

**Written evidence submitted by Professor Heather Widdows,  
University of Birmingham (MISS0009)**

### **Introduction**

- I work as the John Ferguson Professor of Global Ethics at the University of Birmingham, where my research focuses on the increasing demands of beauty, which I examine in my latest book *[Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal](#)*. I have also started the [#everydaylookism campaign](#), in which members of the public share their stories of facing discrimination because of their looks.

### **Executive summary**

- Body image anxiety is widespread and needs to be viewed as a public health issue, given the serious nature of the harms that can result.
- A change in our value frameworks and culture is needed. Displaying different images might help, but in the end they reinforce an image-based culture, with its message that the image matters most.
- I refer to discrimination based on appearance as ‘lookism’. Clear parallels could be drawn between lookism, sexism and racism. Sexism has always existed but until we had a name for it we couldn’t really address the issue. Nasty comments based on appearance are still as invisible as sexist comments were in the workplaces of the 50s and 60s - we need to name the problem and then start to address it.

### **The impact of poor body image**

**Who is particularly at risk of poor body image? What is the impact for those with multiple protected characteristics including race, disability, sex and sexuality?**

1. Body image anxiety is rising across all groups. We are starting to see it affect people at a younger age and continue as we get older, so more of us are feeling the pressure. But because it potentially affects us all, and is becoming normalised, this doesn’t mean it is less harmful. On the contrary it may be more harmful. Instances of ‘lookism’, which is prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of a person’s appearance, are increasingly damaging. In our visual culture, our bodies are ourselves. So when we shame bodies, we shame people.
2. Unlike racism and sexism, everyone can experience body image anxiety and it’s even regarded as normal. Indeed so normal that we think there is something abnormal about someone who isn’t dissatisfied with some aspect of their appearance. For example, we find it odd if a woman says she is happy with her body.

3. This pressure is exacerbated by social media. We know that no one is as perfect as Facebook, Instagram and TikTok suggest, but we still feel the pressure to present perfectly and feel dissatisfied with our bodies. It falls more on those who are particularly immersed in visual and virtual culture, perhaps especially the young, but in the present lockdown situation, when on-line communication is dominant, more of us will be affected. Because lookism affects all, it is less easy to address than discrimination against a group – but it is still harmful and a prejudice.
4. This said, pressure does fall in different ways on different groups – but this is a complex picture. For instance, in some racial groups lighter skin is regarded as the most important beauty feature and so those with dark skin are discriminated against. However, on a global level, the ideal skin tone is golden/coffee coloured so it's not just 'paler is better'.<sup>1</sup> Race and class hierarchies are still important but it doesn't track in a simple way, i.e. discrimination can be on individuals who don't fit (e.g. lesbians wearing make-up, black women not having 'afro hair' and being 'black enough'). Discrimination can be about being too pale/dark, too fat/thin, wearing too much make up/not enough, and so on.

#### **What contributes to poor body image?**

5. There is no simple answer and psychologists, sociologists, and medics have some answers – all of which provide pieces of the puzzle. It is important to ask, not just why body image anxiety is growing (in that more people have it), but why body image anxiety is becoming more closely linked to our sense of self - so that failure in appearance is seen as a failure across our lives.
6. Beauty has become an ethical ideal to live by and the moral pressure to 'do' beauty is growing. This has caused an epidemic of body image anxiety and should therefore be treated as an issue of public health.
7. The change in value frameworks which mean we value appearance more than before is missed from the debate. We are anxious – and suffering – from this more because appearance matters more. Our value frameworks have changed. Body image matters more, so a poor one matters. In the past, we may have compensated for this by success in other areas, but now we have to succeed in beauty - no matter what else we do - if we are to be successful.

#### **What are the long-term effects of poor body image on people?**

8. As body anxiety changes its type we don't know how serious it will be. We do know that it cuts deeply. This is something that we saw very clearly through the #everydaylookism stories campaign that we have been running.<sup>2</sup> Some of the

comments we have received include (quoted verbatim):

