



# “Make sure that everybody feels there is a space for them”: Understanding and promoting appearance inclusivity at university.

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## ABSTRACT

Appearance concerns are a pervasive issue affecting many university students and contributing to poor psychosocial and academic outcomes. To combat these, action is needed by universities to promote appearance inclusivity. The current study used inductive qualitative methods to explore students' lived and/or living experiences and concerns relating to their physical appearance and views on how to achieve an appearance inclusive university. Seventeen students aged 19–55 from a UK university participated in online semi-structured interviews ( $n=12$ ) and focus groups ( $n=5$ ). Thirteen participants were women, three were men, and one was non-binary. Interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Students identified several ways appearance concerns had negatively impacted them and supported an increased focus on appearance inclusivity at university. Three themes were developed: 1) appearance has a big impact on my university life; 2) it's not the same for everyone (i.e., individual differences and intersectionality impact students' experiences); and 3) intentional change is needed (i.e., change is necessary to improve appearance inclusivity, but it should be consciously thought out). Strategies to improve appearance inclusivity should be prioritised and carefully considered to avoid tokenism and ensure they centre the needs of those from underrepresented groups.

## 1. Introduction

According to the [World Health Organization \(2024\)](#), people's health and wellbeing are impacted by the places they actively use and in which environmental, organisational, and personal factors interact. For young people, one such setting is university. In 2021/22 in the United Kingdom (UK), there were over 2.66 million higher education students, with 64 % under 24 years old ([Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2023](#)). Students may spend significant periods of their lives at university and face unique challenges, including academic and financial pressures, which in turn can contribute to added risks relating to mental health and wellbeing ([Jones et al., 2018](#)). Relative to other sections of the population, levels of mental illness, distress, and poor wellbeing are high amongst students and, alarmingly, appear to be increasing ([Lipson et al., 2022](#)). Further, student mental health appears to decline as they progress through their degree, with those in later years reporting poorer overall mental health, greater worry about financial difficulties, and issues balancing work and study ([Hampson, 2017](#)). This highlights the need to prioritise and focus on improving student health and wellbeing.

As most individuals at university are navigating the transition into adulthood and exploring their identities, they are more susceptible to influence from academic and social challenges as well as demands and norms ([Montgomery & Côté, 2003](#)). In particular, university students are especially vulnerable to appearance-related social pressures ([Grossbard et al., 2009](#); [Yager & O'Dea, 2008](#)). As university students will often be future leaders with the potential to impact society ([Thomas, 2014](#)), identifying and addressing issues relating to appearance, as well as opportunities for health promotion within this context, is advantageous.

University students are regularly exposed to imagery promoting unrealistic and unattainable appearance ideals ([Jones, 2013](#)). Not only are these ideals perpetuated through mass media ([Harper & Tiggemann, 2008](#)) and social media ([Fioravanti et al., 2022](#)), but can also be reinforced to students through the use of idealised imagery on university websites, posters and materials displayed on campus, and student social nights or parties that may be appearance-focused. This may contribute to students having a negative perception of their physical appearance, or body dissatisfaction, and the consequences of this can be far-reaching

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(Stice & Shaw, 2002). Body dissatisfaction has been shown to predict depression and low self-esteem (Bornioli et al., 2021; Paxton et al., 2006) as well as the occurrence of risky health behaviours such as smoking and drug use (Bornioli et al., 2019). Body dissatisfaction also negatively impacts students' engagement at university (Rehman et al., 2021), which can have long-term implications for their future, for example on career opportunities.

Focusing on improving student health not only benefits those enrolled but can have a positive impact on wider society. Positive body image (i.e., the love, respect, acceptance, and appreciation an individual holds for their body; Tylka, 2011), has been linked to positive health behaviours such as skin screening, seeking medical attention, and sun protection (Andrew et al., 2014). As they are involved in education, research, community engagement, and knowledge exchange, universities are uniquely placed to contribute to health improvement at a population level, strengthening the wellbeing of people, places, and the planet (Healthy Universities, 2024). Addressing factors contributing to body dissatisfaction and promoting students' health and wellbeing can therefore extend to having a positive impact on wider society and public health. Considering this level of influence and involvement in society, it can be argued that universities also have a social responsibility to consider the impact of their activities (or lack of) on people's health and wellbeing and to take such action. This is in line with the aim of the UK Healthy Universities Network, which calls for universities to "incorporate health and sustainability into their mission, vision, and strategic plans" and to "lead and drive change in society by modelling, testing, and transferring innovative approaches" (Healthy Universities, 2024).

One way to make such improvements is by promoting appearance inclusivity at university. Appearance inclusivity aims to promote acceptance of diverse appearances, including those that differ from the 'norm' or from idealised beauty standards (Parnell, 2021). An evaluation of various training programmes aiming to promote inclusivity and improve intergroup attitudes in children and adolescents found low to moderate intervention effects (Beelmann & Heinemann, 2014). Usefully, this meta-analysis concluded that interventions that included direct contact experiences and social-cognitive training programmes designed to promote perspective taking and empathy yielded higher effects. This suggests factors such as increased representation, ensuring a diverse population of staff and students, and delivering training to aid in building empathy are all important factors when broadly considering the promotion of appearance inclusivity in university contexts.

