NUFFIELD COUNCIL ON BIOETHICS

Response to the Science and Technology's Committee inquiry on the impact of social media and screen-use on young people's health

March 2018

Introduction

1 The Nuffield Council on Bioethics is an independent organisation that examines and reports on ethical issues arising from developments in biological and medical research that concern the public interest.

2 Our response to the Committee's inquiry draws on the conclusions and recommendations of our 2017 report *Cosmetic procedures: ethical issues.*[1] We address a selection of the issues set out on the Committee's inquiry page.[2]

Evidence on the effects of social media and screen use on young people's physical and mental well-being

3 In the context of young people's mental well-being, we will focus on the specific issue of appearance anxiety.

4 Several sources suggest that appearance anxiety is growing among the UK's young people – particularly during adolescence;[3] body self-esteem has also been shown to be low in a significant number of girls.[4] The level of young people's access to support networks to address body image concerns is also of note: last

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[1] Nuffield Council on Bioethics (2017) *Cosmetic procedures: ethical issues*, available at: http://nuffieldbioethics.org/wp-content/uploads/Cosmetic-procedures-full-report.pdf.

[2] House of Commons Science and Technology Committee (2018) *Impact of social media and screen-use on young people's health inquiry launched*, available at: https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/science-and-technology-committee/news-parliament-2017/social-media--young-peoples-health-inquiry-launch-17-19/.

[3] Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2012) How we see it: report of a survey on young people's body image, available at: http://www.dcya.gov.ie/documents/childyouthparticipation/BodyImage/DCYABodyImageReport.pdf, at page 33. McDool E, Powell P, Roberts J, and Taylor K (2016) Social media use and children's wellbeing *IZA Institute of Labor Economics* **1041**, at page 13, found that less than 20% of survey respondents aged between ten and 15 stated that they were "completely happy" with their appearance. Survey responses were drawn from the UK Household Longitudinal Study and its youth self-completion questionnaire. An upward linear increase in body dissatisfaction among a cohort of young people (both male and female) assessed at middle school, high school, and young adulthood has also been observed in a US context: Bucchianeri MM, Arikian AJ, Hannan PJ, Eisenberg ME, and Neumark-Sztainer D (2013) Body dissatisfaction from adolescence to young adulthood: findings from a 10-year longitudinal study *Body Image* **10(1)**: 1-7.

[4] Dove's 2017 *Global girls beauty and confidence report* interviewed over 5,000 girls and reported that more than half do not have high body self-esteem. Seven in ten respondents felt that there was too much importance placed on beauty as a source of happiness. See: http://prn.to/2xjjfJB.

year, Childline reported that almost 2,000 body image counselling sessions were delivered to girls (256 sessions to boys).[5]

5   These sources sit alongside exponential growth in the use of social media and a growing 'visual diet' of appearance-related images have been associated with greater unhappiness about appearance, particularly among children and young people.[6] The 'amount' of use of social media platforms has also been shown to correlate with body image concerns among girls of high school age.[7] Relatedly, research from The Netherlands has highlighted the negative role that manipulation of photographs on Instagram can have on adolescent girls' body image.[8]

6   We are unable to comment on the evidence around young people's physical well-being, but suggest that the Committee examines research undertaken by academic psychologists on data around social media use and eating disorders.[9]

Areas of future research

7   There is a significant number of studies that suggest a correlational link between social media use and appearance anxiety. However, in order to address how policy-makers can best tackle this anxiety, causation must also be explored through further academic research. We argued in our report that social media providers should proactively fund such research as part of their corporate social responsibilities, and should collaborate to establish and fund an independent programme of work. This programme should aim to understand better how social media contributes to appearance anxiety, and how this can be minimised by providers.[10] It could also include:

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[5]   NSPCC (2017) *Girls outnumber boys for body image counselling*, available at: https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-we-do/news-opinion/body-image.

[6]   See, for example, Tiggemann M, and Slater A (2013) NetGirls: the internet, Facebook, and body image concern in adolescent girls *International Journal of Eating Disorders* **46(6)**: 630-3; Tiggemann M, and Slater A (2014) NetTweens: the internet and body image concerns in preteenage girls *The Journal of Early Adolescence* **34(5)**: 606-20; Holland G, and Tiggemann M (2016) A systematic review of the impact of the use of social networking sites on body image and disordered eating outcomes *Body Image* **17**: 100-10; and McDool E, Powell P, Roberts J, and Taylor K (2016) Social media use and children's wellbeing IZA Institute of Labor Economics **1041**. See also: Department for Education (2016) Longitudinal study of young people in England cohort 2: health and wellbeing at wave 2 - research report, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/599871/LSYPE2_w2-research_report.pdf, at page 19, which highlights research that suggests negative associations between the use of screen-based media (including smartphones) and happiness.

[7]   Tiggemann M and Slater A (2016) Facebook and body image concern in adolescent girls: a prospective study *International Journal of Eating Disorders* **50(1)**: 80-3.

