



“Presentable for the outside world”: Social class, cultural capital and body image amongst White working-class women in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Women’s body image is influenced by sociocultural factors. Given that social class shapes people’s sociocultural environments and socialisation experiences, little is known about how social class influences women’s body image. Moreover, given that existing body image literature tends to recruit early adult middle-class populations, working-class women’s body image experiences remain underrepresented in appearance research. The current study aims to broaden the understanding of women’s body image by examining how working-class women in early adulthood make sense of their bodies and appearance using an interpretative phenomenological approach. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 cisgender, heterosexual, White working-class women (21–35 years old) in the United Kingdom. Our findings highlight how the White working-class women in our sample were passively situated in positions where they lacked choice and control over the events that take place in their lives (Superordinate Theme 1). Within these contexts, they made sense of the importance of adhering to group norms to avoid social penalties (via appearance; Superordinate Theme 2), and viewed appearance as a form of capital that garners intrinsic gains and extrinsic benefits (Superordinate Theme 3). Our findings reflect the uniqueness of our sample of younger working-class women’s body image experiences and highlight the importance of emic research in giving voice to underrepresented populations.

1. Introduction

Body image is a fluid and dynamic process of understanding how people make sense of their bodies (Gleeson & Frith, 2006). Given that body image is continually shaped by the dialogical nature between people and their contexts, people are socialised to interpret and internalise specific appearance-related visual cues and/or codes within their sociocultural environment; this influences their body image (Gleeson & Frith, 2006). In particular, social class is an important context that shapes the environment that people find themselves within (e.g., different types of workplaces and/or schools; Stephens et al., 2014); yet, how social class shapes body image has scarcely been explored in existing literature. Within different social class contexts, people foster culture-specific selves, which provide interpretive frameworks that guides them in making sense of themselves and their environments

(Stephens et al., 2014). However, little is known about how culture-specific selves are manifested in people’s body image. Moreover, with most existing body image studies recruiting predominantly (White) middle-class women samples (e.g., student samples, Harrison, 2003), it is important to unpack the heterogeneity of White women’s body image experiences, as “people who bring different selves to the situation will experience the ‘same’ situation as a different reality” (Stephens & Townsend, 2013, p.128). As such, the current study employs an interpretative analytical approach to examine (White) working-class women’s unique body image experiences.

1.1. Gendered sociohistorical significance of social class in the United Kingdom

Contemporary understandings of social class in the United Kingdom

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(UK) is perhaps best examined starting from the 1980s (Jones, 2011). The political agendas and influences during this time—including the dismantling of the mining industries, trade unions and council housing, as well as welfare state reforms—played a significant role in reconfiguring how social class is perceived and constructed within British society. In particular, political discourses about how the ‘aspirational’ working-classes have joined the middle-classes that began emerging in the 80 s have shaped narratives that portrayed those ‘left behind’ as lacking ambition and being unwilling or unable to seize the opportunity for social mobility. Given this sociopolitical and historical context, it is important to acknowledge the challenge in categorically defining what ‘working-class’ means in the UK, due to difficulties in reconciling ideas of social class as an objective (e.g., economic status) and subjective characteristics, including perceptions (class identification, Savage et al., 2010) and social constructions (Raisborough et al., 2013). In this paper, we aim to approach social class as a sociocultural context which are shaped by both objective and subjective characteristics of social class. Accordingly, working-class contexts are characterised by constraints in economic and cultural capital—and by extension, lower power and status—as well as fewer opportunities for choice, control, and influence (than middle-class contexts; Stephens et al., 2014).

To understand women’s body image experiences, it is important to contextualise the historical pathologisation of the (White) working-classes in the UK (see Skeggs, 1997). Bourdieu claimed that the universal ideals of social competence, or “the art of behaving *comme il faut*,” are characterised by having ‘good taste’, or being ‘cultured’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p.4744), which are historically displayed within the UK through women’s performance of femininity (see Gunn, 2005). As such, social class is embodied and observable through women’s appearance; bodies that deviate from middle-class femininity are pathologised (see Frith, 2012; Gunn, 2005). This continues to prevail in contemporary mainstream British discourses (see Jones, 2011) and popular culture (e.g., reality television programmes; Raisborough et al., 2013; Wood & Skeggs, 2008). For example, on British makeover reality television programmes (e.g., *What Not To Wear*), women are offered opportunities for self-transformation by displaying middle-class femininity through (middle-class) appearance-related practices (see Frith, 2012), particularly in avoiding clothing that signalled excess in “sexual, colour, frills [and] bodily exposure” (Wood & Skeggs, 2008, p. 201). These types of media representations and messaging have consequences for working-class women, as their ‘failure’ to achieve ideals of (middle-class) femininity leads to forms of marginalisation and discrimination, and inevitably perpetuates cycles of oppression through symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2003; Skeggs, 1997).

Whilst existing research on discursive constructions of the intersection of working-class women’s gender and class within mainstream media exists (Raisborough et al., 2013), no research thus far has sought to understand how White working-class women themselves make sense of their appearance and bodies against a backdrop of gendered and classed discourses in the UK. Given the focus of mainstream discourses on working-class women on their womanhood (e.g., sexuality, mothering practices; cite) and the uniqueness of early adulthood as a life phase—where women experience distinct biological (i.e., pre-menopausal) and socioemotional development (e.g., increasing agency; cite)—we aim to explore how UK-based White working-class women in early adulthood make sense of their bodies and appearance using an interpretative phenomenological approach. It is worth noting that our focus in the current study on *White* working-class women is rooted in the sociopolitical and historical significance of this particular demographic within Britain. For example, class politics in the UK are often targeted at White people such as the construction of the derogatory term, ‘chav’, which is typically used to describe the White underclass and reflects a lack of morality (Le Grand, 2015). However, we emphasise that the impact of limited resources (i.e., low SES) and its related socialisation for racially Minoritised women in the UK (e.g., Mangalore & Knapp, 2012) should not be dismissed.

1.2. Sociocultural perspectives of body image and social class

Sociocultural models of body image in typically posit that women’s body image are shaped by the social and cultural factors within their environments (Tiggemann, 2011). For instance, the tripartite model of influence (Thompson et al., 1999) highlights: i) how sociocultural contexts influence women’s socialisation in relation to appearance ideals; and ii) the processes through which sociocultural appearance ideals, over time, transform from *external* aesthetic observations to *internal* appearance-related goals and pressures. For instance, existing literature has consistently found associations between the internalisation of thin ideal and body image, including appearance anxiety, body esteem and body dissatisfaction (see Grabe et al., 2008; Rodgers et al., 2015), amongst mostly White middle-class women. However, the conceptualisation of body image as a multifaceted concept commonly employed in existing literature, to an extent, is rooted in positivism, as it necessarily assumes that these dimensions of body image are ‘real,’ measurable and, to an extent, accurately reflect an internal state (Gleeson & Frith, 2006). Given our interpretative analytical approach in the current study, we embrace Gleeson and Frith’s (2006) position that body image is a dynamic process that is actively constructed and situated within broader social, cultural, historical, political and discursive contexts—particularly class-based contexts—rather than a formed product (that, at times, fluctuates).

