Study Findings

Exploring the Social Media Experiences of Adults with Visible Differences

Why is it important to understand how people with visible differences use social media?

Nearly 4 billion people use social media worldwide.
It plays a major role in how we connect with others, access news, enjoy entertainment, and learn.

For people with visible differences (conditions or injuries that affect appearance), social media can offer valuable support—reducing isolation, sharing information, and helping to build a sense of community. However, it can also bring challenges, such as cyberbullying and pressure to meet unrealistic appearance standards.

While some research has been carried out, it mostly describes *how* people with visible differences use social media, rather than exploring their *personal experiences*. It also focuses on Facebook, even though Instagram, TikTok and YouTube are increasingly popular and offer different ways of engaging.

Understanding more about how adults with visible differences experience these platforms has also been identified as a priority by the **Appearance Collective**—a group of charities supporting people with visible differences.

To find out more, researchers at the Centre for Appearance Research (CAR) carried out interviews with adults with visible differences to learn about their experiences of using social media.

What did we do?

We spoke to 17 adults with a range of visible differences about their experiences of using social media.

Each person chose four posts from their own social media account(s), which were discussed during online interviews with a researcher.

To analyse the interviews. the researchers looked for common topics—known as 'themes'—that described the shared experiences of the adults.
This process is called **reflexive thematic analysis**,
a method used to explore patterns across different people's stories.

What did we find?

Social media pressures affect everyone — but can be harder for people with visible differences.
Participants felt pressure to look "perfect" online and often worried about judgment or negativity. Many felt pressure to hide their visible difference in photos to fit in with beauty standards.

It can be difficult to be authentic online.
People sometimes felt unable to show their true selves and their visible difference online because of fear of rejection or criticism. There was a constant balance between wanting to be real and normalise difference and wanting to be accepted and receive engagement with their posts.

Social media helped build confidence and self-acceptance.
Sharing their stories online often led to positive feedback, which helped participants feel more confident — both online and in everyday life. Many found it empowering to be seen and heard, especially when acting as role models.
Support from others with similar experiences was a major benefit.
Participants found comfort, advice, and understanding from others living with similar conditions — offering relatable support that could go further than information from medical professionals.

A powerful space for community and advocacy — but not without conflict.
Social media was seen as an important place to normalise visible differences and raise awareness. However, some people felt conflicted — they wanted to advocate, but did not want their condition to become their whole identity online.

What do these findings mean?

Adults with visible differences face many of the same pressures around appearance on social media as others, but having a condition that affects how you look can make it even harder to fit in online.

Despite these challenges, people with visible differences use social media in positive ways — by being visible, building confidence, finding information and support, and helping to normalise and advocate for visible differences.

Clear guidance for content creators, support organisations, and social media users with visible differences can help promote positive and inclusive use of social media.

Health professionals and **charities** should work with content creators to ensure content is **accurate** and **relatable**.

More research is needed to better understand the experiences of **young people** and **content creators/influencers** with visible differences.

Guest, E., Roberts-Mills, W., Zarola, A., & Slater, A. (2025). "It's a kind of double-edged sword": Exploring the social media-related experiences of adults with visible differences using photo-elicitation interviews. PLoS ONe.