Appearance inclusivity is closely intertwined with equality/equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Typically, EDI focuses on factors such as race/ethnicity, gender, age, social class, sexuality, and ability (Siri et al., 2022; Wolbring & Lillywhite, 2021). Initiatives focusing on promoting EDI have been developed for university contexts, for example the UK-based Athena Swan charter to obtain gender equality in higher education and research (Advance, 2021) and the Race Equality Charter to help universities identify and address barriers facing racially minoritised staff and students (Advance, 2015).

While related, appearance inclusivity also includes characteristics such as visible difference (i.e., differences in appearance due to conditions or injuries) and diverse body shapes and sizes, and considers intersecting factors together rather than separately, as is often done with EDI initiatives. In this way, appearance inclusivity aims to include those that are typically excluded from EDI spaces, such as fat people (Dufur & Okeke, 2024) as well as people with visible differences, who are often neglected when it comes to anti-discrimination efforts (Swift & Bogart, 2021). Given the dehumanisation and discrimination experienced by many people from such groups (see Bonnanno & Choi, 2010; Jamrozik et al., 2019; Kersbergen & Robinson, 2019), broadening the conceptualisation of EDI to include diverse appearances is an important social justice issue. However, this is not yet the norm, suggesting that strategies are needed for universities to move towards greater appearance inclusivity.

Whilst previous research has focused on topics such as gender

equality and antiracism in a university context (e.g., Law, 2018; Rosa & Clavero, 2021) as well as promoting appearance inclusivity in primary schools (e.g., Parnell, 2021), to our knowledge, no study has examined this broader concept of appearance inclusivity in a university context. Given the negative consequences of body dissatisfaction on students as well as society, this should be a priority as part of universities' strategies for health promotion and EDI. Conversely, failure to act and address such issues may have severe consequences. Indeed, lack of support and treatment for student health can result in adverse outcomes, including increased risk of dropping out of education as well as death by suicide (Thorley & Cook, 2017).

Finally, evidence suggests that university-aged students spent increased time browsing the Internet during COVID-19 lockdowns and had increased internalisation of thin/low body fat beauty ideals (Baceviciene & Jankauskiene, 2021), which, according to the Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson et al., 1999), may put them at risk of increased body image concerns. As such, gaining insight into student experiences and views on how to address appearance concerns and promote appearance inclusivity may be particularly important and beneficial in countering these effects in the current post-lockdown world. Therefore, the present study aimed to examine university students' lived and/or living experiences and perceptions of appearance inclusivity at university.

## 2. Method

This study used an inductive qualitative approach. Online semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted that explored students' concerns and lived and/or living experiences related to their own physical appearance as well as reflections on the current and future state of appearance inclusivity at university. Ethical approval was received from the University of the West of England's Faculty Research Ethics Committee (HAS.21.06.157).

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

This study was part of a larger project focused on promoting body acceptance, positive wellbeing, and inclusivity of all appearances for students at the university. It formed part of the evidence stream and was conducted alongside teaching and training, advocacy, and the creation of promotional materials focused on addressing these aims. The project team consisted of university staff from across all faculties who forged links with internal collaborators and external organisations. It also included an advisory board who provided feedback on the study design and interview/focus group topic guide and consisted of university students, researchers, lecturers from different departments, and staff from the students' union and the Healthy University Group. Students on the advisory board did not participate in the study.

Participants were recruited from a UK university in the South-West of England via poster advertisement (in bathrooms, student eating spaces, and noticeboards), social media posts, group email notifications (e.g., via the university's societies), and face-to-face teaching sessions. All university students were eligible to participate; however, the study employed a purposive sampling technique, whereby it was explicitly stated that the study was actively recruiting for participants with underrepresented characteristics (e.g., those from racially minoritised groups, those who had not recently graduated from secondary education, those who identified as LGBTQIA+ or disabled). Additionally, students from different departments within the university were encouraged to take part by targeting different university courses. These sampling techniques were employed to support recruitment of a diverse sample and to represent a range of educational subject areas.

Participants were invited to take part in either an online focus group or interview. They were given a choice to account for their preference and availability as well as the possibility that some students may be more comfortable discussing their experiences in a group rather than

one-to-one setting (or vice versa), due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Participants were informed that the aim of the study was to understand how they felt about the way appearance was portrayed at the university as well as identify key appearance-related issues for students. They received a £10 online shopping voucher as a thank you for participating.

Seventeen participants aged 19–55 years took part in the study ( $M = 28.23$ ,  $SD = 10.71$ ). Five were recruited via face-to-face teaching sessions, five via group email notifications from the university, four via the students' union, two via poster advertisement, and one via social media. Students represented a diverse range of characteristics including age, race/ethnicity, gender, level of study, year of study, and disabilities (see Table 1). Twelve participated in a one-to-one online interview and five took part via two focus groups. Interviews and focus groups were conducted between October 2021 and May 2022, during the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when students were permitted on campus (i.e., not during national lockdown).

The semi-structured interview/focus group topic guide was developed for the current study by two alumni of the university with the second and third authors, who were employees of the university at the time. It was reviewed by the fourth and sixth authors, who are senior academics in the field of appearance psychology and body image, as well as the advisory group for the larger project. It was then piloted and adjusted accordingly to form the final topic guide.