The sociocultural perspective of social class posits that social class is a sociocultural context (beyond resource affordability) that facilitates socialisation; this has implications for women’s body image (Chan et al., 2024). It is important to note the distinction between socioeconomic status (SES) and social class, where SES is indicative of people’s current access to resources (e.g., income, education) and social class is a social category and/or context and facilitates socialisation (Easterbrook, Kuppens, & Grigoryan, 2023). Stephens and colleagues (2014) proposed that structural differences in people’s social class contexts shape the circumstances that they are in and give rise to culture-specific selves; in turn, their culture-specific selves shape the way they interact with others and navigate their environments through culture-specific ways of feeling, thinking and behaving. Notably, working-class environments—which are relatively more materially constrained and precarious—produce ‘hard interdependent’ norms, where people develop a sense of connectedness, similarity to others and adaptability to thrive in an environment with fewer opportunities for choice and influence (Stephens et al., 2014). This is supported by research that found that people from working-class contexts made sense of the concept of ‘choice’ as a function of similarity to others, rather than a distinction from others (Stephens et al., 2007). This may have implications in body image research due to its relevance to women’s body and/or appearance-related choices. Moreover, Stephens and colleagues (2014) proposed that culture-specific selves are (re)produced within families, schools and workplaces; considering these overlaps with the roles of peers, family and parents as socialising agents in the tripartite model of influence (Thompson et al., 1999), it is possible that further explorations of women’s body image experiences from a social class perspective could provide more nuanced understandings on *how* these appearance-related socialising agents might operate within different social class contexts.

However, no research thus far has examined social class as a sociocultural context when examining women’s body image. Most existing quantitative studies have typically focused on or operationalised social class as SES, such as education (Gavin et al., 2010), occupation (McLaren & Kuh, 2004), income (Paeratakul et al., 2002) and/or subjective rank-based SES (Chan & Hurst, 2022). Findings thus far have also been mixed, with research indicating positive (e.g., Paeratakul et al., 2002), negative (e.g., van den Berg et al., 2010) or no relationships (Caradas et al., 2001) between SES and body image. Aside from these largely inconclusive findings, the examination of women’s body image and SES necessarily takes on a narrow perspective, as this assumes that women’s

appearance-related experiences are solely a function of their consumption, rather than their socialisation. As such, these existing findings merely highlight how access to resources is associated with body image, with little understanding as to *how* women’s access to resources shape their appearance-related socialisation processes and body image experiences.

To-date, few qualitative studies have examined women’s body image in relation to social class. One study highlighted the importance of understanding Chilean women’s body image as a function of class and gender (Robinovich et al., 2018), such that women from the lower social positions were prioritised a “comfortable and functional body” for pragmatic reasons over aesthetic reasons rooted in their intersecting class and gender identities. However, it is worth noting that the women’s social positions were derived from their educational attainment, thus reflecting (cultural) affordability rooted in the cultural capital obtained from their educational backgrounds (i.e., SES), rather than social class. Another study conducted in the United States (US) highlighted the importance of situating women’s experiences within broader sociohistorical context – notably, the situatedness of African American women with broader sociopolitical and historical influence of slavery influenced how they experienced self-objectification and physical safety anxiety within heteropatriarchal American society (Watson et al., 2012). However, social class in this study was examined through women’s social positioning as a function of racialised power dynamics in this study (Watson et al., 2012); as such, social class as a cultural context (see Stephens et al., 2014) has yet been foregrounded in explorations on women’s body image. Further, whilst these studies shed light on the interaction between women’s sociocultural environments, including social class, and their body image, differences in sociocultural, political and historical contexts (i.e., between Chile, the US and the UK) and discourses within these contexts shape women’s intersectional identities (e.g., race, gender and class; Crenshaw, 2017) and appearance-related experiences differently. To address these gaps, the current study seeks to explore White working-class women’s experiences of body image by contextualising their experiences within their working-class context in the UK.

1.3. The current study

We employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a methodology to allow for an idiographic examination of White working-class women’s lived experiences in early adulthood and an in-depth exploration of how they attach meanings to their bodies and appearance. Considering that people are often not explicitly aware of how their social class contexts provide structure and meaning to their patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Stephens et al., 2007), the commitment to the double hermeneutic in IPA is particularly valuable; the researchers are allowed to interpret, contextualise and reflect on participants’ interpretations of their experiences by shedding light on how the manifestations of culture-specific selves might have emerged in their experiences, which might otherwise be unrepresented in the literature. We approached the current study from a contextual constructivist perspective; we acknowledge that the knowledge produced is contextualised within specific contexts and the reflection of truth in participants’ experiences are the product of both the participants’ and the researchers’ meaning making (Smith et al., 2021).

A subset of themes that are part of a larger IPA project (see Chan et al., 2024) are presented in the current paper. These themes reflect a broad research question: how do UK-based White working-class women in early adulthood make sense of their bodies and appearance? By examining experiences from a bottom-up approach and grounding our analysis in participants’ data, the current study creates space for unique perspectives to emerge, from a working-class sample, on a phenomenon (i.e., body image) that has been theorised primarily with data from middle-class samples.

2. Method

2.1. Sampling and participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit a homogenous sample that represented a particular perspective (Smith et al., 2021); considering the importance of context for IPA analyses (Shinebourne, 2011), we imposed specific selection criteria (i.e., cisgender, heterosexual, White women, who were aged between 18 and 35 years) to maintain homogeneity. Recruitment materials were distributed on social media (i.e., Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) and to local community groups in Summer 2021, following ethical approval from the University of Sussex. In the context of the Covid-19 lockdown, only online recruitment methods were successful. Following an expression of interest, interviews were arranged through email communications between the participant and the first author. Whilst small sample sizes are common for studies using IPA as a methodology, there are no specific rules on sample sizes for IPA studies (see Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

In total, we recruited ten White working-class women through word-of-mouth (n = 2), Facebook community groups (n = 2) and paid Facebook advertisements (n = 6) to participate in a study on their social background and body image with the incentive of a £ 10 shopping voucher. The women were aged between 21 and 35 years and based in England. Before the interview, participants were asked through a demographic questionnaire, “how would you describe your social class?” as a means to locate individuals within their social class context. Out of the ten women, eight self-identified as working-class. Two participants did not explicitly identify as middle-class or working-class, but rather a mix of and/or between both. It is worth noting that a sense of ambivalence around social class identification is not uncommon in the UK (Savage et al., 2001), particularly for working-class women who might want to distance themselves from pathologisation (Skeggs, 1997); this complexity does not necessarily mean that social class is negligible, as challenges in meaningful self-identification to a particular social class group do not discount their class-based socialisations and experiences (Savage et al., 2001; Savage et al., 2010). Considering our focus on women’s social class context, we made decisions—for the two particular participants who did not categorically identify as working-class (or middle-class)—based on their parents’ education and occupation, as these shape the social class contexts that people inhabit from a young age (Lareau, 2011). Participants’ demographic information is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Participants’ demographics.