- a. 82: "When I was about 20 years old, my mum asked how much I weighed. I told her 56kg. She responded by saying "well when I was your age I was only 53kg." Before she said the comment I didn't think much of my weight and (rightly so) thought I was pretty thin but afterwards I immediately felt like I had done something wrong and somehow failed. Every time I step on the scale the comment plays through my mind."
- b. 110: "My brother told me that I am fat, despite he actually being the one who was overweight. I went on to develop anorexia in my teenage years. I am not saying his single comment was responsible for my illness, but please be considerate, weight is so sensitive topic."
- c. 132: "When I was 21 I went to my university ball (my first time for this kind of event). I was all dressed up for the first time, walking to meet some friends, and a van full of men drove past. They rolled down the window and shouted "hey ugly, you look like a man". That was over 20 years ago and it still rings in my ears every day."
- d. 149: " "You've got legs like tree trunks. They're much bigger than mine." - said by my Grandma to my Mum when she was a teenager. She has suffered from an disordered eating since her teenage years."
- e. 345: "My doctor told me I wasn't as pretty as my older sister. I was 11 and already had low self esteem due to bed wetting from a young age. I believe this had a knock on effect to a lot of poor decision making growing up. Still get that heart sinking feeling when I think about it."
- f. 501: "I was picked to play a ballerina in a school play when I was in year 1 (age 5-6). Someone's mum complained to the teacher because I was "too fat to be a ballerina." My mum then chose to keep reminding me about this comment years later. I'm 29 and it still bothers me to this day."
- g. 530: "I can't believe grandma spoilt you so much! You are so fat! You need to loose weight right now!" said my mom as she put me on a diet when I was 6 years old. I battle food addiction to this day - I am 36."
- h. 632: "A major high street fashion chain does not stock above size 14 in their stores as standard. I was told so by a sales assistant when I asked if they had a size 18 in a dress I fell in love with. She said - 'We're a high-fashion retailer and there are other brands that cater specifically for women like you'.
- i. 618: "I once sat in on my sisters physical therapy session. Her therapist turned to me as I was giggling at my sister and said 'I don't know why you're laughing. You can't wear a big jumper to hide that big belly forever'. Totally unrelated to why I was laughing, and I was 12. That's 12 years ago and I still think about it when I wear loose clothing."

- j. 635: “One day, when I was around 10-11, my dad looked at my stomach from side view and told me that real women should have curves in chest and booty area and not the stomach.. and that I have it all, just reversed. He didn't mean to hurt me, and I wasn't particularly hurt by it then... But a few years and eating disorders later I realized maybe that wasn't such a clever thing to say to your child.”
9. We already know very well that poor body image has effects – people report not doing things, such as speaking up in class, and we know that it leads to conditions such as disordered eating. The stories that emerged from the #everydaylookism campaign show that the effects can be severe and stay with people for years.

**What is the impact of media consumption on people’s body image, does it impact their mental health?**

10. Studies say different things – some say it is very damaging, others suggest that young people can use social media in more positive ways. My view is that an image-based culture is emerging where the image is more powerful than the word - this is something we have not had before. This doesn't always go how you think – i.e. labelling in adverts to say that they have been digitally altered doesn't reduce the pressure, but makes you focus on the image more.<sup>3</sup> It's not just social media or adverts but all the images we see – we don't see ‘normal breasts’ as a rule (when I needed them for a presentation I had to google and I found only breast checking for cancer which were normal images). What we mean by ‘normal’ is not statistically average, but what we see or aspire too – so it's no wonder we feel inadequate when we look at ourselves and our non-modified body when we compare to the modified (by surgery, botox, make-up, filters and digital tools) bodies we see. We can't avoid these images - they are everywhere.

**What is the relationship between poor body image and mental health conditions including eating disorders?**

11. As our bodies become our ‘selves’ (how we define ourselves) then mental health conditions will increasingly be body related. We will try to ‘fix’ our bodies to ‘fix’ ourselves (if I were thinner, firmer, smoother, I'd be happier). So the relationship is complex and needs to be seen in the context of the changing value framework: that our bodies matter more in an increasingly visual culture.

**Media**

**What is the effect of the following on people’s body image when using social media? (Adverts, User-generated content (posts from friends), User-generated content (posts from celebrities), Content promoting eating disorders and diet culture, Content promoting cosmetic surgery/interventions)**

12. In my view, these types of content contribute differently, not just because of what they are, but who they fall on. Some people are more immune to some things than others. It doesn't matter what the intention is behind the comment, it can still have the capacity to hurt some people, whereas others may shrug it off. It is more about moving the focus off people's bodies.

**What are the responsibilities of companies and the media in ensuring diversity in the images we see?**

13. Companies and the media should be encouraged to feature a large range of bodies and body parts, including non-modified bodies and body parts, as well as old bodies, disabled bodies, and bodies which do not conform to the beauty idea (thin, firm, smooth and young – or with most of these features).
14. Diversity is one possible way forward, but it needs to be genuine diversity. Usually when we say diversity we just change one feature of the global ideal (thin, firm, smooth, young). So you end up with bodies that are fat, but young with curves and make up. Or hairy, but thin and young. Magazines sometimes display models who are supposedly diverse but all broadly fall into the spectrum of thin with curves, and other features of the beauty ideal. Body positive campaigns have their hearts in the right place, but we should recognise their limitations. I discuss these ideas in more detail in a blog published last year: [What's Wrong with Body Positivity?](#)

## **Regulation**

**Has Government policy had an impact on improving body image?**

**(i) What strategy should the Government take to encourage healthy body image for young people?**

15. Taking the context and the value framework seriously is crucial if we are going to address this. So far the focus has been far too much on what individuals feel and not on changing behavior to get culture change. It is not enough to teach resilience – as it asks the individuals to feel differently and doesn't take into account the extent of the pressure as the beauty ideal becomes global and ethical.

