# NUFFIELD COUNCIL ON BIOETHICS

## Changing the perfect picture: an inquiry into body image

### 20 May 2020

**Summary**

1 We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Women and Equalities Committee's inquiry on body image. Our response draws on the conclusions and recommendations of our June 2017 report on cosmetic procedures, and the developments we have observed since the publication of that report.

2 We have answered only those questions which are relevant to our conclusions on body image. Other researchers and organisations will be better placed to provide up-to-date evidence on other points relevant to the Committee's inquiry.

**Response**

***What are the responsibilities of companies and the media in ensuring diversity in the images we see?***

3 We suggest that it is not just companies and the media that have a responsibility to ensure that we see diverse representations of body image: the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and Ofcom have a key role to play too.

4 In July 2017, the ASA addressed some issues relevant to the portrayal of diverse body types in its report on gender stereotyping.[1] In a news item that publicised this report, the Committee for Advertising Practice (CAP – which writes the ASA's codes of practice) states that advertisers should "make sure that models are not presented in a way that makes them appear underweight or unhealthy, as this could be considered irresponsible for promoting an unhealthy body image."[2] A further piece of CAP advice states: "advertisers should ensure that they don't portray particular body types in an irresponsible manner, imply people can only be happy if they look a certain way, or present an unhealthy body image as aspirational."[3]

5 These are clearly important points to put to advertisers. However, we feel that the ASA has a responsibility to go beyond asking advertisers to 'ensure'. Instead, we

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[1] ASA (2017) *Depictions, perceptions and harm*, available at:
https://www.asa.org.uk/resource/depictions-perceptions-and-harm.html.

[2] CAP (24 August 2017) *Gender on the agenda*, available at: https://www.asa.org.uk/news/gender-on-the-agenda.html.

[3] CAP (14 June 2019) *Social responsibility: body image*, available at: https://www.asa.org.uk/advice-online/social-responsibility-body-image.html.

suggest that the regulator should **reject advertising likely to create body confidence issues, or cause pressure to conform to an unrealistic or unhealthy body shape**. This would mirror the line taken by Transport for London, which has banned such adverts.

6  Ofcom – which shares responsibility for broadcast advertising with the ASA[4] – must also consider available evidence on broadcast media's contribution to body image anxiety and think about whether specific guidance to accompany its broadcasting code is warranted. We put this point to Ofcom in our own report and in a follow-up briefing note,[5] and suggest that further evidence that has emerged in the last three years warrants the organisation reconsidering the necessity of such guidance.[6]

7  Outside the context of regulation, there has been positive work in improving the diversity in images presented in the media by initiatives such as the Be Real campaign, Changing Faces' Face Equality campaign, and Sport England's This Girl Can campaign. While signing up to these campaigns is important, companies and organisations who do so must go beyond paying lip service and ensure that their actions and wider commercial strategies are in tune with their spirit.

### *What strategy should the Government take to encourage healthy body image for young people?*

8  We suggest that a key role could be played by the Department for Education (DfE). In September 2020, personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education becomes compulsory. Ahead of this statutory change, DfE has stated:

> *"PSHE is a non-statutory subject. To allow teachers the flexibility to deliver high-quality PSHE we consider it unnecessary to provide new standardised frameworks or programmes of study. PSHE can encompass many areas of study. Teachers are best placed to understand the needs of their pupils and do not need additional central prescription."[7]*

9  In our report we recommend that the DfE should ensure that all young people have access to evidence-based resources on body image, whether through PSHE (personal, social, health, and economic education) lessons or through other (compulsory) elements of the curriculum. We feel that **body image is a topic that is too important to be optional**. Should the DfE change its policy in the future, and choose to provide standard frameworks for PSHE, we suggest that body image should be at the front of the queue for a prescriptive approach.

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4  Ofcom (2020) *Broadcast advertising*, available at: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/tv-radio-and-on-demand/broadcast-advertising.

5  This can be shared with the Committee on request.

6  See, for example, Mental Health Foundation (3 June 2019) *Mental Health Foundation criticises new series of Love Island as it releases new statistics about body image and reality TV*, available at: https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/news/mental-health-foundation-criticises-new-series-love-island-it-releases-new-statistics-about. See also the comments of a 17-year-old girl in: Young Minds (4 June 2019) *How Love Island and other reality TV can affect our mental health*, available at: https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/how-love-island-and-other-reality-tv-can-affect-our-mental-health/.

7  Department for Education (11 February 2020) *Guidance: personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education*, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/personal-social-health-and-economic-education-pshe/personal-social-health-and-economic-pshe-education.

***Is there enough research and data to support the Government in creating policy surrounding body image and social media?***

10 As part of our research on the ethical issues relevant to the cosmetic procedures, it became strikingly clear that **there is a lack of research and data to support evidence-based policy on body image**. Although some excellent work is being undertaken on body image – for example, by the team at the Centre for Appearance Research – a complete picture of the role of social media and its effect on body image is not possible without the full cooperation of social media companies.

