

Written evidence submitted by the University of Birmingham (BYC032)

Executive Summary

The submission provides evidence and recommendations in response to the questions identified in the call relevant to **'the internet, social media and messaging'**. This submission is drawn from a multi-stage process:

1. A review of existing international evidence on young people's engagement with social media and digital technologies and the impacts on their health and wellbeing
2. An analysis of new data from 1500 young people in the UK (age 13-19) who were engaged in participatory research; 478 questionnaires, 53 digital pin boards, 36 focus group interviews and a survey (n=942).
3. An analysis of both existing evidence and the new data by an expert group. The expert group included 35 teachers, international academics (UK, Ireland, Sweden, Netherlands, Spain, Australia, China) and trusts/organisations with a focus on youth health and wellbeing in the UK (see Appendix 1).

The submission provides a summary of the latest evidence-based thinking on the influence of social media and healthy lifestyle technologies on young people's practices and attitudes related to body image. It has been developed in the context of growing national and international concern about young people's access to risky online environments and reported increases in body dissatisfaction and mental health problems^{1,2,3}. Evidence suggests that young people are increasingly turning to social media and digital technologies for health-related information^{4,5,6,7}, and there is confusion and uncertainty about how this behaviour impacts upon young people's practices and attitudes related to body image^{8,9,10}, and whether/how interventions by adults can be optimally effective^{11,12,13}.

This submission will support the work of key stakeholders in research, policy, and practice who need to better understand young people in their digital spaces.

The Internet, social media and messaging

In our new research, evidence from young people tells us that:

- 1. Social media and healthy lifestyle technologies offer *exceptional opportunities* to inform young people's learning about their bodies, and to have a range of impacts on their body image practices and behaviours.**
 - Young people are *tethered* to social media; most check and/or post to SnapChat, Instagram and YouTube before, during and after school.
 - *Over 50%* believe that social media is a *good source of information*
 - Young people are *turning to social media for information related to their body image*. 29% reported that they look at images of the body on social media.
 - *48% have changed their behaviours* because of something seen on social media.
- 2. A significant amount of unsolicited and unregulated information on social media and healthy lifestyle technologies reaches young people and impacts negatively on their practices and attitudes related to body image**

- *Nearly all young people report seeing inappropriate content* related to body image; e.g. Water diets, FitTea, and adult weight loss and/or bodybuilder transformations
 - Some young people report that they have developed *obsessive/addictive monitoring behaviours*, engaged with *extreme diets and/or exercises*, and experienced *heightened levels of body dissatisfaction* as a result of accessing material from social media and healthy lifestyle technologies.
- 3. Social media sites are responsible for the fact that vast amounts inappropriate content reaches young people**
- *Social media sites tailor what young people see* based on the images they follow post or like, previous videos watched, commercial adverts, cookies, and/or topics the site/device considers young people will enjoy.
 - Young people suggested that the *liability/accountability lies with the social media sites and app developers*, and feel that mechanisms should be in place to protect young people from inappropriate content; e.g. 'fake news'.
- 4. Young people choose to engage with and act on information based on the number of likes a post receives and/or who has posted to social media and/or whether a site is 'official'.**
- *Credibility of information is gauged by the number of likes a post receives*, with 200 likes acting as the benchmark
 - *Celebrities act as role models, yet their posts and/or advertisements* are often inappropriate and/or targeted at adult behaviours. 18% reported they look at images of the body posted to social media by celebrities.
 - 51% would consider *changing their health-related behaviours* if it was posted by an *official organisation* (e.g. NHS, Sport England, Youth Sport Trust)
- 5. Schools/teachers, parents/guardians and the media fail to understand and/or adequately address the social media-generated pressures that are experienced by young people.**
- Young people report that *schools/teachers and parents/guardians fail to understand* how young people use social media; adults *should take greater responsibility* for the pressures facing young people and should avoid dismissing them
 - *Schools focus primarily on cyberbullying* but for young people, a bigger problem is *peer-pressure* on social media and its relationship to enhanced *body dissatisfaction*
 - Young people believe that *the media/news makes fun of their uses of social media and exaggerates or inadequately represents the real risks experienced by young people*

Recommendations/Actions

- 6.** Taking into account the new evidence from our research with young people and the existing evidence base, participants in the workshop (teachers, international academics and health and wellbeing trusts/organisations) identified the following recommendations/actions to inform research, policy and practice.