[8]   Kleemans M, Daalmans S, Carbaat I and Anschütz D (2016) Picture perfect: the direct effect of manipulated Instagram photos on body image in adolescent girls *Media Psychology* **21(1)**: 93-110. See also: Harrison K and Hefner V (2014) Virtually perfect: image retouching and adolescent body image *Media Psychology* **17(2)**: 134-53.

[9]   See, for example, a research study by Israeli researchers: Latzer Y, Spivak-Lavi S and Katz R (2015) Disordered eating and media exposure among adolescent girls: the role of parental involvement and sense of empowerment International *Journal of Adolescence and Youth* **20(3)**: 375-91. See also: the work of the Centre for Appearance Research at the University of the West of England.

[10]   Nuffield Council on Bioethics (2017) *Cosmetic procedures: ethical issues*, available at: http://nuffieldbioethics.org/project/cosmetic-procedures/, recommendation 4.

- funding research to improve understanding of the impacts of social media use, including the role played by the rating of images through 'likes', on appearance anxiety, and self-esteem;
- funding and disseminating educational programmes to combat cyber-bullying and teasing with respect to appearance, and to promote a social norm that this is unacceptable;
- funding the development, evaluation, and roll-out of evidence-based social media literacy interventions to promote the positive benefits and minimise the harms of social media, with particular reference to the sharing and rating of photos;
- developing similar guidance for parents and teachers in promoting safe social media use in children, working with key youth organisations including the Be Real Campaign, Girlguiding and Scouting movements, the NSPCC, and the UK Safer Internet Centre; and
- encouraging and supporting targeted campaigns that put under scrutiny the imperative to be perfect, or flawless.

The well-being benefits from social media usage, including for example any apps that provide mental-health benefits to users

8 Social media does – and has further potential to – provide the vehicle for challenging the dominance of particular appearance ideals through the use of tweets with hashtags such as #effyourbeautystandards, #celebratemysize, and #bodypositive.

9 At the opposite end of the spectrum, we suggest that the Committee should also address apps which convey negative appearance-related messages to young people. Examples of these apps include those which encourage children as young as nine to 'play' at being a cosmetic surgeon. We encourage the Committee to engage with Endangered Bodies' campaign to see these apps excluded from online game stores (such as those managed by Google Play).[11]

Increasing awareness of risks of social media use (for children, schools, social media companies, and government etc.)

10 There are several positive initiatives to note which address awareness of the risks of social media use. These include the Government's September 2017 announcement of a new schools' programme to contribute to teachers' future ability to address issues around "body image in a digital world" through current personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education provision. However, PSHE is not mandatory at present, which means that some young people will not be able to benefit from this positive programme. The Department for Education must act to ensure that all young people have access to evidence-based resources on body image, whether through PSHE or through other (compulsory) elements of the curriculum.

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[11] Ibid., at paragraph 8.15.

11 Positive contributions are also provided by organisations such as the Safer Internet Centre,[12] whose work includes training and supporting young people to become peer educators with respect to positive social media use; and Fixers,[13] which supports young people to take action with respect to issues that concern then, including body image.

12 Collaborative partnerships between social media providers and organisations who focus on children's online 'presence' – such as Facebook's partnership with the ChildNet Digital Leaders' Programme[14] – are also welcome. However, given the pervasive use of social media among young people, these positive initiatives are likely to only reach a small percentage of users, and therefore more needs to be done. We therefore urge the Committee to encourage further collaborative work.[15]

Measures, controls or regulation needed; where responsibility lies for these measures

13 We argue strongly that social media providers must – as part of their corporate social responsibilities – take a key role in introducing, supporting, and researching appearance concerns elicited by young people's use of their services.

14 We also suggest that the Government has a 'stewardship' role to play in addressing appearance anxiety among young people: this includes a requirement to provide conditions that enable young people to flourish with respect to both their physical and mental health in the context of social media use.[16] This idea of stewardship provides an ethical foundation for the recommendations made above with respect to ensuring all children, whatever funding model used for their school, have access to appropriate education and support in these areas. It also underscores the responsibility for the state to act where others, such as commercial companies, fail to exercise corporate social responsibility. If social media companies, for example, fail to take action to ensure young people are not harmed by their products, the Government has a responsibility to step in.

Conclusion

15 The Council would be happy to provide the Committee with further clarification of any of the points outlined in this response as it approaches the next stages of this inquiry.

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[12] The Safer Internet Centre has also conducted research on the 'power of the image', which revealed that the average number of photos taken before posting a selfie was 12, and that a 'successful' selfie received over 40 'likes'. See: https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/blog/exploring-education-connected-world-self-image-and-identity.

[13] See: http://www.fixers.org.uk/home/about.php.

[14] The programme will train young people across the UK to be peer educators for staying safe online. Body image is part of ChildNet's agenda.

[15] Nuffield Council on Bioethics (2017) *Cosmetic procedures: ethical issues*, available at: http://nuffieldbioethics.org/project/cosmetic-procedures/, at paragraph 8.14.

[16] Ibid., at paragraphs 7.19-21.