

Social Media & Visible Difference

Communications Workshop

Dr Ella Guest

Senior Research Fellow

Centre for Appearance Research

**Tuesday 28th January
2025**



CAR VTCT Foundation Team Social Media Stream

- To better understand the **experiences** of individuals with appearance-altering conditions using social media.
- To inform **strategies that encourage safe and healthy social media use** for individuals with appearance-altering conditions.
- To investigate how social media can be used to further **promote acceptance of diversity of appearance** in the general population.



Illustrations by Celyn Hunt

Research Studies in the Social Media Stream

Study 1– Understanding the Experiences of Adults

- Photo-elicitation interviews with 17 adults with visible differences.



Study 2– Understanding the Experiences of Children and Young People

- Photo-elicitation interviews with 15 children and young people with visible differences.



Study 3– Understanding the Experiences of Influencers

- Photo-elicitation interviews with 15 social media influencers/content creators with visible differences.



Study 4– Understanding the Experiences of the Appearance Collective

- Exploring how Appearance Collective use social media and their experiences.



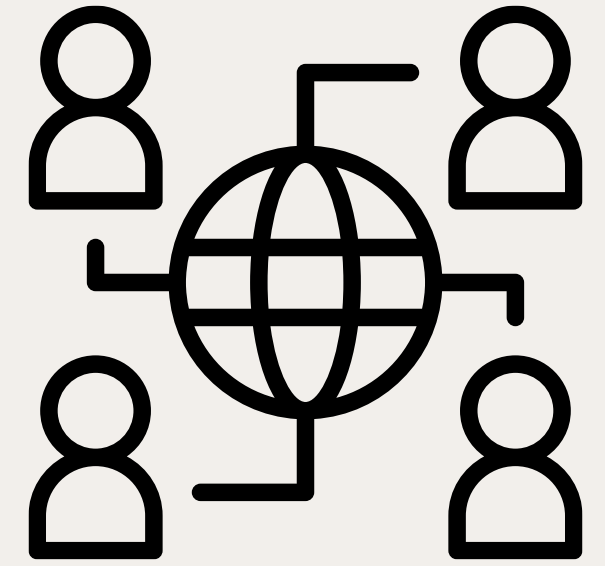
How do people with visible differences use social media?



Information & advice



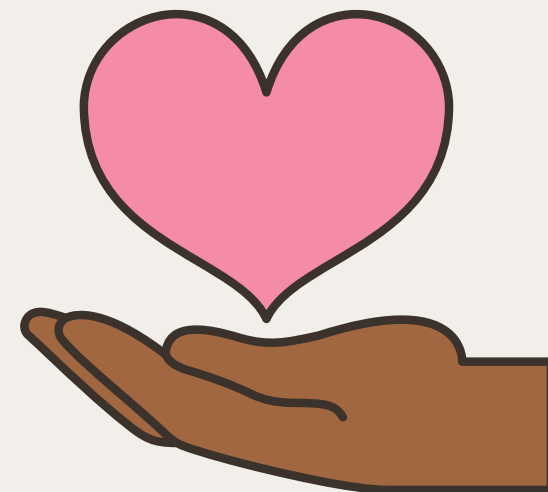
Share their story



**Meet others with the
same condition**



Fundraising



**Give & receive
support**



**Awareness raising &
advocacy**

Key findings: harms & challenges of social media

Appearance Pressures

- Social media often reflects narrow and unrealistic **beauty standards**.
- Leads to body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and negative mood.
- Greater **pressure** on individuals with visible differences to **conform** to these ideals (e.g., filters, editing software).

Misinformation:

- Risk of inaccurate medical and treatment-related advice from non-experts.



Key findings: harms & challenges of social media

Negative Experiences

- Appearance-related comments, online bullying and trolling.

Balancing Advocacy & Identity:

- Felt a sense of social responsibility to challenge societal norms and promote change, but struggled with not wanting their condition to define their online presence.



Benefits of social media for people with visible differences

Connection & Support

- Meet others who understand their experiences, reducing isolation.
- Young people particularly formed meaningful relationships with others online.

Confidence & Acceptance:

- Boosted confidence and acceptance of visible differences.
- Supportive engagement (e.g., likes, comments) increased self-confidence online and offline.



Benefits of social media for people with visible differences

Information & Advice

- Provided valuable, nuanced insights from experts by experience, beyond typical educational resources.

Representation & Stigma Reduction:

- Increased representation of visible differences.
- Normalised visible differences, showing they don't define someone.
- An avenue to challenge narrow beauty standards.