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Education	Children
Anna	21	Part-time contract work	Undergraduate degree	No
Becca	25	Teaching assistant	Undergraduate degree	No
Cherry	33	Healthcare assistant	A-levels	Yes
Cori	31	Psychologist in a special needs high school ^a	Postgraduate degree	No
Indie ^b	32	Healthcare assistant	A-levels	Yes
Jess	34	Administrator	A-levels	No
Luna ^b	33	Unemployed	Undergraduate degree	No
Peach	35	Call centre operator ^a	Undergraduate degree	Yes
Summer	29	Probation officer	Postgraduate degree	Yes
Wilma	31	Speech language therapist	Postgraduate diploma	No

Note.

^a Reflects participants’ who were in between jobs during the time of the interview. Their most recent jobs are presented.

^b Reflects participants who were grouped based on their parents’ occupation and education.

2.2. Data collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews that were guided by an interview schedule based on the principles of IPA data collection outlined by [Smith and colleagues \(2021\)](#). To ensure accessibility for our community sample and to facilitate good data collection through good interview skills ([Miller et al., 2018](#); [Smith, 2011a](#)), we refined this schedule after trialling it with three independent, non-specialist individuals prior to data collection; for example, instead of the terms ‘social class’ and ‘body image,’ I asked participants if they thought their social background has affected the way they feel or think about their bodies. The final interview schedule focused on three broad areas including participants’ thoughts and feelings about their bodies, perceived appearance-related expectations and participants’ understanding of social class (see [Supplementary Materials](#)), with room to follow up and discuss any new or unprompted experiences. Before the interview, participants provided informed consent and completed a survey with demographic questions (e.g., social class group identification, parents’ occupation and parents’ education) on *Qualtrics*. Given that data collection took place between July 2021 and February 2022, (i.e., shortly after the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions in the UK), the interviews were conducted online via Zoom to minimise the health risks for participants and to increase accessibility. The interviews (25–51 minutes; $M = 43$ minutes)^{1 5} were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. All identifiable information (e.g., location, names) was anonymised. Participants were invited to take part in member reflections in the final stages of the analysis (with the incentive of a £7 shopping voucher). This was to obtain feedback and input from participants on the analysis to enhance transparency and rigour, rather than to serve as a basis for confirming or disconfirming any interpretations ([Smith & McGannon, 2018](#)). Four participants (Cori, Anna, Cherry and Summer) provided their reflections.

2.3. Analysis and trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness and rigour, we followed [Smith, \(2011a, 2011b\)](#) IPA-specific evaluation guide: i) adherence to the philosophical underpinnings of IPA (i.e., phenomenological, hermeneutics and idiography); ii) transparency for readers to understand what was done; iii) evidence of sampling adequacy for each theme; and iv) evidence of a coherent, persuasiveness and interesting analysis. The first author was the main voice of analysis and interpretative in the current research, and the rest of the research team were involved as doctoral supervisors and “critical friends,” who offered alternative perspectives, critiques and contextual information ([Foulger, 2010](#)). The term “I” will be used when referring to the first author and the term “we” will be used when referring to all authors for the remainder of the manuscript.

First, I read and re-read the first transcript whilst listening to the audio recording. During this process, I engaged in the double hermeneutics by making initial interpretative commentaries to the data on the right margin of the transcript, beyond descriptive comments. For instance, for the quote, “although, probably on paper we’d be middle-class, I feel more working-class” I made a linguistic note on how social class is also experienced as a ‘feeling’ beyond social mobility or access to resources. I then identified the essential attributes of these comments and abstracted them into ‘emergent themes’ ([Smith et al., 2009](#)), which were noted on the left margin. Based on the example above, I identified the emergent theme, “stickiness of social class.” In the next step of the analysis, I identified patterns and connections across emergent themes and mapped them out graphically on an online visual platform, *Miro*, before organising them into a table of superordinate themes and themes.

⁵ It is worth noting that the average length of the interviews falls within the ranges of interview lengths in existing IPA studies (e.g., [Dickson et al., 2007](#); [Glackin & Beale, 2018](#); [Meaney et al., 2017](#)).

It is important to note that the analysis continued to take place when moving from the former to the latter.

Following IPA’s commitment to idiography, I repeated the steps above for each of the following transcripts and aimed to treat each transcript on its own terms. I was mindful of occasions when I noticed comments or emergent themes that were similar (or different) from those in previous transcripts; here, I paid particular attention to whether these comments or themes were grounded in the data from the transcript itself. For transparency, I also kept an audit trail by making reflexive notes throughout this process to document any decision made ([Creswell & Miller, 2000](#)). When moving between transcripts, we acknowledge that complete ‘bracketing’ was impossible; however, by keeping a paper trail, we were able to track the shifts in my position as my understanding was continually revised.

When the analysis for each case was completed, I examined the individual tables of superordinate themes and themes to identify how participants’ experiences converged or diverged across cases, as well as similarities and differences in perspectives within themes. I performed several iterations of the analysis and identified recurrent themes – for example, “availability of choice and control” and “availability of resources.” To ensure rigour, we made sure that at least three participants’ accounts were illustrated within each theme, in line with [Smith’s \(2011a\)](#) recommendation for sample sizes larger than eight. As the analysis progressed, the themes became more interpretative and phenomenological in nature to better reflect participants’ experiences. Following this, I made changes by renaming and merging the themes identified, such as merging the superordinate themes mentioned above to form the current superordinate theme, “lack of control.” At the end of this process, I discussed the superordinate themes with the remaining authors, who acted as ‘critical friends.’ To ensure that my analysis was grounded in the data, any interpretations made were checked against the transcript as a measure of good validity ([Shinebourne, 2011](#)). For example, I consistently checked that participants’ accounts were representative of the theme and were contextually relevant. I also provided theme summaries and included convergent and divergent perspectives across cases within a theme whenever possible.

Due to the large number of themes identified in the analysis, we aimed for a coherent, persuasive and interesting analysis by presenting a subset of themes within this paper to allow sufficient space for an in-depth exploration within each theme ([Smith, 2011a](#)). The current study contains a subset of themes that reflected how participants made sense of their bodies and appearance as a function of their passive positioning within their social class environments. It should be noted that the analytic process continued throughout the writing process, where new configurations of themes were developed (see [Glackin & Beale, 2018](#)). I then updated the final table of themes with any changes made. In the final stages, I reflected on my interpretations based on member reflections and made additions to enhance my interpretations in Superordinate Theme 1, Theme 2.1 and the Discussion section.

2.4. Author positionality

Our positionalities situate us within the broader social landscape and inherently shape our worldviews. In this sense, we can never fully escape our subjectivities ([Gadamer, 1990](#)). As such, it is important for us to engage in reflexivity—which refers to a sense of “critical self-awareness of the researcher’s historical-cultural situatedness of the researcher and the context of the research” ([Finlay, 2014](#), p.130)—to critically examine our roles when (co-)producing knowledge. We aimed to achieve transparency by providing a positionality statement on our identities, experiences and backgrounds.

I am a cisgender, queer woman, who has Chinese ancestry. I grew up in Southeast Asia, where social class-based hierarchies are different than in the UK. At the time of the interviews, I was a 26-year-old PhD researcher, who is a first-generation student, and had lived in the UK for approximately six years. The analysis took place for approximately two

years following the interviews. The second author identifies as a cisgender, bisexual, middle-class woman; the third author identifies as a White, cisgender, heterosexual middle-class man, who grew up in a lower middle-class/working-class village; and the fourth author, identifies as a White, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class woman. They were aged between 35 and 37 years at the time of the analysis and grew up in the UK. Our reflexive analysis is further detailed in a parallel paper (Chan et al., 2024).