The first, second, third, and fifth authors conducted the interviews and focus groups and were all White, cisgender women in their twenties, with experience of being students at UK universities. At the time, the first author was a doctoral student, the second and third authors were Research Fellows with doctoral-level qualifications, and the fifth author was enrolled on an MSc course. Whilst the authors have some shared experiences and demographic characteristics, their individual

experiences will have shaped how the interviews/focus groups were carried out. For example, the second and third authors have greater research experience in this topic area and the second author has researched a similar topic with children, so have pre-existing knowledge that may have influenced their interactions with participants and the subsequent responses. Similarly, the first and fifth authors were current students and so may have related more closely to participants' experiences, increasing their 'insider' status (Gair, 2012). This may have resulted in greater rapport and richer responses from participants (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015), however may also have resulted in taking knowledge for granted and overlooking parts of the responses (Perry et al., 2004). Throughout the research project this was reflected on by each interviewer independently and during group discussions.

Interviews and focus groups took place online via Microsoft Teams, with researchers having their video cameras turned on and therefore visual cues about their identity provided (e.g., race/ethnicity). There were no repeat sessions, and no previous relationships had been established between participants and researchers. Participants were given the choice whether to have their camera on or off during the interview/focus group, with two participants choosing to have their camera off (one interview and one focus group participant). A small number of the participants only spoke briefly about their experiences; however, given that their responses were relevant we did not want to exclude them from the data. Interviews ranged from 9 to 62 minutes long ( $M = 32$  minutes) and focus groups were 28 and 55 minutes.

## 2.2. Data analysis

Interviews and focus groups were recorded. Five interviews and one focus group were recorded audio only and seven interviews and one focus group were recorded audio and video. This was based on researchers' access to recording technology. Data were transcribed verbatim by the first and fifth author using Microsoft Word and transcripts were anonymised. Transcripts were not returned to participants for comment. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was used to analyse the data, as it is a theoretically flexible method suitable for examining participants' experiences and perceptions. This method involves developing patterns and themes from the data whilst also critically reflecting on one's role as researcher and the research practice and process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). It includes the following six phases: 1) familiarising oneself with the dataset; 2) coding; 3) generating initial themes; 4) developing and reviewing themes; 5) refining, defining, and naming themes; and 6) writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

After reading and re-reading the transcripts, the first author used NVivo to inductively code the entire dataset before collating and revising the codes. She then clustered together codes to develop candidate themes and subthemes and checked these against the coded data to determine whether they were representative and addressed the research question. Candidate themes and subthemes were reviewed by the first, second, and third authors. A thematic map and table were used as part of this process and several subthemes were discarded, as well as themes being restructured. Themes and subthemes were refined further by the first, second, third, and sixth authors through detailed discussion about the focus and name of each. These discussions were led by the first author and helped ensure that themes were distinct from one another and were coherent. This was a recursive process, as we moved backwards and forwards through the phases of analysis, particularly when refining and reviewing themes.

The analysis was conducted within a contextualist/critical realist framework, which considers knowledge and experience as subjective but influenced by the wider sociocultural context (Braun & Clarke, 2022). It therefore allowed us to examine the legitimate reality of participants' lived and/or living experiences and perspectives, whilst recognising these are moderated by factors such as culture, gender, and social class.

**Table 1**  
Participant Characteristics (self-reported).

Demographic		N (percentage)
Age	19–21	6 (11.8 %)
	22–26	5 (11.8 %)
	27–30	2 (5.9 %)
	31–37	2 (11.8 %)
	38–50	1 (5.9 %)
	51–55	1 (5.9 %)
Ethnicity	Asian – Chinese	2 (11.8 %)
	Asian – Indian	1 (5.9 %)
	Asian – Pakistani	1 (5.9 %)
	Asian – Other	2 (11.8 %)
	Black - African	1 (5.9 %)
	Black - Caribbean	1 (5.9 %)
	Prefer not to say	1 (5.9 %)
	White and Black Caribbean	1 (5.9 %)
	White	7 (41.2 %)
Gender	Female	13 (76.5 %)
	Male	3 (17.6 %)
	Non-binary	1 (5.9 %)
Level of study	Undergraduate	13 (76.5 %)
	Postgraduate	4 (23.55 %)
Year of study	Year 1	3 (17.6 %)
	Year 2	3 (17.6 %)
	Year 3	6 (35.5 %)
	Year 4	1 (5.9 %)
	Master's degree	4 (23.5 %)
	Autism	1 (5.9 %)
Disability	Autism, non-epileptic attack disorders	1 (5.9 %)
	No	15 (88.2 %)
Course subjects	Education	1 (5.9 %)
	Engineering	2 (11.8 %)
	Health Science	1 (5.9 %)
	Information Technology	1 (5.9 %)
	Business and Economics	3 (17.6 %)
	Arts and Humanities	4 (23.5 %)
	Environmental Studies	2 (11.8 %)
	Did not respond	3 (17.6 %)

### 3. Results

Three themes and ten subthemes were developed through the analytic process. The first theme, *appearance has a big impact on my university life*, reflected the significance of appearance in the lives of students and had three subthemes of *appearance concerns have a ripple effect*; *comparison is the thief of the student experience*; and *influential people and places*. The second theme, *it's not the same for everyone*, focused on individual differences and intersectional experiences relating to appearance, and had three subthemes of *race/ethnicity influences experience*; *your course impacts your concern*; and *it's a man's world, it's a man's university*. Finally, the third theme, *intentional change is needed*, reflected students' views about the importance of improving appearance inclusivity at university and how to achieve this, and included four subthemes of *you are what you do, not what you say you'll do*; *creating space for different cultures*; *education increases acceptance*; and *you can't be what you can't see*.

