



The social media experiences of young people with visible differences

We spoke to 12 young people aged 13–17 years (9 girls, 3 boys) with a range of visible differences about their social media experiences. This is a summary of the results.

"I was constantly comparing myself to other people's lives, which made me quite unhappy"

"You've got people commenting horrifying things to people just because there's that screen and there's the anonymity"

"Everyone with clear skin, which may not even be true because of filters, actually affects you because you're like 'why do I not look like these people?'"

Young people talked about how spending time on social media can be harmful to their mental health. They felt that beauty standards and social comparisons could negatively impact their self-esteem and daily life. They felt that online interactions could be harsher due to anonymity, leading to unwelcome comments and questions about their visible differences.

"If people are negative, you can just block them"

"I've got a private account that I just let a few people follow and that's where I usually put my day-to-day stuff"

Young people talked about ways they protected themselves online, such as being mindful of their audience when sharing content, and using strategies to cope with negative reactions.





"I think it just feels good that people are supporting me and what I go through"

"A lot of people I've found similar to me that I probably wouldn't have found if I didn't use social media"

"I feel like this [an image of a midsize model with vitiligo] shows I don't have to be perfect. I don't have to be perfectly slim. I don't have to be ashamed of my birthmark"

Young people found social media valuable for connecting with others who have visible differences, sharing their experiences, and forming supportive relationships. They felt that increased representation on social media could help reduce stigma and positively impact their self-esteem and how they felt about their appearance. Supportive reactions to posts about visible difference boosted their confidence and sense of belonging.



Many young people wanted to use social media to support and uplift others. They believed that increasing representation of people with visible differences doing everyday tasks could challenge narrow beauty ideals, prompting people to question their own beliefs and ultimately encouraging societal change.

"If they [people who react negatively to visible differences] see more stuff on social media with visible differences, and they get more used to it, they'll stop commenting on it so much and they'll stop commenting badly on visible differences"

"[My goal is] to help other people that are also going through alopecia to know that they're beautiful and then just to make a stand as well"



"I try and limit it because it can get a bit out of hand. So an hour or so on each app per day"

"I think if you use it carefully then it can be a good thing, but you just have to be careful not to go down a bad route"

Young people used social media intentionally, choosing content and setting limits to maintain a healthy balance. They found it helped them remember happy memories, express emotions, and show gratitude. They felt the impact of social media depended on how people chose to use it, including who they follow and how much time they spend online.

So What?



- This study provided valuable information about what it is like to use social media for young people with visible differences.
- We will be combining these results with results from two other studies – one with adults with visible differences, and one with influencers with visible differences.
 - This will give us a better understanding of what it's like to use social media for people of different ages and roles who have visible differences.
- Our findings will be used to create resources to help increase awareness of the risks of social media and tips to use it in a positive way.
 - These resources will emphasise the importance of peer support and involving young people with visible differences in decision making, helping their voices be heard.

Thank you so much to those who contributed to this work!

If you have any questions or would like to know more then please contact: Emma.Waite@uwe.ac.uk