3. Results

Three superordinate themes were identified and discussed with quotes below. These themes include: 1) “If I had...”: Experiencing a lack of choice and control, 2) “It’s like pack mentality” and 3) Treating appearance as an “asset.”

3.1. “If I had...”: experiencing a lack of choice and control

Participants described a lack of choice—as a function of their class-based contexts and socioeconomic circumstances—that is characterised by an unattainable possibility (“If I had...”). These have implications in how they understood and navigated their bodies and appearance.

Anna was a first-generation student at a prestigious UK university and her father was an engineer who “worked up the ladder” over the course of his career. She described feeling “more working-class” even though “probably on paper we’d be middle-class.” Growing up working-class had resulted in a particular type of lifestyle that was associated with what her family could afford:

Growing up, we had a lot of like, traditional working-class meals like, potatoes smileys, potato waffles, beans and a lot of frozen stuff and I guess in like, families with higher social status, you’re eating healthy meals from a younger age. You’re doing stuff together, like a lot of parents of my friends will do like half marathons or marathons or like, cycle or you know, do like, sports and my parents don’t... do anything like that, um, probably because of the finances involved with getting gym memberships or stuff like that. Um, so I guess I’ve not grown up in an environment that’s like been conducive to having like, a healthy, healthy lifestyle.

In the extract, Anna made sense of having a healthy lifestyle as something that is good for her, though it is noteworthy that her description of what constitutes a healthy lifestyle revolved around commodified health practices (e.g., gym memberships; marathons); her family’s socioeconomic circumstances meant that these health practices were inaccessible to Anna. Anna has also made a clear distinction between the environment that she grew up in and her self-identity, such that having an unhealthy lifestyle was attributed to contextual factors (i.e., growing up in an inconducive environment), rather than personal characteristics (i.e., adopting an unhealthy lifestyle by choice). This distinction seemed to emphasise Anna’s sense of a lack of choice as a passivity rooted in her family’s economic circumstances. Specifically, this had implications in her appearance: “If I had the energy all the time to, to eat what I enjoy and to exercise as I would like, I would, I would most likely have a body size that reflected that lifestyle.” This quote highlights how Anna made sense of her body as being an embodied capital that reflected a body that led a healthy lifestyle and by extension, this meant a body that embodied the ‘right’ type of cultural capital. However, this was hindered by the lack of choice she experienced. It is worth noting that Anna later mentioned in member reflections that she had made different choices as a function of experiencing a greater level of autonomy as an adult; this highlights how her perceived autonomy might have increased as a function of her social mobility.

Indie described how her experience of growing up “below the poverty line” had indirectly shaped the events that occurred in her life, particularly in relation to her body, sexuality, and appearance. For

context, the extract below shows Indie’s description of the food insecurity that she had experienced in her childhood:

I didn’t know if, you know, dinner was going to be more than half a tin of soup and like, half a slice of bread because my mum had a piece of bread and soup to share between me and my brother.

For Indie, the process of the interview then sparked a series of reflections, which led her to question the course that her life has taken stemming from her initial experience of poverty. The following extracts illustrate these:

If I had access to proper nutritional, balanced meals on a regular basis, you know, would I have that intuition to know, that actually I’m full now, I don’t need to carry on eating because I know that you know, come tea time, there’s going to be another healthy, nutritionally-balanced meal for me. So, you know, and... would it then mean that I wouldn’t have had years of being bullied if we weren’t as poor as we were because I wouldn’t have been as fat perhaps.

If I wasn’t bullied, would I have been as promiscuous as I was, trying to find validation for myself as a person in the way of sexual gratification? Um, would I then have, you know... struggled with yo-yo dieting in my adult life? You know, it’s, it’s weird like, try-, like linking it back just to s-, uh, something as simple as not growing up as poor as I did, would that have changed the course of my life, really, in terms of how I see myself and, and the behaviours that I’ve displayed in trying to find validation.

Indie’s process of sensemaking revealed the interconnectedness of the events in her life and suggests that growing up poor was not an encapsulated experience that ended when she became an adult; its effects were reproduced throughout Indie’s adulthood through a series of (compensatory) appearance-related behaviours. Indie’s reflection highlights that social class was not experienced merely as access to resources at a particular timepoints, but rather a context that fosters and reproduces specific types of appearance-related behaviours. For Indie, she seemed to experience a lack of control, which stemmed from childhood poverty, that spilled over into other domains in her life, including the way she viewed her body.

Becca, who was teaching assistant, articulated how she tended to just “get over” appearance pressures to avoid getting upset by unattainable standards:

I feel like I’m quite laid back about my appearance, like yeah, sometimes I don’t feel great and like, I’d like things to be different, but I don’t get caught up in it like, I, I just kind of let it, accept it and let it go. Um, maybe if I had like, been brought up with a different... like, maybe middle-class, then maybe there’d be more emphasis on like, how you look and like, because you’ll have the money to like, change it maybe, to like, buy different clothes or like, do things to alter your appearance and like, maybe you would care... I would care more but, but I don’t know.

It is interesting to note that Becca described herself as being quite “laid back about (her) appearance”, as this sense of being laid back seemed to not to be rooted in body positivity (i.e., a sense of intrinsic pride or acceptance), but rather, a passive acceptance of her appearance due to a lack of choice and control as a function of her social class; this acceptance was despite her desire for a different physical body and/or appearance (“I’d like things to be different”). This suggests how working-class women’s socialisation within their social class contexts shape how they make sense of and navigate their bodies, particularly through passive acceptance.

The following extract from Luna demonstrates how two aspects of working-class women’s identities (i.e., gender and social class) intersect and shaped her experiences with her body. She used to work as an occupational therapist but had been unable to continue working after

being sexually assaulted and had gone through an abortion with complications.

The abortion led to this bleeding and it doesn't stop and it was, I had to take the tablets because of the blood loss. So, that was... and then, they have a side effect of making me put on weight. I guess it was another part of like, I just lost control of my body and like, a lot of these things were happening, big () really fast, um, and there wasn't a lot of support around it and it was kind of like, that's just another thing you have to deal with and um, you know, I wasn't working then. I didn't have money just to be going out buying a whole new wardrobe and it was kind of, I guess like, panic: okay, how much more weight will it be?

The emotional and practical stress that Luna experienced could be attributed to her gender and social class identities – her gender identity as a woman left her in a position (within a heteropatriarchal society) where she was vulnerable to sexual violence; her position as a working-class woman had left her in a situation where she lacked financial resources to deal with the aftermath of the abortion (i.e., to buy new clothes). Notably, the loss of control that Luna experienced seems to be twofold – first, it is the physical violation of the assault and second, it is the loss of control in bodily functions in the aftermath. Luna's loss of control over her physical body rapidly snowballed (“*it doesn't stop*”, “*a lot of these things were happening...really fast*”) into her loss of control over her mental wellbeing. Yet, being at the intersection of class and gender, the experience of losing control over her body seemed to have been trivialised as something that just had to be dealt with.