- a) Social media is a potentially powerful educative resource that has the potential for positive and negative impacts.
- b) Social media should be harnessed by governments, organisations and schools/teachers as an important space in which to educate young people about their bodies.
- c) Young people should be treated as ‘expert’ users of social media and their experiences and opinions should be sought in the design of educational mechanisms and/or interventions that use social media and/or digital technologies.
- d) Young people, schools/teachers, parents/guardians and organisations must be better informed about the risk-related impacts of social media on young people’s practices and attitudes related to body image.
- e) Schools/teachers and parents/guardians have a responsibility to empower young people to act critically, safely and ethically in digital/online environments.
- f) Technology and app designers and social media sites have a responsibility to act ethically in order to limit the range of inappropriate material that reaches young people.
- g) Multi-sector and multi-disciplinary engagement is required to address the complexity of digital youth culture and optimise the potentially positive educational benefits.

The Body (background information to recommendations/actions)

7. *Social media is a potentially powerful educative resource that has the potential for positive and negative impacts*

Social media and digital technologies are a *way of living* for young people; varying sites, apps, and devices are used multiple times a day and are woven into the very fabric of contemporary youth culture. Unlike for most adults, there is no online/offline binary and young people are *tethered* to their devices. Young people *publish their lives* in short snippets and turn to social media and digital technologies to stay *connected with friends* and to *access information*. Access to digital media is, therefore, viewed by young people as a ‘right’ and as *essential for their wellbeing, making it - potentially - a powerful educative resource*. Caution should be taken, however, given the significant amount of *unsolicited and unregulated material* available for young people to *access and this can result in harm*. Social media, therefore, acts as a *potentially powerful educative resource* that can have both *positive and negative impacts*.

8. *Social media should be harnessed by governments, organisations and schools/teachers as an important space in which to educate young people about their bodies*

There are *unprecedented opportunities* to reach and engage with young people, for whom the use of social media and digital technologies is a daily activity. Young people are constantly exposed to an *influx of messages related to body image*; information is widely *accessible*, dissemination can occur *quickly* and material that *relates* to young people can be easily retrieved. Young people also place a degree of trust in government/official organisations, suggesting there is an opportunity to engage large numbers of young people with information that is credible and appropriate. Equally, schools/teachers should see social media as an additional and complementary learning platform. *Social media and healthy lifestyle technologies* are, therefore, relevant and engaging *platforms* that provide *opportunities* to engage young people with information about their bodies.

9. *Young people should be treated as ‘expert’ users of social media and their experiences and opinions should be sought in the design of educational mechanisms and/or interventions that use social media and/or digital technologies*

Ongoing conversations with young people are required to ensure that they can help to *shape digital spaces and media*. The *design, content and delivery mechanisms* of social media and digital technologies that are *engaging and relevant* to young people should *inform the design of technologies and/or educational mechanisms* (e.g., official campaigns, or school-based curriculum). *Co-constructing* new understandings with young people will increase the likelihood that new educational mechanisms and technologies will *reach a wide audience*, be *adopted* and result in sustained engagement. Mechanisms and technologies that are aligned with *young people’s current and future experiences* of digital media will have the greatest positive impact.

10. *Young people, schools/teachers, parents/guardians and health and wellbeing organisations must be better informed about the risk-related impacts of social media on young people’s practices and attitudes related to body image*

Key risk-related impacts resulting from young people’s access to social media material are; *mental wellbeing*, including factors such as stress and anxiety; *obsessive, addictive and/or disordered behaviours*; and *body dissatisfaction resulting from* negative comparisons of the body. Personal, social and cultural factors can also contribute to and *intensify* a young person’s *vulnerability* and/or *resilience* to social media material. Young people need to be *protected from the development of harmful views and/or behaviours that are linked to their engagement with social media*.