All participant names are pseudonyms. Some focus group participants were not able to be matched to the voices on the recordings. In these cases, as detailed as possible demographic information is reported. See [Supplementary Figure 1](#) for a visual representation of themes and subthemes.

#### 3.1. Theme 1. Appearance has a big impact on my university life

This theme reflected participants' views about the salience of appearance and its ubiquitous impact on various aspects of their everyday lives at university. It had three subthemes relating to the secondary effects of appearance concerns on relationships and support seeking at university, the impact of appearance comparison on the student experience, and the impact of particular people and places.

##### 3.1.1. Subtheme 1.1. Appearance concerns have a ripple effect

Students discussed how concerns related to their appearance had secondary effects on other aspects of their psychosocial wellbeing and their behaviour at university. They identified a link between their appearance concerns and overall mental health and emphasised the pervasive and ongoing nature of their issues, despite their best efforts to combat them. Appearance concerns were identified as contributing to a lack of confidence in social situations, which in turn had a negative effect on interpersonal relationships and wellbeing and led to feelings of isolation. Nadia described her struggle to make friends with other university students due to worries about her appearance:

*My appearance and how I feel about myself has impacted my student life because I'm not as outgoing or as extroverted as everybody else seems to be. Sometimes it can feel a bit lonely but also, I just struggle to put myself out there because I do struggle with my appearance. (Nadia, aged in 20 s, female)*

Further, difficulties were not exclusively related to social situations involving other students, but also those involving staff. Students highlighted the potential for appearance concerns to prevent them seeking academic support, as this would draw further attention to them. The process of seeking and receiving support was therefore anticipated to be an unpleasant experience that outweighed the potential benefits of the support. This highlighted the significance of staff perspectives and their possible impact:

*If you are already feeling a bit out of place and then you needed help with something, or wanted to get in contact to speak to someone, you might be less likely to 'cause you don't want to draw attention to yourself. (Claire, 20 years, White, female)*

##### 3.1.2. Subtheme 1.2. Comparison is the thief of the student experience

Participants spoke about comparing their appearance to other students as though it was a natural and unavoidable thing that was inherent

to being human. Looking 'good' was spoken about as though it was a competition, with participants describing a sense of defeat and dissatisfaction when perceiving someone else to be more attractive than themselves. For Diana, the culture around appearance at university seemed to take away from the learning experience:

*You come into your lectures, and you see people, and you're naturally going to compare yourself, it's what people do. So, you see people, and you're like 'oh they're skinnier than me, they're prettier than me', and before you know it, you're like 'I'm going to look really nice today', and then you're like, 'I can't be bothered'. (Diana, 28 years, White, female)*

Participants also demonstrated an awareness of the detrimental effects of appearance comparison, including the tendency to feel badly about their own appearance. Some described socially withdrawing and avoiding aspects of social life at university, to prevent experiencing these negative feelings. Nadia described how she had stopped attending some social events altogether due to her negative expectations about how she would feel: *"I feel like I don't quite get involved with some events and stuff just because I compare myself to everybody else."* (Nadia, aged in 20 s, female)

##### 3.1.3. Subtheme 1.3. Influential people and places

There were specific circumstances associated with university that students identified as worsening their appearance concerns. Many students talked about attention from peers as heightening their self-awareness, and that this was more impactful as the number of people increased:

*When you walk into a big lecture hall and you have to walk up the stairs and everyone looks at you, you're more aware, whereas in a seminar or a workshop where it's smaller grouped things, you'd be less likely [to be aware of the gaze of others]. (Claire, 20 years, White, female)*

They also talked about the protective nature of being with a group of friends, compared to being alone, and that this social support could buffer against the negative effects of attention or reactions from others. Further, participants identified that a lack of social support could impact how they appraised situations, being more likely to have negative appraisals when they were alone compared to with friends:

*I remember once I was in the library and these two girls were in there and they were laughing and looking at me. They could have just been laughing, but because I was on my own, I was more self-conscious about that. But if I was with a group of friends I probably wouldn't care. So, I think if you're on your own you're more likely [to be aware of others]. (Diana, 28 years, White, female)*

Overall, this theme reflected the pervasiveness of appearance concerns and their interwovenness into the everyday lives of students. In particular, students made links between appearance concerns and certain social situations, as well as the negative impact on their mental health, social life, and learning at university.

#### 3.2. Theme 2. It's not the same for everyone

It was clear that experiences varied greatly between individuals and were influenced by specific person characteristics. Often, these were those that were seemingly visible to others. This theme had three subthemes relating to the impact of race/ethnicity, university course, and gender.

