



Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP  
Chair, Women and Equalities Committee  
Committee Office,  
House of Commons,  
Palace of Westminster,  
SW1A 0AA

3 November 2020

Dear Ms Nokes,

Thank you for inviting me to give oral evidence on the Committee's inquiry into body image, and for providing an opportunity for one of our young ambassadors, Danny Bowman, to address the Committee.

As requested, I have provided responses below to the questions we were not able to cover in the Committee session.

**1) What action is needed from social media companies to ensure their platforms aren't damaging young people's body image?**

Social media companies need to be more active in promoting good body image by generating positive exposure to a diverse range of body images and in protecting against the promotion of unrealistic and unobtainable body ideals. Social media companies cannot claim to be passive in this – their provision of filters, advertising guidelines, and what is promoted through their algorithms all contribute to the promotion of unobtainable body ideals. The proposed new codes of practice in the Online Harms White Paper should encourage social media companies to be better guardians of young people's mental health by protecting against negative body images.

However, the causes of body image dissatisfaction are multifactorial and complicated, and regulation is not going to be able to capture all the drivers of poor body image. Regulatory change will be most effective if social media companies are fully engaged in the process. Social media carries the potential to deliver some innovative solutions to the problem above and beyond what is possible through the application of sanctions alone. Social media companies should investigate positive and innovative ways of promoting healthy body image and protecting their users from body-image-related harm. They should recognise their duty of care in this area.

Social media companies should have clear systems for users to report bullying and discrimination and should be able to take effective action. Social media platforms should give users greater control over the content they see and create accessible tutorials to show users how to exercise this control.

**2) Have you had any engagement with social media companies on improving body image and mental health of young people?**

We were able to reach employees of Apple and Google to discuss the recommendations from our briefing about image altering apps and young people's mental health.

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**3) Currently you need to be 13 years old to access most forms of social media. Do you think this is the appropriate age and how might this be better enforced?**

We are not in a position to be able to answer this question.

**4) Will the protections introduced in the Online Harms White Paper protect people from harmful content around body image?**

Understandably, the Online Harms White Paper focused largely on the serious topics of child sexual abuse, suicide prevention and radicalisation. We do however think there is scope to expand its offering for preventing negative body image, and this featured in our response to the Government's consultation.

The proposed codes of practice for social media companies would be the best place for this action. We recommended that the codes of practice should ensure that the content social media promotes to users – through advertising, trending/viral content, and algorithms – does not exacerbate body image concerns. The codes should further encourage social media to help promote a greater diversity of body images.

As well as social media companies, the Online Harms White Paper should target app stores. The terms and conditions of these stores would be a useful tool to help prevent apps from causing psychological harm to children and young people, particularly through their promotion of image manipulation. As internet use is increasingly moving to phones and tablets, stronger oversight of applications is becoming more important.

**5) What other action would you like the Government to take to reduce poor body image for young people today?**

Public campaigns focusing on nutrition, obesity and being overweight should avoid the potential to create stigma and indirectly contribute to appearance-based bullying by not making weight the focus of their messages. Instead, they should focus on healthy eating and exercise for all members of the population, regardless of weight.

A body image and media literacy toolkit, co-produced by young people, should be a compulsory element of what children learn in schools. This should include the development of a charter for achieving a healthy and positive body image. In England, we recommend that this is used within the new Health Education curriculum.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share our findings with the Committee. I hope to be able to share our expertise on other topics in the future.

Yours sincerely,

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**Director for England and Wales**

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