There is an urgent need to develop youth-centric understandings of these risks. Currently, *parents/guardians lack the understandings* they require to engage effectively in the digital/online environments inhabited by young people, and adults often *lack the digital skills* required to engage with, navigate, and *appreciate digital youth culture*.

Schools/teachers and parents/guardians, therefore, *require a much more detailed understanding of the ways in which young people use social media*, the nature of any *impacts on body image*, and any *evidence-based examples of good practice*. Evidence about *young people’s own discourses of risk* and how they *negotiate and navigate digital environments* can provide schools/teachers and parents/guardians with deeper understandings of digital spaces and cultures that are often far removed from their own experiences.

11. *Schools/teachers and parents/guardians have a responsibility to empower young people to act critically, safely and ethically in digital/online environments.*

Young people have a right to grow up as *knowledgeable, practical and empowered digital citizens* who are able to *understand digital social norms* and *manage risk for themselves*. They need to be empowered to engage in *critical, safe, and ethical behaviours*. Young people should be supported to *act prudently and carefully*, and to *become thoughtful users* of social media and digital technologies. Given that many young people can already recognise harmful, fake and/or untrue information, the focus should be upon extending *young people’s existing digital, critical, safe and ethical skills* and *developing new understandings with young people themselves about what critical, safe, and ethical*

behaviours entail. This is an important action/responsibility for schools/teachers and parents/guardians.

12. *Technology and app designers and social media sites have a responsibility to act ethically in order to limit the range of inappropriate material that reaches young people.*

Minimum standards should be developed and applied to protect young people from inappropriate content and limit the amount that reaches them through social media and digital technologies. Minimum standards would include a requirement for social media sites and apps to apply account filters to regulate the ways in which information is advertised, marketed and distributed to young people. In addition, all social media material and information from apps about diet/nutrition, exercise/physical activity and body image material should include clear signposting explaining to whom the material is relevant/appropriate. Technology and app designers and social media sites have a responsibility to deliver a service to young people that is safe, even if it is not in their immediate commercial interests.

13. *Multi-sector and multi-disciplinary engagement is required to address the complexity of digital youth culture and optimise the potentially positive educational benefits.*

Social media, digital technologies and young people's body image should be a key policy and practice concern for practitioners and professionals from different sectors who have a responsibility for and interest in young people's health and wellbeing. This includes policy makers, academics, schools/teachers, practitioners/organisations, and parents/guardians. Understanding the potential positive and negative impacts and also the digital spaces inhabited and navigated by young people navigate is a multi-disciplinary academic concern. Relevant academic fields include education, computer science, children and childhood, ethics, policy, public health, mental health and many more. To act responsibly and effectively, researchers, practitioners/professionals and policy makers must work together to better understand the role of social media and digital technologies in young people's lives and to maximise learning opportunities while minimising damaging risks. A multi-sector and multi-disciplinary approach is required, that acknowledges the rights of young people and supports them to exercise those rights in safe ways.

Conclusion

14. Social media and healthy lifestyle technologies offer *exceptional opportunities* to inform young people's learning about their bodies, and influence their health and wellbeing behaviours. Despite this, there are a number of *risk-related impacts* that need to be *navigated*. The following actions for policy makers, third sector organisations, researchers, and practitioners/professionals, are suggested:

15. Policy makers: National and international governments must take overarching responsibility for the role of social media in young people's lives, for supporting schools/teachers and parent/guardians to become better informed, and requiring technology and app designers and social media sites to act ethically. Policy makers should proactively take advantage of the trust young people place in them, and the influence they can exercise, to optimise the potential of social media and digital technologies as mechanisms to promote youth health and wellbeing. In the design of new digital/online policies or interventions that seek to promote young people's health and wellbeing, young

people's expert opinions and experiences should be sought to ensure maximum and positive impact.

