

# NUFFIELD COUNCIL ON BIOETHICS

## Response to the Youth Select Committee Inquiry on Body Image

14 June 2017

### Executive Summary

1. We very much welcome the opportunity to respond to the Youth Select Committee's inquiry on body image, and commend its work in this important area.
2. On 22 June 2017, the Nuffield Council will publish the report of a two-year inquiry on *cosmetic procedures: ethical issues*.<sup>1</sup> Our response draws on the findings of our report, and will focus on one question set out in the Committee's call for evidence on the internet, social media, and messaging.

### Response to Question 6

**Question 6: 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?**

3. Social media providers have an important role to play in addressing concerns around young people's body image. We saw this in the course of 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."<sup>2</sup> 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'".<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nuffield Council on Bioethics (2017) *Cosmetic procedures: ethical issues*, available at: <http://nuffieldbioethics.org/project/cosmetic-procedures/>.

<sup>2</sup> Deliberative workshop with Young Persons' Group, Aberdeen, ScotCRN (18 June 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Deliberative workshop with young people, International Association of Bioethics Conference (17 June 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Deliberative workshop with young people, International Association of Bioethics Conference (17 June 2016).

4. 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; particularly #beyourself and #perfectlyme. These campaigns may challenge views on how people 'should' look, and encourage users to embrace themselves 'as they are'.
5. Although such initiatives should be welcomed, the extent of body image concerns among young people and the suggested link<sup>5</sup> between these concerns and social media use means that social media providers need to go beyond initiating hashtag campaigns, and do more.
6. 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.<sup>6</sup> **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.**
7. 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, but also others such as the 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.

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<sup>5</sup> 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; McDool E, Powell P, Roberts J, and Taylor K (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\\_w2-research\\_report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/599871/LSYPE2_w2-research_report.pdf), which highlights research that suggests negative associations between the use of screen-based media (including smartphones) and happiness.

<sup>6</sup> 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."

8. 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. This is therefore an ethical imperative, and clearly falls within what is, or should be, social media providers' corporate social responsibilities.

## **Conclusion**

9. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our response further with Committee members. More information on the Nuffield Council's work on *cosmetic procedures: ethical issues* is available on our website.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Nuffield Council on Bioethics (2017) *Cosmetic procedures: ethical issues*, available at: <http://nuffieldbioethics.org/project/cosmetic-procedures>.