##### 3.2.1. Subtheme 2.1. Race/ethnicity influences experience

Students' experiences of university were impacted by their race/ethnicity. Students described struggling for a sense of belonging due to lack of representation, although it was noted that this varied across departments. Students discussed this lack of diversity not only in relation to their own race/ethnicity, but for minoritised racial/ethnic groups in general and highlighted the tendency for Whiteness to dominate the



university environment, causing discomfort:

*This is from my perspective as a Black person. I feel like when I walk around my particular faculty, sometimes I feel like it is not well represented for Black people [...] Sometimes there are certain departments that I might go to, and I might think 'okay, this is okay'. But then I might not feel so comfortable, because there is not a lot of representation there, or it's just mostly male, or it's just White male, or just White female. And I don't think there's any other ethnicities, not necessarily my ethnicity, but just any other ethnicity to give an impression of some kind of diversity. (Femi, 37 years, Black Caribbean, female)*

Many students also reported experiencing actual or anticipated negative reactions from others due to their race/ethnicity. One Asian student described anxiety about the possibility of others directing blame towards them for the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Possible consequences were talked about as ranging from a lack of social relationships to negative beliefs directed specifically at them:

*Because I'm an Asian I'm really afraid that no one will really want to talk to me because of this corona thing. Then people would think that 'oh you're from this country' [...] or they will think that I'm Chinese, so my ancestors bring the virus. (Mary, 21 years, Asian Chinese, female)*

Participants also explicitly named racism and racial discrimination as issues impacting students, whether they had experienced it first-hand or witnessed it (but were not themselves from a racially minoritised group). They gave various examples of this, including negative thoughts and comments: *"Ethnic minorities [...] they could be discriminated against or seen as not as intelligent."* (Claire, 20 years, White, female); *"I come from Kenya and I'm Indian as well, so some people get confused and they tell me 'why are you not Black?'"* (Gajara, 22 years, Asian Indian, female); *"Some feel like the dark skin [...] is a hindering factor when you talk about appearance."* (Hayes, 50 years, Asian Other, male)

### 3.2.2. Subtheme 2.2. Your course impacts your concern

Participants described differences in the importance of appearance dependent on university course. Specifically, they viewed course difficulty and field of study as impacting on students' priorities, with those enrolled on more traditionally 'academic' courses being perceived as less inclined to prioritise their appearance compared to others. These student populations were described as though they were distinct categories with separate concerns and priorities, and that this was to be expected:

*If you were doing more of a creative course, you are more subconscious about the way you look or might feel like you need to put more effort in and look more like a certain way [...]. Whereas if you were doing say, maths, you're less likely to care so much. (Claire, 20 years, White, female)*

For some, lack of time due to prioritising study was the reason for fewer appearance concerns and this affected those undertaking 'harder' university courses the most, such as postgraduate courses. In these instances, studying was described as more important than tending to physical appearance and therefore this division of time was logical rather than something to worry or be upset about:

*You'll see that in my course [Masters in Law], people literally just wear whatever. They just don't really focus on what they're wearing [...] Your hair is not cut, it's fine. I've been studying, I've been up all night [...] Whereas if your course is relatively easy, you have more time to maybe get ready and then focus on yourself. (Aliya, 22 years, Asian Pakistani, female)*

### 3.2.3. Subtheme 2.3. It's a man's world, it's a man's university

Participants described the ways in which their gender influenced treatment from others as well as their own behaviour. Of note, participants predominantly spoke of gender using binary categories of 'men'

and 'women'.

Participants almost exclusively focused on the experiences of women and used examples highlighting the disproportionate impact of gender inequality on them. It was clear that being a woman in a male-dominated university environment was an unpleasant experience for some participants, with underrepresentation being linked to feeling intimidated in male-dominated spaces. A distinction was made between staff and students, with a lack of female representation being identified not only in students but in staff, and this compounding the issue:

*There's probably two females on my entire course [IT Management for Business]. So, it would be good if there was more representation gender-wise. Because sometimes it can feel intimidating [...] And also, sometimes it's reflected in the lecturers as well. You get a lot of male presence in the classroom in terms of students, but you also get male presence in terms of the academic staff. (Femi, 37 years, Black Caribbean, female)*

The impact of gender inequality and sexism was clear, with participants identifying various negative impacts on their cognitions, feelings about themselves, and behaviours. One participant described the emotional toll of repeated negative comments from others: *"It actually impacts us girls especially a lot, because we have really low self-esteem after listening to all the comments and stuff."* (Mary, 21 years, Asian Chinese, female)

Importantly, despite the subthemes, a significant proportion of students reported that they did not have issues related to their appearance, for example stating, *"I don't feel a lot of struggles because of appearance."*

Overall, this theme reflected students' views about 'appearance inequality' at university and the notion that some groups experience more difficulties than others when it comes to appearance. Students placed particular emphasis on the impact of race/ethnicity, university course, and gender on peoples' experiences as well as treatment from others.

## 3.3. Theme 3. Intentional change is needed

There was a clear discrepancy between students' descriptions of their current university experiences and that of their ideal appearance inclusive university. Change was viewed as welcome and necessary for improvement, with an emphasis on the need for this to be intentional to ensure effectiveness. This theme had four subthemes relating to avoiding tokenism, increasing cultural awareness, the importance of education, and the need for representation.