- 16. Third Sector (Health and Wellbeing):** Health and wellbeing organisations, associations, charities and trusts have a responsibility to increase awareness of the risk-related impacts of social media and healthy lifestyle technologies. The third sector should proactively provide continuous professional development resources for schools/teachers and appropriate educational support for parents/guardians. Equally, they should exercise their trusted and influential role in young people's lives by using social media and digital technologies as a mechanism to promote health and wellbeing. In the design of new educational mechanisms or interventions young people's expert opinions and experiences should be sought, to ensure maximum and positive impact.
- 17. Researchers:** International researchers have a responsibility to strengthen the evidence-base on the opportunities and risk-related impacts of social media and healthy lifestyle technologies on young people's health and wellbeing. Further evidence is required from large samples of young people in different contexts and cultures, and from those with a wide range of learning needs. New evidence on the educational mechanisms (e.g. campaigns, curriculum, pastoral) that engage young people with their health through social media and digital technologies, and that positively impact on their health-related behaviours, is also required. Providing evidence-based best practice guidelines on ways in which to empower young people to act critically, safely and ethically should be a central focus.
- 18. Practitioners/professionals (Schools/Teachers, Parents/Guardians):** Schools/teachers and parents/guardians have a responsibility to recognise, understand and respond to the pressures experienced by contemporary young people. Further learning opportunities and guidance, as required, should be sought and schools/teachers and children/childcare networks should share examples of good practice. Schools/teachers and parents/guardians should also engage with on-going conversations with young people to ensure that they act in ways that respect young people's digital rights and meet their expectations.

June 2017

Overview of Existing Evidence-Base Drawn on

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Appendix 1: Attendees of Workshop May 11th 2017

Professor Kathleen Armour	University of Birmingham, UK
Ms Nicky Beirne	University of Birmingham, UK; St Patrick's Academy, Ireland
Mr Marcus Belben	Birmingham City Council; Active Streets, UK
Dr Kris Bevelander	Radboud University, Netherlands
Ms Hannah Bodsworth	The Bedford Modern, UK
Ms Tina Bold	Birmingham City Council, UK
Ms Suzie Britt	Ninestiles School, UK
Professor Moniek Buijzen	Radboud University, Netherlands
Dr Ashley Casey	Loughborough University, UK
Dr Shushu Chen	University of Birmingham, UK
Mr Alex De Lyon	University of Birmingham, UK
Ms Holly Duckworth	Lode Heath School, UK
Dr Dean Dudley	Macquarie University, Australia
Mr Gareth Evans	Ninestiles School, UK
Ms Clare Fletcher	Youth Sport Trust, UK
Dr Victoria Goodyear	University of Birmingham, UK
Dr Mark Griffiths	University of Birmingham, UK
Dr Frank Herold	University of Birmingham, UK
Professor Suzanne Higgs	University of Birmingham, UK
Ms Karen Hill	Swanhurst School, UK
Dr Alfredo Joven	National Institute of Physical Education of Catalonia, Spain
Dr Charlotte Kerner	Brunel University, UK
Professor David Kirk	University of Strathclyde, UK
Mr Adam Llevo	University of Birmingham, UK
Dr Eloisa Lorente-Catalán	National Institute of Physical Education of Catalonia, Spain
Dr Anthony Papatomas	Loughborough University, UK
Dr Paul Patterson	Forward Thinking Birmingham, UK
Dr Tom Quarmby	Leeds Beckett University, UK
Professor Mikael Quennerstedt	Örebro University, Sweden
Ms Charlotte Ralph	The Bedford Modern, UK
Dr Rachel Sandford	Loughborough University, UK
Professor Brett Smith	University of Birmingham, UK
Mr Jagdish Sohal	University of Birmingham, UK
Mr Will Swaites	Youth Sport Trust, UK
Ms Hannah Wood	University of Birmingham, UK