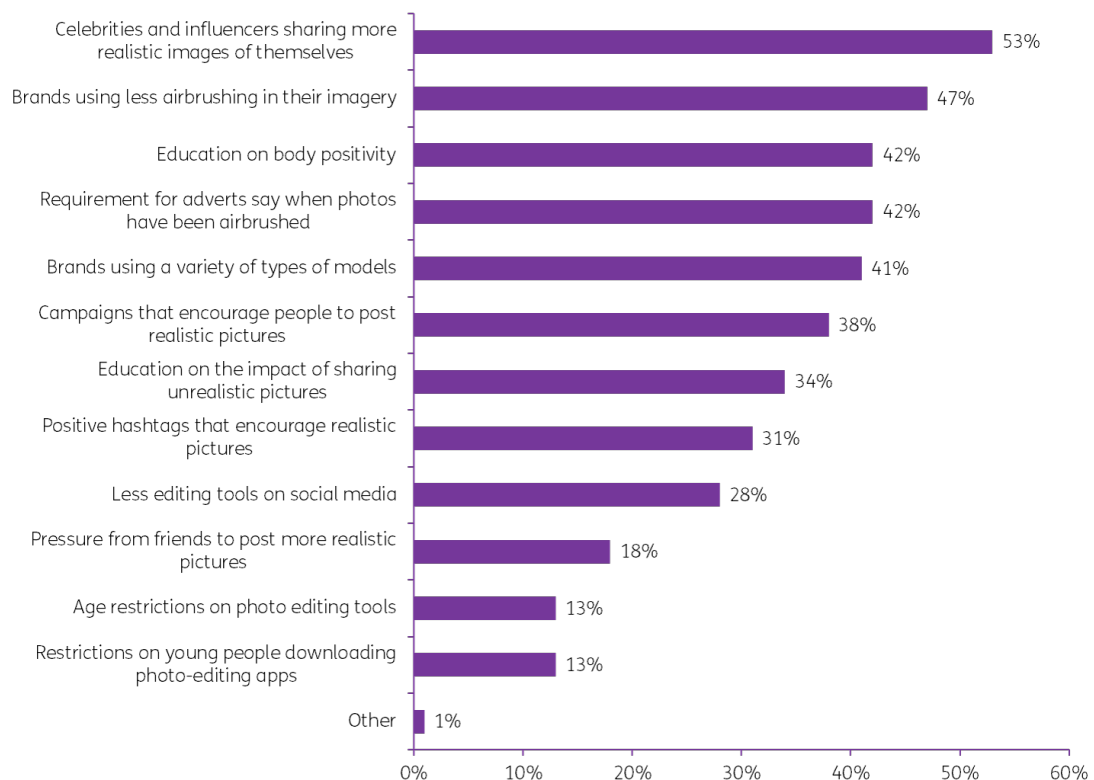
While the pressures that lead to young people editing and curating an ‘idealised’ image of themselves online can come from a multitude of sources, social media is often named as the most common.

Indeed, previous research undertaken by YMCA found that more than half of young people (52%) identified people on social media as setting the expectations and pressures on how they are supposed to look.²

Given their role as ‘expectation setters’, young people recognised how the power people exert on social media could instead be harnessed for good and used to promote body confidence.

The power of celebrity is illustrated by the fact that they are the ones young people felt could most significantly challenge the status quo. More than half of young people (53%) said that celebrities and influencers sharing more realistic images of themselves would encourage people to post content that more accurately reflects what they look like in real life.

What, if anything, would encourage people to post pictures and videos that more accurately reflect what they look like in real life? (n=2,189)



The importance of celebrities and influencers was felt more among the older age group with 63% of those aged 17 to 24 calling for celebrities and influencers to share more realistic images of themselves, compared to 37% of 11 to 16 year-olds.

Furthermore, a gender differential existed with females being more likely to recognise the importance of celebrities and influencers sharing more realistic images of themselves (62%) compared to males (44%).

Similarly, the importance of brands in affecting behavior change was noted with 47% of young people saying that brands using less airbrushing in their imagery and 42% saying a requirements for adverts to say when images have been airbrushed would encourage people to post content that most accurately reflects what they look like.