### 3.3.1. Subtheme 3.1. You are what you do, not what you say you'll do

When describing the actions of their university, participants expressed frustration that these were sometimes inauthentic and tokenistic. Whilst they supported increased diversity, they outlined the importance of action being genuine and based on care for students, rather than being done to satisfy a requirement. Participants recognised the difficulty in navigating this difference: *"I'm all for showing different genders and different diverse backgrounds on multiple platforms [...] but there's a fine line between actually caring and feeling like this is a tick box exercise."* (Isabella, 30 years, White, female)

*It's a difficult line to tread, I suppose. But sometimes I see some of the media stuff around what [university name] is doing and [...] it just feels like they are putting Black students front and centre. And they probably deserve to be there [...] but they are almost trying to be politically correct and to me it seems false. It's like, okay three out of four people on this poster are Black, we're representing. (Leah, 26 years, White and Black Caribbean, female)*

Further, participants identified the problematic tendency for their university to discuss and identify actions but fail when it came to executing and following them through. They described the need for alignment when it came to words and action:

*One thing I do notice is that the university does talk a lot of diversity and inclusion, but from my perspective I feel like a lot more is said than what is actually done. What is done doesn't match up to the words that are said. There is a misalignment there. (Femi, 37 years, Black Caribbean, female)*

When considering action, participants pointed out the importance of acknowledging the diversity of student experiences and identities. In particular, they noted that actions that may seem small and nonsignificant to some people have the potential to be important, noticed, and appreciated by others, depending on their identity. For example, Ellen described the internal sense of comfort in being able to affirm their gender identity on a university website, even if this went unnoticed and did not change others' perspectives:

*I've actually been able to change my gender identity and my pronouns on [university webpage], which I think is very good. I don't know if anyone even looks at that or anyone even notices it, but the fact that I know it's there is quite nice. I haven't ever had that with school or college or any other uni applications. (Ellen, 19 years, White, non-binary)*

### 3.3.2. Subtheme 3.2. Creating space for different cultures

Participants consistently mentioned the importance of cultural awareness in promoting appearance inclusivity. Culture and appearance were viewed as interlinked, with physical appearance providing information about peoples' background and culture. By encouraging students from different cultures to interact more and learn from one another, it was felt that inclusivity would improve. One way to do this was through the university giving students from different backgrounds a platform to share their culture:

*Try to mix up African American culture and Asian culture. Try to bring them together, or even UK domestic students as well. Or even an open day, people sharing to a large audience, so they prepare themselves and talk about it. This shall try to bring more togetherness. (Ria, aged in 20 s or 30 s, female)*

This sharing was also viewed as a strategy to address misconceptions about other cultures, further helping improve awareness:

*I think the university can give a platform to students from different backgrounds to try and share about the history and culture of their country [...] because a lot of students don't understand inter-culture communications. They might have some misunderstanding. [...] This kind of information can be useful for students to really understand. (Penny, aged in 20 s or 30 s, female)*

Finally, emphasising the value of contributions from a diverse range of people and ensuring those from different groups had the opportunity to express themselves as well as feel welcome and comfortable at university was seen as important for increasing inclusivity:

*I think it [inclusivity] means to welcome everybody to university, you know of any age, of any colour, of any background. To make sure that everybody feels there is a space for them and that their contribution is valued, accepted, and celebrated. (Leah, 26 years, White and Black Caribbean, female)*

*"It [inclusivity] is acceptance. Including everyone whether it's different races, different genders, different body shapes, including everyone [...] If you are including everyone you are showing your acceptance." (Isabella, 30 years, White, female)*

### 3.3.3. Subtheme 3.3. Education increases acceptance

It was clear that participants perceived education as being a useful tool to promote appearance inclusivity and that this could help change the attitudes and culture of the university. The need for this education to be about a diverse range of appearances and to be thorough was recognised:

*If we want to create this environment where cultural acceptance is the norm, then it has to be having the proper understanding. This is where training and education come in of these different elements, and different characteristics amongst university populations. (Femi, 37 years, Black Caribbean, female)*

Students spoke about the tendency for people to judge someone's health based on their physical appearance, but that this was not an accurate representation. This was seen as problematic and important to correct. Education was perceived as a method to undoing this misconception and combatting people's ignorance, with further positive secondary effects on people's preconceived beliefs about others:

*I think people just need to start learning the facts... I think people do actually genuinely believe that it is healthier and you are gonna be better at it [sport] if you look a certain way, which just isn't true. So I think that people just need to start learning that that isn't true and then I think less stereotypical opinions will be formed. (Ellen, 19 years, White, non-binary)*

As well as benefiting learners, educational initiatives were seen as communicating the university's priorities. By the university investing resources into initiatives focused on increasing equality, this portrayed that they cared about students from minoritised groups and were trying to promote inclusivity:

*For [university name] I know we are very welcoming, and they are even introducing modules. I participated last month in a focus group about trying to introduce a module for newcomers, needing to accept other cultures and make everyone feel equal on campus, irrespective of their sexual orientation, ethnicity, colour. I think [university name] is doing a great thing, to be open and raise those issues about how everyone feels. Even if I am lesbian, gay, I feel valued or I feel respected as I am. (Ria, aged in 20 s or 30 s, female)*

### 3.3.4. Subtheme 3.4. You can't be what you can't see

Participants described the importance of being able to see examples of people from diverse backgrounds in imagery both online and in person. They emphasised the importance for those selecting the images to pay attention to different aspects of appearance: "Stuff around campus, making sure that the media that is used stems to different cultures and you can visibly see different cultures and different body shapes in pictures." (Diana, 28 years, White, female)

Showcasing images of people with differences in appearance was viewed as a positive action that could inspire others. Research focused on appearance was also viewed as important and in need of being promoted:

*Maybe if it was a big event for appearance research, I think that would be good. And case studies, or stuff around campus of famous people who don't look like the stereotypical person, so you could get inspired by that. (Brooke, 19 years, White, female)*

Images paired with success stories were identified as being particularly motivational. The importance of these showcasing people from underrepresented groups was highlighted to evidence that succeeding was possible: "More pictures or more case studies of females or different ethnicities who have succeeded in engineering in the engineering block building. I think that would help." (Brooke, 19 years, White, female)

Overall, this theme reflected students' desire for change and improvement in appearance inclusivity at university. Potential avenues to achieve this included encouraging prosocial intergroup contact, education, and increased diversity in imagery.

