

## **Written evidence submitted by the Working Group on Body Image and Eating Disorders (BYC054)**

The following represents the responses to some of the questions of the Youth Select Committee 2017 Inquiry into Body Image from a group of academics, third-sector professionals, clinicians and bloggers who last year formed the Working Group on Body Image and Eating Disorders. The group is based at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, but it includes members throughout the UK.

We address questions 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10.

### **Q4: Has the growing use of social media and communications platforms amongst young people encouraged practices and attitudes that entrench poor body image?**

To answer this question, we will quote excerpts from the recently published article by Dr Petya Eckler on this topic (Eckler, Kalyango, & Paasch, 2017):

“Unrealistically thin images are prevalent in mass media, but may also exist on social media as users tend to select carefully the content they share (Goodings and Tucker 2014; McLaughlin and Vitak 2012; Siibak 2010). Some young men, for example, have tended to pose alone in their profile images to emphasize their looks and appear as willing romantic objects (Siibak 2010). College women have untagged photos on Facebook, which they see as unfitting to Western beauty ideologies (McLaughlin and Vitak 2012), while a female university student has described her conscious construction of an image on social media (Goodings and Tucker 2014). Hence, some authors have argued that Facebook may reinforce an “ideal self,” which misrepresents the individual (Gonzales and Hancock 2011).”

“Several studies have explored the relationship between Facebook use and body image. More time on Facebook related to more internalization, drive for thinness, body surveillance, and less weight satisfaction among Australian adolescent girls (Tiggemann and Miller 2010; Tiggemann and Slater 2013). American adolescent girls showed similar effects from photo-related activity (Meier and Gray 2014). Studies on college women, however, have conflicting results. Rutledge and colleagues (2013) found no link between Facebook use and negative body image, and users with more friends perceived their appearance more positively, but two recent studies showed the opposite results. Fardouly and Vartanian (2015) reported a positive relationship between Facebook usage and body image concern, while Mabe, Forney and Keel (2014) found a positive correlation between duration of Facebook use and disordered eating.”

Dr Eckler’s study itself showed a similar relationship: more time spent on Facebook by the female university students who were surveyed related to more frequent body and weight comparisons, more attention to the physical appearance of others, and more negative feelings about their bodies. For women who wanted to lose weight, more time on Facebook also related to more symptoms of disordered eating. Disordered eating is different from an eating disorder, as it is not a mental illness but a poor relationship with food (Eckler, Kalyango, & Paasch, 2017).

**Q5: Can the internet and social media be used as a tool to promote positive self-image? What examples are there of this happening?**

Important to acknowledge is the widespread use of social media – people use it for a reason and find it a positive tool that promotes health and wellbeing. If this is not acknowledged, people may dismiss any subsequent advice given on how to have healthy social media use. Other positive aspects to it are that it can help people to feel part of a community, which can have a positive impact on feelings of self-worth and engagement. The internet and social media can be a very positive space for disclosure. Many aspects of social media provide space to promote positive health and wellbeing through healthy eating, exercise, all of which positively promote self-image. There is also a case that it promotes skill development and self-mastery (examples would be beauty tutorials, etc.) and for many public self-acceptance. However, it is clear that all of the above can also translate into a negative if taken to extreme or tips into unhealthy comparisons and competitiveness.

Positive body image is an existing research stream and various researchers have tried to define dimensions of positive body image but further work into understanding this aspect of body image is greatly needed. Wood-Barclow and colleagues' (2010) ethnographic study with female college students suggested a number of unique characteristics of positive body image including: appreciation, body acceptance, and love and taking care of the body via healthy behaviours. These were associated with a positive body image and frequently went beyond physical appearance and embraced positive self-esteem more broadly e.g. finding others who are accepting of you. While social media is recognised as a place of positive self- presentation, which may lead to negative self-esteem e.g. through idealised photography and lifestyles in sites such as Instagram, much less is understood about how those with positive body images may be using social media. Wood-Barclow et al. (2010) suggested that positive body image could be a “protective filter” which women, in their study, use to process and respond to information in a self- and body-preserving manner. Yet much more research is needed to understand how this filtering may work and indeed to better understand the key elements of a positive body image. There is further a dearth of research considering how social media may be used purposively to enhance body image. While apps and blogs exist which aim to enhance body image, our understanding of their effect and effectiveness is little understood.