Despite this loss of control, Luna described how the assault and the abortion had influenced her views on her body and appearance: “I'm kind of like, I don't care how they (men) expect me to look (chuckles). I will look how I want.” This sense of indifference can be interpreted as Luna's way of reclaiming control over her body and freedom. The emphasis of ‘I’s in the last sentence seems to reflect her action of centring herself in her narratives, rather, rather than having her experiences dictated by the trauma that she had experienced.

3.2. “It's like pack mentality”

This theme demonstrates the importance of group-based appearance norms to participants. The first subtheme illustrates participants' experiences of the appearance norms that exist within their friendship groups and their perceived pressures to adhere to these norms. The second subtheme demonstrates how participants understood the social costs that were associated with any deviations from group appearance norms.

3.2.1. “There'd be kind of always a uniform”

Summer mentioned being “genuinely happy not spending (her) money on lip fillers and extensions and (having her) nails done”, as she argued that her value as a human was not based on others' valuations of her aesthetics: “I'm not there for people. I'm not there to aesthetically please anybody.” However, she also described how her friends' appearance maintenance behaviours affected her own behaviours and the way she felt about herself.

Most of my friends are very low maintenance kind of girls, like me. We, you know, still like to put an effort every now and again, but it's not a priority. But again, I do have some friends who are more high maintenance, have extensions, their nails done all the time and eyelashes. Um, so again, if I don't look like that when I'm with them, I do feel inadequate sometimes.

Summer seemed to make sense of her friendship groups in terms of their levels of appearance maintenance; the boundary between ‘high maintenance’ and ‘low maintenance’ seem to be maintained by women's availability of resources, as resource investments are required to upkeep appearance maintenance behaviours (e.g., availability of

economic resources to afford regular manicure). Although Summer argued that her body does not solely exist for the (aesthetical) pleasures of others in general, it seems that she was still susceptible to pressures from specific groups of friends. This suggests that group-based appearance norms may be more important to Summer than universal appearance ideals and/or standards. However, it is worth noting that these appearance maintenance behaviours and feelings about these behaviours were not shared by other working-class women who expressed their views during member reflections.

Similarly, Becca described experiencing pressures from her peers when she was in school, which was the reason why she began experimenting with make-up. Becca is a working-class woman who articulated how she tended to just “get over” appearance pressures to avoid getting upset by unattainable standards. She was never particularly interested in wearing make-up when she was younger: “Just because everybody else was doing it. So, I was like, ‘oh, maybe I should’”. Becca's experience seems to suggest that peer pressures are imposing, rather than inspiring, where the former reflects a sense of conformity and the latter reflects a sense of agency. This highlights a sense of passivity in Becca's acceptance of appearance norms, as she conformed to these norms despite her lack of interest in them.

Wilma described herself as growing up in a council estate that was notorious for being working-class but had also lived in different locations across England at various points of her life. She described her experience of going on a night out in the extract below, where “there'd be kind of always a uniform as such, or a general kind of unspoken vibe,” about the different context-specific appearance-related expectations.

When I was like, back at home or like, my university town, it'd very much be like, short dresses, high heels, fake tan, like, eyelashes, fake nails, that kind of look. In London, I found it a bit more diverse, a bit more varied, a bit more relaxed, which was nice, um, but yeah, I think there was still an expectation that, you know, w-, look sexy and well-presented and kind of, all of those things and, and very feminine. So, you know, it would be long hair. Um, make-up, I suppose, eyelashes and things like that, that you might as-, assume to be slightly more feminine, kind of characteristics. Um, yeah, again, wearing things that flattered your body but still showed it off.

Wilma's understanding of the sense of uniformity in women's appearance within particular groups was not explicitly taught to her (“*a general kind of unspoken vibe*”), but rather, it seems like she had acquired this knowledge implicitly through ways of socialisations throughout her life. In the extract above, Wilma's description particularly highlighted how presentability is enacted in a heteropatriarchal society through the body in showcasing (“*showed it off*”) the performance of gender (“*very feminine*”). However, the extract above suggests that the performance of femininity seems to be dependent on contexts – for instance, Wilma understood the performance of femininity in her university town through wearing short dresses, fake tan and having fake nails and eyelashes; whereas, in London, this was understood as looking “sexy and well-presented.” This suggests the importance of fluid context-based appearance norms for working-class women, possibly as a way to avoid feelings of embarrassment stemming from misreading the appearance requirement within particular situations or for specific occasions (i.e., “getting the wrong end of the stick”).

A further interpretation could be made on the importance of appearance norms over appearance ideals to working-class women by examining another extract from Wilma:

So, we wouldn't have a lot of money. So, we'd go to kind of maybe more fast fashion type of places, where they would be selling, um, you know, short strappy dresses and that's what we'd get, and that'd be cheap and we'd have, um, kind of a, um, yeah, we'd have quite a lot of kind of fast fashion-y, quite (.) cheaper price point stores in [town], in one of the shopping centres in particular, um, near where I worked.

Contextualising this within working-class women's lack of choice (Superordinate Theme 1), the way that Wilma achieved universal appearance ideals were limited by her access to resources; in part, this also refers to the availability of opportunities (i.e., type of clothing shops) in their (working-class) environments. Their limited access to resources might have allowed them to achieve a *version* of a particular ideal (e.g., femininity), which is shaped by their accessibility to resources and the types of clothing shops that are around them (e.g., fast fashion places that sold short strappy dresses). As such, within their local communities, it is possible that achieving appearance norms is important to working-class women, as part of collectively achieving a particular ideal using the same means.

3.2.2. "I don't want to be like, you know, excluded"

Despite Summer's commitment to unsubscribe from any aesthetic valuations of women's body, she still continued to view women's appearance as a function of whether or not they aligned with the 'uniform':

Even now, when you see a woman with thin lips, you kind of think 'oh, something is off about her' and you think, 'she just doesn't have any fillers and that's not okay', you know, but you catch yourself thinking 'what's wrong with her face', but then you look at all these girls and they kind of look the same in the end because the, the, the facial features are so exaggerated.

The extract above highlights the function of appearance norms to Summer, as a basis for evaluating whether one's appearance is 'right' or 'wrong' ("*something is off about her*", "*what's wrong with her face*"), where the former seems to reflect an appearance that conforms to the normative. This conformity seemed important regardless of the awareness that women should not be valued solely based on their appearance. Summer's passive acceptance of these norms and her deliberate effort in policing herself ("*you catch yourself thinking*") potentially reflect the pervasiveness of working-class women's passive acceptance of appearance norms.

Wilma described the social costs of these deviations when explaining her thought process in selecting an attire to a party that was hosted by a friend who was "incredibly glamorous".

I think I wouldn't want to feel... like left out, if that makes sense. So, for example, my friend from the party, you know, I... followed her dress code and things like that, even though I nes-, didn't necessarily feel comfortable, took me a lot of thought than it would take (to) do anything usual(ly).

