**Body image, lookism and body shaming: A preparation project to help pupils (Y11 – Y13) who intend to go on to university to adapt to research work**

**This pack contains:**

1. Context
2. Project background
3. Aims
4. The project (n.b. see separate document for briefing pupils with teacher information removed)
5. Useful reading for pupils
6. Teacher prompts
7. **Context and value of research projects:**

The teaching and learning styles at university are very different to what students experience at sixth form. Independent learning, time management and self-directed study forms the backbone of higher education.

At a time when curriculums for both Year 11 and Year 13 are more flexible due the absence of exams, this project aims to provide teachers with an opportunity for pupils to achieve skills that they can transfer to higher education study.

While the research this project is based on is philosophy, it can be explored through most arts and humanities disciplines at school and it is relevant for all students, irrespective of the subjects they study.

The subject of the project is body image and appearance bullying which could be triggering for some pupils. Due to this, teachers should assess if this is suitable for their pupils before taking it forward and follow their school’s procedures for safeguarding.

1. **Project background:**

Rightly or wrongly, Professor Heather Widdows, from our Department of Philosophy, argues in her book, *Perfect Me,* that being perfect has become an ethical ideal to live by. By this she means that appearance has become a core value, something we want almost more than anything else and we spend time and money trying to improve. When we fail at appearance we feel like failures and ashamed of ourselves. In our visual and virtual culture, appearance is key to whether we think we are ‘good’ or ‘bad’, succeeding or failing. Think of L’oreal’s slogan ‘you’re worth it’, or if someone has chosen not to eat cake, they may say ‘I have been good today’.

As a result of this change to how we understand appearance we are experiencing an epidemic of body image anxiety. So severe is this anxiety that Heather argues it should be treated as an issue of public health. It’s also something that disproportionately affects young people with the rise of social media and accompanying pressures. If anything the pressure to be perfect is increasing in lockdown as social media (Instagram and TikTok) become the primary form of communication.

[Professor Heather Widdows](https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/staff/profiles/philosophy/widdows-heather.aspx) - an expert on the beauty ideal and its effects on society – started a campaign called Everyday Lookism. While the word ‘lookism’ (prejudice on the grounds of a person's appearance) is not new, she argues that it is a prejudice that is more prevalent and more damaging today.

Heather is now calling for collective action to end body shaming talk, and for this to be a uniting movement that makes us all stop and think about the effects of lookism. The campaign asks everyone to share their body shaming stories, to show that negative comments about other people’s bodies are never ok. Each story is a painful memory, but together they are collective action for change. The website has received almost so far: <https://everydaylookism.bham.ac.uk/>

Heather has held many talks at school assemblies and public events. However, due to coronavirus, many of her upcoming events and engagement with schools have been cancelled. This pack intends to fill this gap and raise awareness of body image issues and suggest ways to respond.

1. **Aims:**

* To develop independent learning skills and research techniques to support the transition to higher education
* To help pupils to step back and acknowledge the effects of beauty pressures and the lookism in our society while developing cross curricular links
* To increase pupils’ awareness of bullying (related to body image) and the effects it can have
* To reflect on visual culture and how changing individual behaviour can result in bigger social change

1. **The project:**

Introduction:

* This project will support students to independently research and explore the Everyday Lookism project
* We provide some starter points for them and some suggested tasks
* We encourage pupils to develop a project across any discipline or format that interests them
* The process of the project will result in an online reflection (survey below) and that no direct feedback will be provided to students. Teachers can mark for spelling, punctuation and grammar, but no mark scheme is provided due to the wide-ranging responses that the work can inspire. We would be happy to receive visual work for use on website social media along with a completed release form (which is attached to this pack) to beauty@contacts.bham.ac.uk

Research

At university, the first stage of any research project is to explore various sources and ideas to assess what the key arguments and ideas are within a given topic. Ways to do this for this task are:

* Visit the everyday lookism website and look at some of the body shaming stories that have been shared: <https://everydaylookism.bham.ac.uk/>
* See the further reading section below and write some notes on parts that resonate with you
  + - What points are the authors making?
    - Do you agree/disagree with them? Why do you – what are your reasons?
    - How important do you think body image is to how you? To your friends? In general?
* Think about which stories on the Everyday Lookism page resonate with you and why. Here are some prompts that may help to guide you in your note taking and thoughts:
* Do you think there are themes within body shaming, for instance, are there some body parts (e.g. body hair) that people find particularly shameful?
* How do you feel when you read the Everyday Lookism stories?
* Do you feel some stories are more damaging or hurtful than others? What are the possible reasons for this? For example:
  + Is it because of the type of body part that is shamed?
  + Does it matter if it’s by someone you are close to (such as a family member)?
  + Does it matter why they said what they did?
* Do you think it’s ever ok to say negative things about other people’s bodies?
* How prevalent is lookism? Do you see it in news articles and magazines, amongst your friends? Is it normal, do you think it should be?
* Why do you think appearance bullying is so frequent? Do you think it is better or worse than other forms of bullying?
* Why do you think people want to share their stories with the Everyday Lookism campaign?

Exploration

Choose one of the following tasks to base your project on:

1. Professor Heather Widdows argues that beauty has become something that people judge success on in society.

In response to this statement, choose one (or more) of the following projects:

* 1. **Artists** – Create a collage of media headlines and images to support the argument that body shaming is prevalent in society **OR** Create a piece of work that depicts the ‘perfect’ person, or the features of the ‘perfect’ person using the Everyday Lookism stories to inform your art.
  2. **History** – Consider the way that the beauty ideal may have changed throughout history, create a timeline of the changing ideal using images and quotes where possible to support your work. Challenge – can you find alternative ideals of beauty at different points in time and / or across different cultures? **OR** Can you find evidence that appearance matters more now than it did vs another historical period of your choosing, or did we used to worry more about other aspects of ourselves, for example, our character?
  3. **Media** – Create a short news piece (this can take the form of magazine/newspaper article or a video report that explores the pressures young people experience with body image and how it can impact their life. **OR** Write a blog post that explores the way the media reinforces the idea that success and beauty are interlinked. Use examples from the press, cinema, music.
  4. **Drama** – Develop and script a scene that explores a situation where the way someone look affects their life in a positive or negative way. Explore their feeling and the feelings of those around them.
  5. **English** – Using evidence from the suggested reading list write an essay that explores the task question **OR** Write a short story that centres on a character that experiences lookism, use the character arc to explore how their experiences affect them and their response to it.

2) If beauty is an ethical ideal, body shaming is people shaming. How does lookism affect people within society?

1. **Artists** – Create a piece of artwork that explores the complex emotions and thoughts that are triggered by those that experience lookism.
2. **History** - Find examples of people’s values throughout history. When were people ashamed or proud of themselves, and was this about their bodies? Do you think that appearance matters more than it did in previous eras? Consider the opportunities and limitations of the sources that you use.
3. **Media** – Create or Storyboard a short scene for a film or animation that explores the impact of body shaming. **OR** Record a short podcast that explores the thoughts of your peers on body shaming and it’s impact on your community
4. **Drama** - Using one of the stories submitted to the Everyday Lookism website, write a monologue that explores the emotional impact of their experience. Consider the given circumstances of the character and their relationship to the person that has body shamed them. How do they feel? Will this experience have a long-lasting effect on them? How might they respond?
5. **English** - Using evidence from the suggested reading list write an essay that explores how lookism affects people within society. Use evidence from the suggested reading to back your points. **OR** Write a piece of poetry that explores the emotional and psychological impact of body shaming.

These are the suggested tasks, but if you have another idea that you would like to pursue seek approval from your teacher.

Conclusion

Pupils are invited to complete an online questionnaire on the following link to conclude their project: <https://forms.gle/RGuFBaX59BdukBmS8>

The responses will be used by the research team at the University of Birmingham to help understand how young people respond to this work and understand body image today.