**Q6: Do internet companies, social media platforms or other platforms have a responsibility to tackle trends which entrench poor body image? What are they already doing in this area? What more should they be doing?**

Body image is a social construction which is shaped by the mass media, social media, advertising and marketing, all types of entertainment programming, interactions with friends and family and ultimately our own culture. Therefore, social media is by far not the only culprit in inspiring young people towards negative bodily attitudes, but it is an agent of enormous power, nevertheless, because it combines peer communication with mass media content, marketing and entertainment, and it commands much more attention by young people than any of the other channels. In other words, social media has the power to exponentially increase the impact and reach of messages and to drive engagement via commenting and sharing. We want to draw your attention to the role of advertising and marketing. Companies play a big role in what young people see as the ideal female or male body. Offline advertisements using unrealistically thin models have been omnipresent for

years and now they are also widely available online. Further, companies actually benefit directly from the poor body image of their target audience as that gives them a chance to “solve those problems” by selling beauty products and diet plans/pills/regimens/exercise DVDs and anything else that could be used for attaining the perfect body. In fact, as Yu et al. (2011, p. 58) state, “thinness is accessible through diet, exercise, fashionable clothing and accessories, make up, plastic surgery, and weight management drugs.” Body dissatisfaction is indeed very profitable.

What social media platforms and online companies can do is to be more responsible with the adverts they show users relating to their bodies. This is especially true for behavioural targeting online, which shows specific ads on social media or on the Internet based on one’s browsing history. This can be very dangerous for some people. For example, people who struggle with eating disorders or even disordered eating may be searching for products or websites related to those issues, and then through behavioural targeting may see ads for diet products, which is the last thing that they should be exposed to if they are already vulnerable in this regard.

**Q7: Does the Government have a responsibility to discourage the use of social media, the internet and communications platforms in ways which promote poor body image? What should it be doing in this regard?**

We do not think that the government should be policing individuals who share their experiences online. However, the government can definitely do more in pressuring the fashion industry and advertisers to use average-sized models in their advertisements. As we said already, these advertisements often end up on social media and are shared, commented on and admired by many, and thus ultimately influence what young people perceive as the ideal body and how they see their own bodies in comparison to those ideals. In fact, through the years the standard of female attractiveness in magazines (*Ladies Home Journal* and *Vogue*) and movies has become leaner between the 1930s and the 1980s (Silverstein et al., 1986), while the size of the average woman has increased.

Governments from countries such as Israel have tried to counter the risk of negative body image from advertisements by passing so-called “Photoshop laws”. Digital retouching in adverts and magazines – as it is common in traditional as well as digital media – should thus be regulated through the disclosure of visible warning claims on the surface of any photoshopped pictures. Alongside, Israel has introduced minimum BMIs for models in order to combat eating disorders, which are widespread in the fashion industry. Since this first Photoshop law came into operation in Israel in January 2013, other countries have expressed the wish to follow their lead, including Australia, the U.S. and France. In the long-term, further research is needed to fully comprehend what impact governmental Photoshop laws and BMI regulations like these may have on individuals’ body perception.

In the UK, the meaning of fashion store mannequins has recently come under scrutiny. Research by Robinson and Aveyard (2017) from the University of Nottingham suggests that the average female mannequins used by high street fashion retailers in English cities were representative of underweight women. Comparing to those unrealistically thin, medically unhealthy models in fashion stores could thus reinforce negative body image at the point of sale. The discrepancy between those slender fashion mannequins and real women is further

reinforced by the fact that the average female dress size has grown considerably over the last decade. Equalities Minister Jo Swinson appealed for the introduction of more realistic sized mannequins in 2013 and many fashion retailers have decided to adjust their mannequins' sizes since. However, Robinson and Aveyard's recent results indicate otherwise. Resultantly, it appears crucial to collect more data on fashion mannequins' impact on body image at the point of sale in order to enunciate further recommendations on both fashion retailers' sales strategies and potential governmental actions in this.

We think also there is a need to look at the impact of commercial behavioural targeting on social media for vulnerable groups and how this may be regulated. In other addictive behaviours such as gambling there has been pressure upon commercial organisation to enact ways for vulnerable individuals to opt-out or self-exclude from sites and triggers which may be problematic. Behavioural targeting in social media relies upon search history to deliver advertising but for those in recovery from eating disorders or with broader body image issues this advertising (e.g. for diet or exercise products) may act as a trigger of past behaviours.