The extract above suggests that the stipulated dress code was not one that was familiar to Wilma, as it required more thought than usual, possibly because this type of cultural capital was not one Wilma was socialised within. Given Wilma's use of the word 'comfortable' throughout the interview to describe a sense of looking acceptably (or reasonably) attractive—which also seemed to be one of her main appearance goals—it seems that Wilma's desire to fit in within this particular context of attending her (middle-class) friend's party surpassed her everyday need to achieve looking 'comfortable' or attractive. This highlights the importance of adhering to appearance norms, particularly within unfamiliar (higher class) contexts, to avoid feeling alienated.

Cori—who also understood her conformity to appearance norms as a way to avoid social penalties—further described learning this when she was much younger:

At school, it was more like, you know, girls or other students like commenting on someone's butt like 'oh, you know, she's fat or he's fat', um, and then like, maybe not wanting to play with that child that much, like a bit of exclusion or something like that. So, I think, children, I mean, they see that and it's like, 'oh, I don't want to be

like, you know, excluded. I don't want to be, like, I don't want someone to say anything like that on my butt.'

Cori described learning which bodies are accepted, and which are not, to avoid social exclusion as a child. The extract above not only suggests that this socialisation process began at a young age (and continues through to adulthood), but further sheds light on Wilma's description of an "unspoken vibe" (Subtheme 2.1), as the product of observing and learning social cues from group behaviours throughout their lives.

3.3. Treating appearance as an "asset"

Participants described the importance of achieving appearance norms, in part, because appearance confers particular benefits and/or value to them. For instance, Wilma described the importance of appearance when attracting a partner:

I, um, definitely felt that would be the most important thing for someone, in terms of, you know, I was like, 'well, they're [men] not going to look at you and go 'oh you've got a nice personality.' They're not going to see that when they first look at you'. Um, it [attracting as partner] always felt very kind of, based on how you looked.

The quote above highlights Wilma's understanding of appearance as the primary cue for evaluation, particularly when attracting a partner, as having a desirable appearance might influence any subsequent impressions and/or contact. Considering working-class women's lack of choice (Superordinate Theme 1), it could be interpreted that by embodying the *right* appearance, Wilma was able to gain *some* control over her life outcomes—in this case, the potential of finding a partner—by influencing others' impressions of her.

Similarly, Indie mentioned the importance of having a desirable appearance. In particular, this revolved around being smaller in size.

For a long time, I sort of felt that I had to, you know, be smaller to have worth. Um, so, you know, I've tried some of like, you know, the Slimming World and things like that and I realised I was more unhappy whilst trying to become something that I'm

not, than I am actually just embracing, you know, this is the body I have.

Contextualising Indie's childhood (i.e., growing up in poverty), she might have strived to achieve a smaller body as a way to gain worth; this could be a mechanism to counter her lack of control from growing up in poverty. However, it is interesting to note that Indie also mentioned that she was "trying to become something that (she was) not", which seems to reflect her self-identity. For Indie—who described herself as being on the cusp of upper working-class and middle-class—on the one hand, this could be read as her attempt to achieve a body size that was impossible, but on the other, this could refer to the stickiness social class positions; that is, she was never going to possess middle-class cultural capital despite gaining social mobility from her childhood position of poverty. This sense of stickiness echoes Anna's experience in Superordinate Theme 1.

Summer described how being pretty and skinny has both extrinsic and intrinsic values in the following quotes: "You know, pretty and skinny, that sort, you know, you have to look that way, y-, you know, because that way, you kind of get better treatment from men, and I think from women as well" and "It makes you feel good accepted. You know, I think, 'oh, you know, I'm still getting the attention. I've still got it' kind of thing". In the former, having a desirable appearance has extrinsic value, in that it garners acceptance and better treatment from others and, in the latter, "getting attention" has intrinsic value, as it seems to be reflective of a sense of perceived personal strength ("*I've still got it*"). These highlight the associated value that comes with achieving the 'right' appearance.

Further, being situated within a heteropatriarchal society, Cherry recognised that having large chests “used to be quite an asset when (she) was younger”; however, this was a source of tension between other girls and her:

Well, when I was at school, I had large chests, not as big as now, but a lot, few of the girls would say comments like ‘oh, I bet those aren’t real’ you know and it’s sort of what, why they stick out and all this sort of thing, but it’s just because I developed younger, either they were jealous because I’ve got a lot of male attention, you know, teenage boys and all that.

The use of the word “asset” by Cherry suggests a transactional relationship between herself (including her appearance) and her environment (including any external observers). During the interview, Cherry mentioned experiencing sexualisation as a result of having large chests and actively trying to avoid being sexualised (in adulthood); despite this, Cherry seemed to make sense of her experiences from her younger self in a way that highlights how she perceived her large chests as a form of capital within a heteropatriarchal society, as it attracted attention from boys. This seems to further highlight a lack of choice (Superordinate Theme 1) that working-class women experience within a heteropatriarchal society.

From a different perspective, Jess’ understanding of appearance maintenance sheds an interesting light on social class dynamics and hierarchies. She articulated her feelings of awe and respect for women who “take great pride in their presentation and appearance, which is good because it’s good to look good and smart for things, you know, in some cases you have to, um, you know, especially for work and jobs.” She then went on to elaborate: “the difference between someone who does look sort of very nice, presentable on the outside and someone who hasn’t, a bit more scruffier, demonstrates the difference between one who’s made the effort and one who hasn’t”. Firstly, Jess perceived appearance as a type of embodied capital that has further implications in impacting the trajectory of one’s life (i.e., through job prospects). Secondly, Jess’ understanding of the distinction between women who make an effort on their appearance and those who do not suggests that this distinction dictates whether a woman is respected—and by extension, respectable—or not. These seem to reinforce the traditional narratives of respectability in the context of the UK, which dictates that middle-class women are inherently respectable, which leaves working-class women as the ‘other’, who lacked respectability.

From a different perspective, Anna highlighted the costs of appearance maintenance. She described spending a significant amount of time on exercising and controlling her diet to maintain her appearance in the past, which was unsustainable when she started university.

I just did not have the time to exercise and control food as much as I was doing when I started university. Um, and I think at that point, it was like, you know, if I dedicate so much time into, into food and exercise, I’m literally just not going to be able to do any work.

Despite the value of appearance as a form of capital that garners intrinsic and extrinsic benefits, Anna’s quote suggests that the attainment of an appearance that qualified as a form of capital required the investment of resources. It is possible that this puts working-class women in a bind, as the attainment of particular types of appearance garners certain forms of capital (e.g., social capital from acceptance by others) but at the same time, it involves the investment of other forms of capital (e.g., economic capital in terms of time and resources), which may be inaccessible or restricted for working-class women, such as Anna.

4. Discussion

The current study explored how UK-based White working-class women in early adulthood make sense of their bodies and appearance within their social class contexts. Our findings suggest that White

working-class women’s lack of financial resources situated them in a position where they lacked choice—and by extension, control—over subsequent life events; this extended to the domain of appearance (Superordinate Theme 1). This lack of choice and control, at times, manifested as passive acceptance of context-based and/or group-based appearance norms, as a way to fit in or avoid social exclusions (Superordinate Theme 2). In part, this was because the women in our sample viewed appearance as a form of embodied capital that could be used to garner intrinsic gains and extrinsic benefits (Superordinate Theme 3).