## 4. Discussion

This study explored students' lived and/or living experiences and concerns relating to their physical appearance and their views about

promoting appearance inclusivity at university. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Grossbard et al., 2009; Yager & O'Dea, 2008), appearance concerns were a prominent issue in university students' daily lives. Whilst responses varied, many participants focused on the impact of their race/ethnicity as well as gender when discussing their own experiences as well as appearance inclusivity more generally. In this way, students positioned appearance and EDI as interlinked, as they felt that visual cues provided information about constructs such as race/ethnicity and gender and subsequently impacted peoples' experiences and treatment from others.

The first theme highlighted the nuanced and personal nature of participants' relationships with their appearance, and the meaning they assigned to experiences based on factors such as personal characteristics and history. Participants outlined the potential for appearance concerns to be worsened in certain situations and have a knock-on effect on various elements of student life, including avoiding seeking academic support and engaging in social events. This is in line with previous research describing social avoidance as an 'appearance-related safety behaviour', that is, a behaviour used by some people with appearance concerns to prevent or avoid judgment from others (Wilver et al., 2020). In having this effect, appearance concerns were a barrier to a 'typical' student life and detracted from the overall student experience.

The second theme emphasised participants' lack of a sense of belonging in certain university environments where people of their gender or race/ethnicity were underrepresented. This is consistent with previous research indicating that, in certain subject fields (e.g., STEM), race and gender predict belongingness (Good et al., 2012; Lewis et al., 2019; Sax et al., 2018) and that university students that self-identify as women and/or part of a minoritised group have a reduced sense of belonging (Mooney & Becker, 2020). This is problematic as lack of belongingness can lead to negative outcomes such as reduced achievement and student retention (Hausmann et al., 2009; Walton & Cohen, 2007), which are issues already disproportionately affecting students from underrepresented groups (Yao, 2015).

This theme also highlighted the importance of addressing sexism and racism to students. This is in line with previous research in which female university students describe their desire to resist and challenge the sexual harassment, misogynistic attitudes and behaviours, and surveillance of their appearance that they experience at university (Lewis et al., 2016), as well as research highlighting students' support for the implementation of antiracist initiatives at university (Jankowski, 2021). This reinforces that these issues remain relevant for students and existing efforts to address them should be ongoing. Where possible, our findings suggest these should be tailored to account for the impact of factors unique to a university context, such as the different courses that students may be enrolled on.

When it came to appearance-related concerns, it was clear that experiences varied, with some students reporting they did not have a lot of struggles. This may be due to individual differences in protective factors against poor body image, such as positive body image (Levine & Smolak, 2016) and self-compassion (Braun et al., 2016), as well as risk factors, such as thin-ideal internalisation (Cafri et al., 2005; Thompson & Stice, 2001). These factors were not measured in the current study; however, future research could consider doing so to help identify and provide targeted support to students who do struggle with appearance-related concerns.

Students supported the idea of promoting appearance inclusivity at university and suggested several ways to do this, including using more diverse media imagery and educational initiatives. Importantly, the third theme stressed the importance of initiatives being authentic and genuine as opposed to 'tick box' exercises. Previous research suggests that universities use imagery to craft a specific impression of their institution and, in doing so, many significantly misrepresent the actual student body, particularly using photos of racially minoritised students at higher rates rather than depicting a more representative student population (Pippert et al., 2013; Wilson & Meyer, 2009). This may

explain the emphasis that students in the current study placed on avoiding tokenism and Leah's frustration that the university is "*almost trying to be politically correct... it's like, okay three out of four people on this poster are Black, we're representing*". While it is therefore evident that many universities are already considering factors such as race/ethnicity when diversifying the imagery they use, this should be done in a more representative way to include those with diverse appearances (e.g., visible differences) to help promote appearance inclusivity.

Some students also viewed greater diversity in academic staff as necessary. Previous research involving school-aged children indicates this is beneficial, with those from racially minoritised groups benefitting from exposure to teachers of the same race through improved grades as well as intentions to pursue higher education (Dee, 2004; Gershenson et al., 2018). This is theorised to be because racially minoritised teachers can serve as role models to motivate students and are also less likely to have negative perceptions of racially minoritised students, resulting in better treatment of them (Egalite & Kisida, 2018). As university staff are often perceived as role models by students (Jack et al., 2017), similar mechanisms may occur in the university context and diversifying staff may therefore be an effective way to foster appearance inclusivity.

As acknowledged by participants, strategies for promoting appearance inclusivity could also include developing training modules, which could increase students' awareness of appearance-related issues and support resources as well as how to champion inclusivity. Whilst many universities are adopting educational initiatives to promote EDI and target other issues affecting students such as rape awareness (e.g., University of Cambridge, 2024) and mental health (e.g., University of Nottingham, 2021), these have yet to be developed for broader appearance-related issues such as body dissatisfaction and stigma towards visible difference. Considering the known negative impact of poor body image and appearance concerns on student health and wellbeing together with the findings of this study, training focused on promoting inclusivity of a diverse range of appearances could be a promising avenue for addressing these issues.