11 Social media companies have an important role to play in addressing concerns around body image – particularly body image anxieties experienced by young people. We saw this during our own evidence-gathering activities, when we spoke to young people who highlighted to us how social media influences their body image concerns. For example, one young person told us that, when using Instagram, "you can take a picture, then you can spend hours changing it… You don't want to put a bad photo on Instagram."[8] Another young person told us that, when using social media, "you always see those really nice photos and think, 'I wish I could look like that'".[9] Young people also told us about how their peers judge and criticise them for the images they post of themselves: "You post a picture on Facebook, and someone comments, and says, oh your nose is so ugly or so big."[10]

12 These comments highlight some of the insecurities that young people may experience when posting images of themselves on social media. Social media companies have responded to such insecurities in part through launching campaigns that aim to address appearance concerns. For example, Instagram has initiated hashtag campaigns for its users to tag themselves in, including #beyourself, #perfectlyme, and #ComeAsYouAre. These campaigns aim to challenge views on how people 'should' look and encourage users to embrace themselves 'as they are'.

13 Although such initiatives should be welcomed, the extent of body image concerns among young people and the increasingly strong associations[11] between these

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8 Deliberative workshop with Young Persons' Group, Aberdeen, ScotCRN (18 June 2016).
9 Deliberative workshop with young people, International Association of Bioethics Conference (17 June 2016).
10 Deliberative workshop with young people, International Association of Bioethics Conference (17 June 2016).
11 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; Fardouly J, and Vartanian LR (2015) Negative comparisons about one's appearance mediate the relationship between Facebook usage and body image concerns *Body Image* **12**: 82-8; 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 *et al.* (2016) Social media use and children's wellbeing *IZA Institute of Labor Economics* **10412**. 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_w 2-research_report.pdf, which highlights research that suggests negative associations between the use of screen-based media (including smartphones) and happiness.

concerns and social media use means that **social media providers have a moral responsibility to go beyond initiating hashtag campaigns** and do more. Recent research has also suggested that these body positive captions have no effect on body dissatisfaction or body appreciation.[12]

14 Further, any social media platform which offers users the ability to endorse others' posts in the form of 'likes', or provide tools that enable users to rate or judge how others look, must take seriously body image concerns that arise when its technologies are used. For example, if a young person feels that they have not received enough likes for a particular image, this might have a very negative impact on them.[13] **Social media companies therefore need to improve understanding of how their platforms contribute to young people's anxiety about how they look. In order to achieve this, social media providers cannot work in isolation from each other; instead they must work together and jointly fund a programme of work on social media's influence on young people's appearance anxiety, and then act on the findings**.

15 This programme of work could include:

- Paying for research to contribute to what we know, or don't know, about how social media affects young people's body image;
- Paying for educational programmes to address cyber-bullying; and
- Working with organisations who represent young people, such as the Youth Select Committee, NSPCC, Be Real Campaign, and the Girlguiding and Scouting organisations, to develop guidance for parents and teachers on supporting young people's safe use of social media.

16 The findings of this programme of work would offer an opportunity for social media providers to obtain the insight and information necessary to act to minimise young people's appearance anxiety. It would also support the Government's efforts to usher in evidence-based body image policies. This is therefore an ethical imperative, and clearly falls within what is, or should be, social media providers' corporate social responsibilities.

***Would proposals in the Online Harms White Paper protect people from potential harm caused by social media content in regard to body image?***

17 We refer the Committee to our response to the Government's White Paper.[14]

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12 Tiggemann M, Anderberg I, and Brown Z (2020) #Loveyourbody: The effect of body positive Instagram captions on women's body image *Body Image* **33**: 129-36. This research also indicates that presenting a more diverse array of women's bodies on social media is likely to be a more effective way to foster body satisfaction and appreciation.

13 See, for example, BBC Radio 4 (6 March 2015) *Women of the World and Annie Lennox*, available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0543k08, where young female contributors note that "It's all become a competition for likes"; and "When someone is getting all of these likes on their selfies, and you post photos and there's nothing there, it makes you feel that other people are doing better than you."

14 Nuffield Council on Bioethics (2019) *Response to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and the Home Office's online harms white paper*, available at: https://www.nuffieldbioethics.org/assets/pdfs/Response-from-Nuffield-Council-to-consultation-on-online-harms-white-paper.pdf.

***What is the role of the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) in promoting diversity and a positive body image?***

18 We comment on the role of the ASA at paragraphs 3–6 above. But we would also like to highlight that the ASA has indicated that it doesn't "just wait to receive complaints" but also "proactively monitors ads across different sectors and media."[15] It is important that this approach applies to its review of advertisements that promote unhealthy body image.

## Conclusion

19 We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our response further with Committee members. More information on our work on *cosmetic procedures: ethical issues* is available on our website.[16]

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[15] ASA (2020) *Our proactive work*, available at: https://www.asa.org.uk/about-asa-and-cap/the-work-we-do/our-proactive-work.html.

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