We found that our sample of White working-class women’s sense-making of their bodies and appearance in relation to their social class context is complex. Some participants viewed their bodies as a function of affordability and consumption based on their (lack of) access to resources, particularly during their childhood; their family’s financial constraints and lifestyles meant that they had little choice in their diets (e.g., reliant on foodbanks, consuming frozen food) and few opportunities to engage in physical activities. This finding is consistent with the social gradient in health, which suggests that people with lower income tend to have poorer health (Public Health England, 2017) due to poorer lifestyle factors. Our findings also suggest that these health and food-related behaviours are transmitted intergenerationally, as one participant explicitly reflected on how her eating habits were indirectly shaped by her parent’s social class as described during member reflections. Additionally, we found that participants’ sensemaking was shaped by *how* they were socialised against a background of material constraint. For instance, food insecurity led to external validation seeking behaviours (e.g., sexual gratification) through a series of events that included overeating, gaining weight and being bullied; financial constraints (e.g., inability to afford buying new clothes) led to anxieties relating to weight gain; lack of choice led to a sense of indifference (i.e., passive acceptance) of one’s appearance. This highlights the complexity in how a lack of resources shaped our sample of White working-class women’s availability of choice and opportunities directly in their social class contexts, and indirectly through their decisions and behaviours in subsequent appearance-related socialisation experiences.

We also found that our sample’s socialisation experiences played a role in shaping how they navigate their worlds with a sense of passivity, including their body image. Specifically, their intersecting gender and class positions within heteropatriarchal UK society meant that they were socialised within environments with little choice and control, including how they navigate their bodies and appearance-related experiences. These findings have theoretical generalisability as they offer the potential for integration with existing theorisations. For instance, social class research suggests that different types of culture-specific ‘selves’ act as an interpretative framework that guides people’s ways of thinking, feeling and behaving, and are (re-)produced through the intersecting contexts that people are socialised within (Stephens et al., 2014). Our novel exploration in the domain of appearance and body image contributes towards existing sociopsychological theorisation; we found that the women in our sample are socialised to foster culture-specific selves that are passive by adapting to their working-class environments with the resources that are available to them through their bodies and appearance. Moreover, it is worth noting that participants’ themselves mentioned during member reflections that their socialisation within environments where they lacked choices meant that they themselves were not aware of the range of choices that existed beyond the options available to them.

Extant body image literature—which are predominantly based on middle-class samples—tends to focus on the internalisation of socio-cultural appearance *ideals* (Thompson et al., 1999); our findings suggest the need to consider the pressures associated with the adherence to appearance *norms*, as these may be more salient and important for White working-class women. In contrast with the notion of appearance *ideals*—which are generally more fixed and tend to be similar for women across larger contexts (e.g., high SES contexts; Swami et al., 2010)—we found that appearance norms were more adaptable and were dependent

on local peer groups and/or contexts for the women in our sample. For instance, women's performance of femininity differed, as evidenced by our finding that the performance of femininity in a metropolitan area in the UK focused on looking "well-presented", but in a city in North England, it was focused around fake tan, fake nails and fake eyelashes. Bourdieu (1984) proposed that people's choices reflected their cultural capital; that is, choices that signalled 'good' taste were reflective of the upper classes, who were socialised to possess the *right* cultural capital. As such, it is possible that White working-class woman's adherence to appearance norms—thereby mimicking the *right* cultural capital within any given context and/or peer groups—might have served as a self-protection mechanism (Chan et al., 2024) to avoid making observable appearance-based mistakes and demonstrating the 'wrong' cultural capital. This has scarcely been explored in existing predominantly middle-class-focused literature. Our interpretations of this further resonated with participants during member reflection ("getting the wrong end of the stick").

It is additionally important to note the distinctions between appearance *ideals* and appearance *norms*, as this has theoretical generalisability for body image research: appearance *ideals* reflect appearance goals that are characterised by having the 'perfect' appearance (e.g., the curvaceously thin ideal typically examined using middle-class samples, Harrison, 2003), whereas appearance *norms*—in our study—refer to an appearance that is similar to the appearance of others within peer groups or contexts (e.g., on a night out). Notably, the contrast between achieving uniqueness—by embodying the 'perfect,' but often unattainable appearance ideal—and achieving similarity by embodying appearance norms echoes findings from social class research, which suggests that individuals from working-class contexts prefer to be similar to others as a way to fit in (Stephens et al., 2007). This highlights the value in considering theoretical insights from existing social class literature in body image research to fully capture White working-class women's experiences. This also emphasises the need to critically position body image knowledge within class-specific contexts to avoid normalising middle-class perspectives as the universal standard across populations. Further research is needed to understand the nuances of women's internalisation of appearance *ideals* and *norms*, particularly considering the unattainability of appearance ideals (Calogero et al., 2007), in contrast to the attainability of appearance norms, as evidenced by maintenance of these norms in everyday life.

We also found that the White working-class women in our study viewed their appearance as a form of (embodied) cultural capital that had transactional value in personal and social outcomes, provided they are aligned with appearance norms. For instance, being thin helped them increase their self-worth, whereas looking attractive resulted in better treatment from others. Considering the lack of choice and control in White working-class women's lives due to the limited choices imposed by their material constraints (Stephens et al., 2014), it is possible that the women in our study were socialised to view appearance as a compensatory mechanism. For instance, by embodying the *right* kind of appearance, White working-class women might be able to influence others' evaluations of them, which might be an indirect way to gain some control over their life outcomes, including marriage and/or job opportunities (see Skeggs, 1997). This is not to say that appearance is a form of embodied cultural capital *only* to White working-class women, but rather, the White working-class women in our study made sense of their appearance this way. However, the notion that appearance is a form of capital necessarily separates women's appearance and their bodies from their person, and thus, objectifies and defines them by the value that their appearance hold. Existing research examining beauty as currency suggests that this has negative personal (e.g., self-objectification) and collective action implications (e.g., gender activism; Calogero et al., 2017). Moreover, the view that appearance has value has hierarchical implications, such that some appearances are valued more than others (see Frith, 2012); this inadvertently maintains cycles of inequalities, as those who have the *right* knowledge and the

means to invest in the *right* appearance inherently occupy a higher status.

4.1. Reflexive analysis

This section aims to discuss my role as the primary researcher throughout the research process. My background in appearance research meant that my familiarity with existing body image literature inevitably shaped my interpretations. For example, I had initially generated themes on 'appearance ideals' during the analytic process, likely because the internalisation of appearance ideals is one of the most commonly examined phenomenon in body image research (e.g., Grabe et al., 2008; Rodgers et al., 2015); however, I was conscious that participants' experiences did not reflect a 'universal' ideal, but rather, sets of 'ideals' *within* particular groups. This prompted me to zoom out of the existing literature, which led me to theorise that the pressures that participants had experienced revolved around context-based appearance *norms* rather than universal appearance *ideals*.

Given the sensitivities around discussions of social class in the UK (see Skeggs, 1997), I asked participants to reflect on their appearance in relation to their "social background" (see [Supplementary Materials](#))—rather than directly mentioning 'social class'—as a strategy to mitigate potential discomfort that might arise during the interview, considering the negative portrayal of the working-classes in mainstream media. As such, our analyses of participants' class-based appearance-related experiences relied on the double hermeneutic circle in IPA analyses: In the first hermeneutic circle, participants' interpretations of their lived experiences were situated, whereas in the second hermeneutic circle, participants' appearance-related experiences were contextualised against their social class contexts, as well as the broader constructions of class within the UK, as part of our sensemaking of participants' sensemaking. To ensure that our contextualisation and interpretations were ethical and representative of their experiences, we additionally sought participants' feedback through member reflections. Nevertheless, we encourage future research to examine participants' reflections on their appearance in relation to their social class directly.

