

NUFFIELD COUNCIL ON BIOETHICS

Response to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and the Home Office's online harms white paper

1 July 2019

Introductory remarks

- 1 The Nuffield Council on Bioethics strongly support the Government's commitment to establishing a regulator with the power to take effective actions against companies that aren't meeting their duty of care towards their users. We welcome the recognition that companies must be more responsible for their users' safety online, especially children and other potentially vulnerable people groups.
- 2 Our response to this consultation will focus on one area in particular - online harms relating to body image and appearance anxiety. Research is emerging that demonstrates a link between images on social media and appearance anxiety.¹ We are concerned about the harmful influence of online content that promotes unrealistic body image ideals and contributes to appearance anxiety. This white paper recognises the growing concern about the relationship between social media and the mental health of young people (paragraphs 1.18-21). We suggest that the online harms white paper should include in scope the promotion of images / products / games that promote idealised body appearance, such as those that endorse diet products, or apps that encourage young people to 'play' at cosmetic procedures.

Background

- 3 In June 2017, the Nuffield Council on Bioethics published a report '*Cosmetic procedures: ethical issues*' following a two-year inquiry. Our report examined how cosmetic procedures are supplied in a UK context but also, importantly, what drives demand for those procedures. As part of this exploration of factors that might influence demand, the role of the internet – particularly social media sites – was highlighted as a key issue. We therefore made recommendations that sought to encourage online providers to tackle rising levels of body dissatisfaction and anxiety about appearance in young people.

¹ Recent research from the Mental Health Foundation and YouGov showed that 22 per cent of adults and 40 per cent of teenagers said that images on social media caused them to worry about their body image. See: Mental Health Foundation (2019) [Body image: how we think and feel about our bodies](#).

Our response

Improving the evidence base

- 4 Many of the appearance-related pressures that we identified in our report are embedded in the technologies that are an increasingly important part of people's lives. During our inquiry, we found links between the growth of appearance anxiety amongst young people and an increase in the use of social media, but we also found that there was little evidence in this area to help better understand the nature of this link.
- 5 We recommended that social media companies should collaborate to fund independent research on how social media may contribute to appearance anxiety, and how this can be minimised; and they should act on the findings. Unfortunately we have seen little progress in this area since we published our report.
- 6 We therefore support proposals for the regulator to undertake and commission research to improve the evidence base around online harms, working closely with UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and other partners - including overseeing the fulfilment of companies' commitments to improve the ability of independent researchers to access their data, subject to appropriate safeguards.

Technology, education and awareness

- 7 Whilst we welcome action from the Government to regulate the activity of companies, we believe more could be done in other ways to help address the increasingly pervasive issue of body image awareness and anxiety amongst younger generations. It is crucial to help children and young people deal with them robustly from an early age, alongside action to challenge at source those pressures that are particularly harmful or discriminatory.
- 8 One of our recommendations called for the Department for Education to ensure that all children and young people have access to evidence-based resources on body image, whether through PSHE lessons or other compulsory elements of the curriculum. These resources need to address issues such as unrealistic appearance ideals, the impact of social media and celebrity culture, ways of reducing appearance-focused comparisons, and how to achieve positive behaviour change.
- 9 In a recent response to the Department for Education's consultation on relationships, sex and health education, and health education aim we suggested that education about body image and appearance ideals should begin in this detail in primary school, as evidence shows that boys and girls of primary school age have reported unhappiness with their appearance, and that this unhappiness is associated with anxiety and depression.

Contact

Hugh Whittall
Director, Nuffield Council on Bioethics
hwhittall@nuffieldbioethics.org