Finally, it would also be beneficial for the government to promote how, through PSHE, schools can promote discussion on healthy social media use by integrating this into existing programmes on safe use of internet and media literacy lessons.

**Q9: What examples are there of youth organisations and peer education programmes outside of schools promoting positive body image? Are there examples of programmes focusing on different groups of young people? Are they focusing on different aspects of body image? How effective are these? How should they be evaluated?**

There are successful body image peer education projects taking place out with school PSHE classes/health curriculum. Namely, the Ambassador volunteer programme developed by Beat, the UK's eating disorder charity [[www.b-eat.co.uk](http://www.b-eat.co.uk)]. Beat's vision is an end to the pain and suffering caused by eating disorders.

Eating disorders are widely misunderstood and stigmatised illnesses, so Beat works to change this at every level. Campaigning for positive change for people who are suffering, so that they can get the help they need and deserve as quickly as possible, assisting with research to learn more about what causes body image issues and eating disorders and how best to treat them. Translating the complex and technical into practical guidance for people affected by eating disorders, both sufferers and their friends and families and offering awareness training in schools and workplaces.

The Ambassador programme is a national network of individuals [under 25 years] with personal experience of body image challenges, who have been affected by eating disorders and are now recovered or in recovery. Ambassadors are trained, mentored and supported to share their experiences in a positive, informative and insightful way as well as co-delivering peer- education workshops in order to improve understanding and challenge stigma surrounding body image and eating disorders, sign post where to garner help and support if struggling with related issues and further to carry the message of hope that 'you are not alone' and recovery is possible. Ambassadors share their experiences with schools, Universities, community groups and members of the public through events, as well as engaging with patients, parents and

clinicians through CAMHS services. The foundation of the programme also serves to increase the confidence and self esteem of the Ambassador volunteers, helping them to develop new skills, further bolster their own renewed positive body image and re-engage with their community and peers following g past illness. The positive impact of this programme has been recognised in Scotland, with the Ambassador project being awarded the 'Volunteer Award' at the national Scottish Health Award 2015, recognising the project having greatest positive impact upon NHS patients, carers and clinicians across the country that year.

Although there is a greater prevalence of initial onset for eating disorders and body image challenges in young females around the time of adolescence, it is known that eating disorders do not discriminate based on age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion or cultural background and anyone may be affected at any age or stage of life. As such the Ambassador programme reflects diversity within the volunteer team, with young people drawing upon the specific nature of the origin of their body image concerns and the contextual interplay with regards to their ethnicity [e.g. body image and eating disorder challenges during religious fasting and Ramadan], gender [e.g. Transgender Ambassadors with regards to complex body dysmorphia] and sexuality [e.g. greater prevalence of body image concerns and worries amongst young gay men and LGBTQI community].

Evaluation of the Ambassador programme is presently undertaken via feedback and evaluation forms regarding impact, usefulness and [in Scotland] outcome measures linked to the 'Getting it Right for Every Child' SHANARRI indicators regarding health and wellbeing – both for the Ambassador volunteers and for professionals/audience receiving peer education workshops and talks. There is a need for more robust and longitudinal evaluation of impact with regards to the programmes impact, for example in relation to measuring change or increase in help seeking behaviour, improved body image and reduction in self-stigma over time. Resource and means to undertake such evaluation is however challenging.

**Q10: To what extent is dissatisfaction with body image contributing to the increase in mental health problems amongst children and young people?**

The Children's Society's Report of 2016 suggests that 34% of girls and 20% of boys aged 10-15 are unhappy with their appearance. One cause for this is considered the growing social pressure as it persists on social media platforms. Other reports have shown that even younger children aged 3-4 worry about their body image. Simultaneously, increasing numbers of children and teenagers affect by mental health issues are noted (Department for Education, 2016). Further research is needed to find out to what extent worsening mental health numbers relate to negative body image out of other factors that may concern young people.

Body image issues raise the risk for developing low self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and obesity (Grabe et al. 2008).

We also know that social media is so ubiquitous that people encountering mental health issues are likely to be using it as part of both their illness and recovery.

**Contributors to the document:**

Dr Petya Eckler, senior lecturer in journalism, University of Strathclyde Dr

Andrea Tonner, lecturer in marketing, University of Strathclyde Anke Kleim,

doctoral student in journalism, University of Strathclyde Julie Cameron,

programmes manager, Mental Health Foundation

Sara Preston, senior national officer-Scotland, Beat charity