Again, the role of brands was recognised more by those in the older age group with 56% of those aged 17 to 24 calling for brands to use less airbrushing in their imagery compared to 34% of those aged 11 to 16.

In addition to imagery being more realistic, more than two fifths of young people (41%) said that brands using a diverse range of models would encourage people to post content on their social media channels that more accurately reflect what they look like.

Females were more likely to recognise the importance of the use of diverse models (52%) compared to males (29%).

Another key area identified by young people to encourage people to curate a more realistic image of themselves on their social media platforms was around education and awareness raising.

As such, more than two fifths of young people (42%) said that education on body positivity was needed and more than a third (34%) said that education on the impact of sharing unrealistic pictures was necessary.

Furthermore, nearly two fifths of young people (38%) said that campaigns would be effective in encouraging people to post more realistic imagery of themselves on their social media platforms.

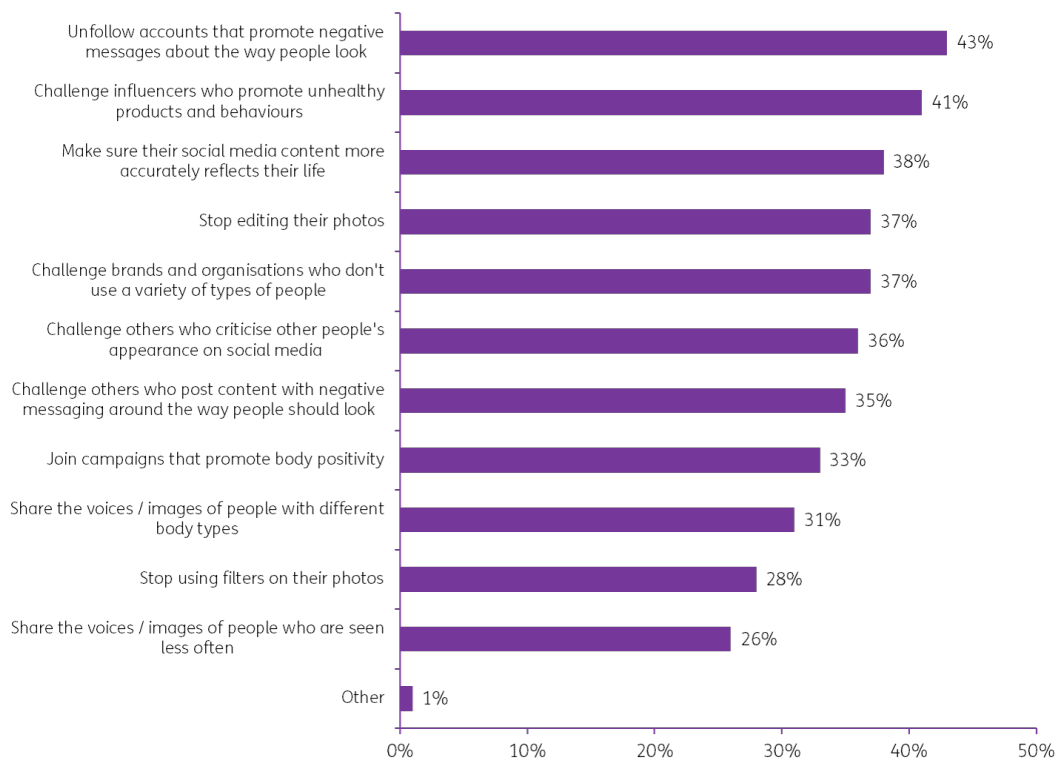
While the proposed approaches for how this could be tackled varied, there was a sense from young people that this was not a hopeless cause. Just 6% felt that nothing could be done to encourage people to post content on their social media platforms that more accurately reflects what they look like in real life.

Harnessing the potential of social media

In addition to others taking action, young people recognised the important role they had in curating a more body positive digital world for themselves and others.

Indeed, 86% of young people said that people should use their social media platforms to promote body confidence.

What, if anything, should people do to promote body confidence on their social media platforms? (n=2,189)



Young people identified a range of things they could do to promote body positivity on their social media platforms. Unfollowing accounts that promote negative messages about the way people look was the most popular method identified.