My outgroup identities—particularly those that were externally identifiable such as my racialised, queer-presenting appearance and my accent—might have been beneficial, in that the women were more willing to open up to me in ways that they might not have, if I were, for instances, a middle-class White woman. Despite lacking shared experiences and British cultural capital, my consumption of mainstream media helped in establishing rapport as participants were able to make references to television shows (e.g., *Motherland*) as a form of shared context in understanding British social class dynamics through the media. I have also interpreted positive feedback from participants as a reflection of resonance between my analysis and their experiences. Specifically, one participant described how reading the analysis had "taken weight off [her] shoulders" as she experienced a sense of solidarity and felt less alone through other participants' experiences. Nevertheless, it is important to note that participants might have positioned me as being middle-class based on my role as a researcher at a higher educational institution, which likely shaped the data collected.

4.2. Critical considerations and future directions

The current study has several strengths. First, IPA's commitment to phenomenology and the double hermeneutic meant that we were able to examine participants' lived experiences, whilst contextualising the meanings that they attach to these experiences within their sociocultural contexts. This was particularly valuable considering the lack of mainstream social class-related body image discourse. Second, our study has merits in transferability (see Hays & McKibben, 2021), due to our transparency with contextual information, which allows the reader to evaluate the extent to which our findings resonate with their experiences. Third, on presenting our findings at academic conferences, we

noted that working-class women in academia reflected on how our themes resonated with the challenges they experienced around navigating differential cultural capitals; this suggests that our study has naturalistic generalisability (see Smith, 2018), which should be further explored in future research.

Nevertheless, our findings should be considered critically. As our sample size is relatively large for a typical IPA study, only a subset of themes was presented in the current paper to enhance methodological quality (Smith, 2011a); however, doing this necessarily omits any connections between the current subset of themes and other themes in the larger study. For example, in this paper, we discussed younger White working-class women's sensemaking of appearance norms as a way to fit in within their peer groups and/or locale as distinct subset of themes from those found in our parallel paper (Chan et al., 2024) relating to experiences of objectification, harassment and pathologisation. We also recognise that our homogenous sampling is, to an extent, representative of a specific majoritised population in the UK (i.e., younger, White, heterosexual and cisgender women); this was a purposive decision to avoid risking accidentally absorbing unique Minoritised experiences (e.g., lesbian, racially Minoritised and/or older women) into mainstream narratives (e.g., heteronormative, white-centric and/or early adult narratives). We encourage future research on working-class women's body image experiences to further examine intersectional Minoritised experiences (e.g., working-class women from racially Minoritised groups in the UK).

Additionally, we note that our sample of working-class women constitute those of relatively higher socioeconomic status amongst working-class individuals, as most of the women have had tertiary education, despite self-identifying as being working-class. Given the middle-class-ness of higher education contexts, it is possible that this meant that the participants in our sample might have been more aware about differences in cultural capital across social class contexts, thus playing a role in their experiences of adopting appearance norms as a way of fitting in. However, it is worth noting that the 'representation' of a perspective is emphasised through the use of IPA, rather than the representation of a population (Smith et al., 2021); as such, our findings should be considered within this demographic. Future research should consider furthering this line of research to recruiting working-class women who have not attended university. Although we recognise that it is potentially challenging to reach working-class women for academic research—in part due to the perceived mismatch in cultural capital and identification between working-class contexts and academic spaces, particularly for those who have not had tertiary education—it is nevertheless important to recruit this population, for instance, through community-based partnerships and/or local community centres in working-class neighbourhoods.

Moreover, it is important to consider how the virtual nature of the interviews via Zoom played a role in shaping the specific interactions between the researcher and participants. Participants' level of disclosure might have differed in in-person interviews due to potentially more stilted conversations and non-verbal cues, such as body language, may have been lost through online interviews. However, it is important to note the level of accessibility this provided our participants (e.g., Cherry had started the interview in her car due to a scarcity of time), though it is also key to acknowledge the trade-off of that this flexibility might mean that participants were not in a 'controlled' environment (see also Oliffe et al., 2021).

Most women in our sample were also relatively articulate about their sensemaking in relation to their bodies and appearance, possibly because our recruitment via social media might have attracted women who were: i) already interested in body image; ii) more attuned to their bodies and appearance; and iii) aware of body positive and/or feminist-based body image discourses on social media. It is possible that White working-class women who are less interested in body image might have different experiences and understandings of body image, for instance, where the body might be valued for its functionality more than its

aesthetics (see Bojorquez & Unikel, 2012). Future research, particularly co-production and participatory research, might be useful in identifying body image concerns that are more directly relevant to White working-class women.

4.3. Implications

Our study contributes to body image research by demonstrating how younger White working-class women's social class shape the sociocultural context which they inhabit, which has implications for how they made sense of their relationships with their bodies. Moreover, our study contributes to social class research by shedding light on how appearance is experienced as an embodied form of cultural capital by White working-class women in early adulthood. Our findings have practical implications. For example, social media literacy interventions (see Paxton et al., 2022) that are aimed at increasing awareness around appearance ideals in the media should also consider the pressures to achieve of appearance norms embodied by peer groups, beyond the salience of idealised images of models. Practitioners and clinicians should also consider women's situatedness within broader sociocultural and political contexts in understanding the pressures that White working-class women in early adulthood experience in relation to their appearance and the underlying motivations. This will help inform individualised, person-centred treatments. Further, our findings suggest the potential benefits of regulating media production and broadcasting companies that inadvertently perpetuate class-based inequalities through media content that centres middle-class appearance standards—acquired through the possession of the right cultural capital—as the gold standard, and the commodification of symbolic violence against working-class women by pathologising and mocking their 'wrong' taste (Frith, 2012), particularly for younger women. The propagation of these classist notions in the media inevitably shape the sociocultural landscape within the UK and influences working-class women's understanding of their appearance, particularly considering how passive acceptance tends to be socialised within working-class contexts.

4.4. Conclusion

We found that younger White working-class women were socialised to adhere to context-specific appearance norms and view appearance as a form of capital, in part, as a function of their lack of control within their working-class contexts. We further highlight the potential usefulness of appearance norms as an important construct in capturing women's body image experiences. Using IPA, we were able to provide insights into how White working-class women understand their bodies and appearance. Our findings highlighted the need for body image research to consider social class as a salient component that shapes women's socialisation processes, beyond material affordability. We hope that our qualitative study sheds light on the importance of critically and actively recognising intersectionality and decentering majoritised (middle-class) perspectives in psychological research. We encourage future research to expand on women's social class and body image experiences.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Miles Eleanor: Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Chan Jamie:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Hurst Megan:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology. **Easterbrook Matthew J:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology.

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.

Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.bodyim.2025.101855](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2025.101855).

Data Availability

Data will be made available on request.

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