The questions in the survey are:

* Has this project made you think about body image in different ways?
  + Give reasons for your answer
* Has this project made you think differently about appearance-based bullying?
  + Give reasons for your answer
* Do you think it’s ever ok to say negative things about other people’s bodies?
* Do you accept the statement ‘anyone can experience lookism’?
* Do you agree that the intention of the speaker doesn’t mean a lookist comment isn’t hurtful?
* Do you think collective action is needed to support people across society who are affected by lookism?
  + Has this project made you feel more confident in recognising and calling out appearance-based comments?
  + Over the course of this project have you found yourself responding differently to comments about or images of bodies?
    - Give reasons for your answer
* Is there anything you would like to add about what you learnt from this project or how it has changed your perceptions?

1. **Useful reading for research project:**

#everydaylookism / Heather Widdows:

* [Body Image in Lockdown](https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/perfect-me/202004/body-image-in-lockdown)
* [“Girls who wear make-up are fake”: #everydaylookism stories tell us that we may never get it right](https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/perfect-me/202001/girls-who-wear-makeup-are-fake)
* [“I can’t believe you don’t have a thigh gap”: #everydaylookism and why we should be ashamed to body shame](https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/perfect-me/202001/i-can-t-believe-you-dont-have-thigh-gap)
* [“Ew, your legs are so hairy”: On #everydaylookism and the normalisation of the hairless body](https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/perfect-me/202001/ew-your-legs-are-so-hairy)
* [Be ashamed of body shaming](https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/perfect-me/202001/be-ashamed-body-shaming)
* [Join the #everydaylookism campaign](https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/perfect-me/201911/join-the-everydaylookism-campaign)
* [New Year, New You? Why We Think a Better Body Will be a Better Self](https://theconversation.com/new-year-new-you-why-we-think-a-better-body-will-be-a-better-self-127269)
* [How the Duty to be Beautiful is Making Young Girls Feel like Failures](https://theconversation.com/how-the-duty-to-be-beautiful-is-making-young-girls-feel-like-failures-79790)
* [What’s wrong with body positivity?](https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/perfect-me/201907/what-s-wrong-body-positivity)

Body-shaming:

* [12 Things You Don’t Think Are Forms of Body Shaming, But Actually Are](https://www.insider.com/things-that-are-actually-body-shaming-2018-7) (Insider)
* [More than Half of Young People Bullied About Their Looks](https://www.berealcampaign.co.uk/latest-news/bullied-about-their-looks) (BeReal Campaign)
* [Bullied for the Way I Looked](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-43212006) (BBC)
* [Boys and Body Shaming](https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/46311187) (BBC Newsround)
* [Make-Up](https://www.ditchthelabel.org/we-teamed-up-with-sleek-makeup-to-talk-about-makeup-shaming/) (Ditch the Label)

Body Shaming and Celebrities:

* [Charli D’Amelio](https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/52442542)
* [Billie Eilish](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qReTIQZUtNU)
* [James Corden](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/james-corden-bill-maher-fat-shaming_n_5d7b6a61e4b077dcbd5c4fda?ri18n=true)

Useful links:

* [Ditch the Label](https://www.ditchthelabel.org/)
* [Girl Guiding Girls’ Attitudes Survey 2019](https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/girls-making-change/girls-attitudes-survey/)

1. **Teacher prompts:**

There are no correct answers to this. For example, some students will think comments from family are more hurtful, others will think these are less so because they are supposedly well meaning.

However, by the end of the exercise we would expect students to have developed their crucial skills and to recognise that it is not as simple as they first thought. We would expect students to understand that:

* + That anyone can experience lookism (whether fat or thin, wearing makeup or not etc.).
  + The intention of the speaker doesn’t mean that the stories are not hurtful.
  + That lookism is a form of bullying.

In our experience very few students will not have their own stories to share and seeing this as a shared problem often gives students permission to complain about things they previously didn’t have the words to and empowers them.