More than two fifths of young people (43%) said accounts with negative messaging should be unfollowed to promote body positivity on social media platforms. This was more prominent for females (51%) than males (35%), and of those aged 17 to 24 (50%) compared to those aged 11 to 16 (33%).

In addition to taking measures to make sure they themselves are not exposed to potentially negative content on social media platforms, young people also recognised their ability to challenge others and the messages they were portraying around appearance.

Indeed, more than two fifths of young people (41%) said that people should challenge celebrities and influencers who promote unhealthy products and behaviours, and 37% said that people should challenge brands and organisations that don't use a diverse range of models in their imagery.

As such, young people recognised the potentially negative effects of both explicit and subliminal messaging around how people should look, including those caused by excluding certain body types from adverts and imagery.

Young people also recognised the importance that comments and negative language can have on someone's body confidence. Accordingly, more than a third of young people (35%) said people should challenge others who post content with negative messages about how people could and should look and challenge others who criticise other people's appearance on social media (36%).

In addition to challenging others exhibiting harmful messages or imagery, young people also realised the importance of their own content, and how they can promote body confidence on their social media platforms.

Nearly two fifths of young people (37%) said that people should stop editing their photos and more than a quarter (28%) said that people should stop using filters on their photos to help promote body confidence on their social media platforms.

To counteract the lack of diversity, nearly a third of young people (31%) said that people should share the voices and images of people with different body types.

The importance of collective action was recognised, as one third of young people (33%) said people should also join campaigns that help promote body positivity to make their social media platforms a more positive place.

Despite accepting the important role they have in curating a more body positive digital world, only 4% of young people said they currently post content on social media that relates to body positivity, demonstrating that more can be done.

Conclusions and recommendations

The pressures that young people face in relation to their appearance come from a multitude of sources and play out in a multitude of arenas. However, for many, none of these arenas are more concentrated than their own social media platforms.

Through a combination of editing tools, filters and public approval systems, young people are able to curate an image of themselves to present to the world and gauge the reaction in real-time.

Indeed, while young people often feel unable to match the body image ‘ideals’ they are presented with in real life, social media platforms and apps have given them the tools to change their appearance with a click of a button – sometimes to the point where the images they curate are unrecognisable.

As such, for many, unrealistic images posted on social media become part of a vicious cycle in which young people are both the consumers and the curators of such imagery, perpetuating the ideals they struggle to meet.

While young people have the ability to end this cycle, it is clear that they cannot challenge the status quo alone. As such, individual action must be supplemented by wider measures taken by brands, celebrities and influencers to counteract the negative impact that social media can have.

Accordingly, to help harness the positive potential of social media, this research proposes that:

Young people should:

- ▶ Ensure the content they curate better reflects reality, by limiting the edits they make and by using less filters
- ▶ Hold brands, celebrities and influencers to account by challenging adverts and content that lacks diversity or contains negative messages about how people should look
- ▶ Promote the voices and images of people who are less frequently seen on social media, including those from individuals with different body types
- ▶ Unfollow accounts on their social media platforms that promote negative messages about how people could and should look, and follow more body positive accounts instead
- ▶ Challenge harmful language around how people look
- ▶ Join campaigns that promote body positivity

Celebrities and influencers should:

- ▶ Share more realistic images of themselves and limit their use of edits and filters
- ▶ Stop promoting unhealthy products and behaviours that could portray negative messages about how people should look
- ▶ Use their platform to share the voices and images of people who are seen less often, including those from individuals with different body types
- ▶ Join campaigns that promote body positivity

Brands and organisations should:

- ▶ Ensure that communications reflect the diversity of the population and include a diverse range of body shapes and sizes, skin tones, ages, genders, ethnicities, disfigurements, abilities and disabilities
- ▶ Ensure that images show people as they are in real life, with alterations limited to technical corrections. Images should also show what is realistically attainable for most people from using the products and services promoted
- ▶ Promote health and wellbeing by taking focus away from weight, appearance and size, and instead focus on people's holistic value
- ▶ Join campaigns that promote body positivity

Notes

¹ YMCA, *Somebody Like Me*, January 2017

² YMCA, *Great Expectations*, July 2018



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