Of note, whilst these strategies may increase appearance inclusivity and help bring positive change to university culture, consideration should also be given to removing barriers for students with appearance concerns to access academic and wellbeing support. For example, virtual initiatives enabling them to avoid being seen by others may increase support seeking and prevent issues escalating. Additionally, while the barriers and goals are similar for promoting appearance inclusivity in any academic institution, attention should be given to ensuring that interventions for a university context are age-appropriate, flexible, and consider multiple ways to engage students both in person and online, as students are not always physically required to attend campus for their studies. Future research should focus on developing and evaluating such interventions and strategies, following a person-based approach to intervention development wherever possible and ensuring they are co-produced with students from a diverse range of backgrounds (Yardley et al., 2015).

#### 4.1. Strengths and Limitations

The current study has several strengths. Firstly, there was diversity in the participants when it came to characteristics including age, course subjects studied, and race/ethnicity. In the UK higher education population in 2021/22, 73 % of students identified as White and 64 % were under 24 years in 2020/2021 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2023), whereas in the current study 41 % identified as White and 47 % were under 24 years. This increased inclusion of participants from underrepresented groups is particularly beneficial given the nature of the research topic and provides a more meaningful insight into their lived and/or living experiences, rather than centring the perspectives of the 'usual suspects' who often dominate research (i.e., White, straight, middle-class people; Braun & Clarke, 2013). Future research could build upon this by aiming to understand the unique experiences of students

from different groups in further detail, so that interventions may be targeted to address their needs and promote equity in the student population.

Another strength was that students were included within the project as part of an advisory board for a larger project. Including those with lived and/or living experience is an important aspect of research (Taylor, 2002) and can provide insight on the appropriateness, relevance, and sensitivity of research topics and design, and increase recruitment rates (Brett et al., 2014). As such, future research should include elements of Patient and Public Involvement in similar ways.

There are also several limitations to this study. Firstly, interviews and focus groups were conducted online rather than in person, which may have hindered our ability to build and maintain rapport with participants as well as detect visual cues (De Villiers et al., 2021). This could have negatively impacted the overall quality of communication (Fielding & Thomas, 2008) and resulted in participants' feeling less comfortable and providing less detailed responses, especially due to the sensitive nature of the research topic. Future studies should consider these limitations alongside the advantages of online research, such as ease of access, when deciding on data collection methods.

Secondly, most participants were women; therefore, our understanding of how appearance-related issues may impact people of other genders as well as suggestions for promoting appearance inclusivity remain limited. Similarly, data about participants' sexuality was not collected. Previous research suggests that a range of rigidly policed appearance norms exist for LGBTQIA+ communities (Clarke & Turner, 2007; Huxley & Hayfield, 2012), which may contribute to unique appearance-related concerns, such as an increased likelihood for gay men to internalise appearance ideals promoting athleticism (Alleva et al., 2018). As such, information about participants' sexuality could have been useful in the current study. Future research should focus on understanding the experiences of students with a range of gender identities and sexualities to build on the practical suggestions from this study.

Of note, we would like to acknowledge the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this research, which is both helpful in terms of understanding its potential impact but also a limitation in the uniqueness of the social context. The pandemic brought additional stressors to the lives of many students which, for many, resulted in negative consequences for their mental health (Fruehwirth et al., 2021). In the current study, this may have subsequently worsened students' appearance concerns as well as affected their perception of appearance inclusivity at university. Of note, this may be particularly relevant for students from racially minoritised groups, due to the intersection between racism and COVID-19 impact (Boserup et al., 2020).

Further, while the research did not take place during any national lockdowns and students were permitted to be on campus, the pandemic was ongoing, and there was a greater number of classes and meetings being held online rather than in person. The specific impact of this on participants' appearance perceptions is, however, difficult to discern as evidence is mixed, with some studies suggesting a link between video call usage during COVID-19 and appearance dissatisfaction (e.g., Pikoos et al., 2021), while others have found no significant relationship (e.g., Gullo & Walker, 2021). Nevertheless, this should be considered when interpreting the findings and in future research as evidence emerges.

## 5. Conclusions

Improving appearance inclusivity should be a priority for universities as part of EDI and health promotion initiatives, not only for the direct benefits on student health and wellbeing, but for the potential subsequent improvements in student engagement and learning. To achieve greater appearance inclusivity, universities should consider the issues faced by students and how to address them, which may include increasing the diversity of staff and media imagery, encouraging positive intergroup contact, and developing educational initiatives such as

training focused on appearance inclusivity.

Finally, when considering and implementing changes, a diverse range of individuals should be included in decision-making processes. This should include those from underrepresented and minoritised groups to gain insight into their needs, help avoid tokenism, and ensure strategies are effective in promoting appearance inclusivity in the university context.

## Ethics

Ethical approval was received from the University of the West of England's Faculty Research Ethics Committee (HAS.21.06.157).

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## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Ella Guest:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Diana Harcourt:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Rachel Stokes:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Amy Slater:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Emma Waite:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Jade Parnell:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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## Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at doi:10.1016/j.bodyim.2024.101809.

## Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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