Recommendations for charities and support organisations

- Collaborate with **influencers/content creators** and **medical professionals** to provide accurate, **evidence-based information** that is **relatable** and **engaging**.
- Highlight **stories** and experiences of individuals with visible differences to **normalise and celebrate diversity**.
- Share content that shows people with visible differences “**just living their lives**” to challenge stereotypes.
- Focus on supporting the **community** *and* reaching the **general population**.
- Focus on **challenging beauty ideals** and the use of editing tools.



Recommendations for supporting service users

- Create and promote moderated online support groups where individuals can **connect and share experiences**.
- Promote safe use such as '**digital pruning**' - unfollowing accounts that promote unrealistic beauty standards or make users feel bad.
- Encourage self-awareness and intentional use of social media to **maintain a positive online experience**.
- Help followers to **think critically** whether content comes from a credible source and its aims (e.g., advertising).
- Be aware of the challenges of advocacy and **balancing identity** for some users.



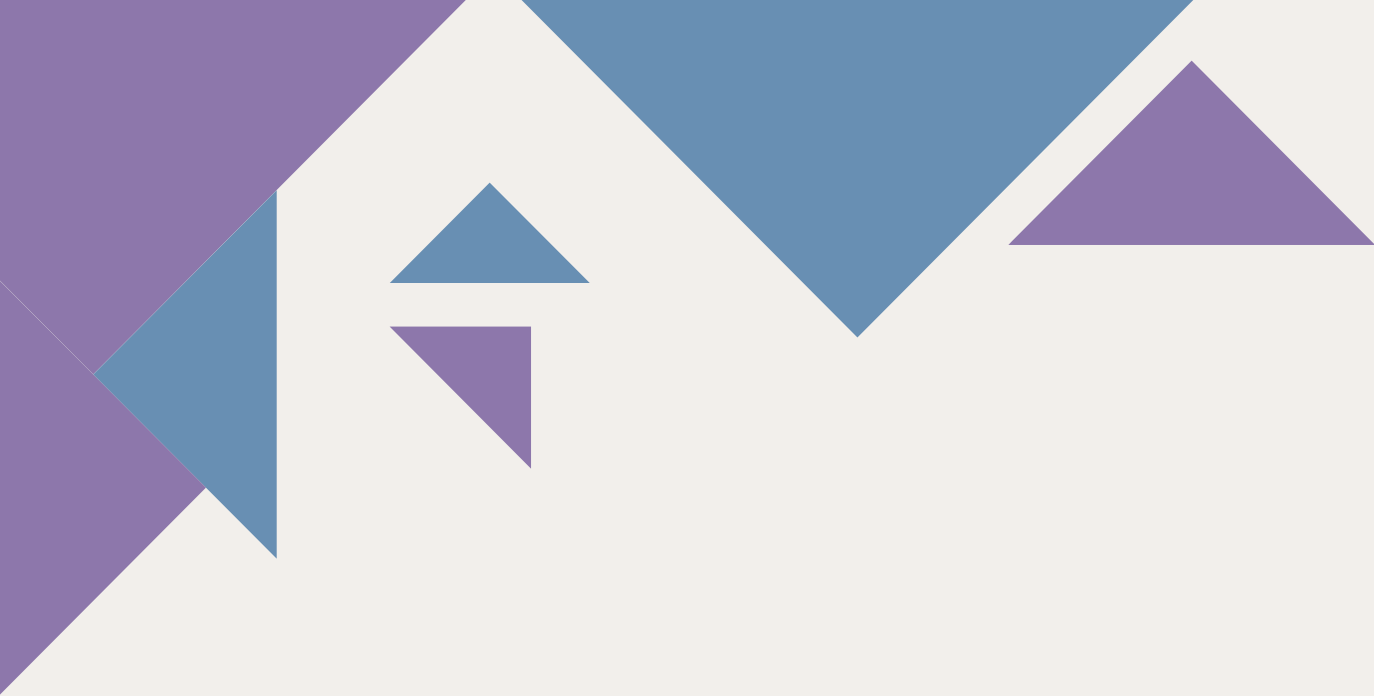
Study 4

Understand how social media platforms are currently being used by Appearance Collective charities and provide guidance on harnessing social media to best support their goals.

We will be sending out a survey as the first part of this work.

If you would like to help make sure the survey is as useful as possible, please email **Ella.Guest@uwe.ac.uk**





Thank You