**(ii) Is there enough research and data to support the Government in creating policy surrounding body image and social media?**

16. Data is important, but the Government should also consider questions posed by a philosophical/ethical approach: what *are* our selves? What do we value? Why do we want it? These questions can't just be solved by asking individuals what they feel, as

these are learned and conditioned answers (e.g. ‘doing it for me’, ‘makes me feel confident’).

**Would proposals in the Online Harms White Paper protect people from potential harm caused by social media content in regard to body image?**

17. The white paper has far too little to say on ‘body image anxiety’ or ‘body-dissatisfaction’ and the related harms. And this is despite the psychological harms that we know can result, such as disordered eating consequences, effects on self esteem, and so on. We also know young girls say body image anxiety holds them back and stops them from doing things like speaking up in class or doing physical activity. So its knock-on harms are likely huge.
18. Body image anxiety is fuelled by social media (our peer comparison group goes from our ‘school/class/village/peer-group to pretty much everyone in the virtual world). The the white paper mentions lots of related harms (on-line bullying, abuse (on race, sex etc. but not appearance)) it doesn’t mention the harm of the increased focus on bodies in a visual and virtual culture (image-based culture), nor the more specific harm of body image anxiety.
19. Online abuse and bullying are mentioned throughout the white paper, but nowhere is *appearance* bullying mentioned - even though this is the most prevalent form of bullying.
20. Responding to **users complaints** “within an appropriate timeframe and to take action consistent with the expectations set out in the regulatory framework” (set out on p8 of the white paper and returned to throughout). From my perspective the key here is that Body shaming/lookism/abuse/bullying about bodies should be in the framework and be the kind of comments which come down in response to complaints.
21. An “effective easy-to-access user complaint function” (on p42) should include taking down body shaming/’thinspiration’ content – and sanctioning repeat posters.
22. I welcome the “**independent regulator**” and the “risk based approach, prioritising action to tackle activity or content where there is the greatest evidence of threat of harm, or where children or other vulnerable users are at risk” (p9).
23. Regulator will work closely with **UKRI to ensure support for targeted harms into on-line harms** (p56). This should include harms from image based culture and increased focus on bodies and attendant harms which follow. Too often appearance/beauty seen as individual (even when taken seriously the focus is on individual ‘resilience’) or trivial. Therefore there has been little research funding – and lack of research in this has allowed things to escalate almost invisibly. If this harm is taken seriously by the government (as parents and others increasingly are) perhaps researchers and academics – so far pretty dismissive of beauty – may begin to take this seriously.
24. Measures to **address harassment** (7.23 and 7.24 – p70) could usefully be extended to appearance bullying and body shaming. Likewise **cyberbullying** (7.43 through to

7.47).

25. “Make it clear to users what **forms of content are acceptable** as part of the terms of service” p82 – should include body shaming/lookism as not acceptable.
26. **School curriculum** (p85) – so far just individual resilience is taught – which basically puts it all on the individual – it’s down to you, you just have to put up with body shaming and lookism because it’s normal. This isn’t enough, we should make it not ok to say these things and change *behaviour* not just change *attitudes* (and attitudes of the most vulnerable). If we require and expect *behaviour change* and action it (take down comments, block those who persistently abuse) then *behaviour and regulatory change will lead to culture change*. Otherwise we are effectively saying to vulnerable kids – “yes it’s horrible but we aren’t going to do anything, you just have to change how you feel so you can cope with it...”. In the work we have done even teachers have been surprised at how much their students feel this when they are asked – appearance as a source of anxiety and bullying is individualised, which isolates and silences.
27. **5 rights** (p89) should be extended to lookism/body shaming – especially the right to remove.

**Do companies advertise their goods and services responsibly in relation to promoting positive body image?**

28. No, but we don’t know what that would look like – need to address image based culture. But we could stop promising miracles and using unhelpful words like ‘resurface’ or ‘erase’.

May 2020

**References**

---

<sup>1</sup> I talk about this in more detail in chapter 3 of *Perfect Me*. Page 91 is especially relevant on how no racial group escapes - white women focus on lips and hair removal, black women on skin tone and Asian women on eyes.

<sup>2</sup> <https://everydaylookism.bham.ac.uk/>

<sup>3</sup> MacCallum, F., Widdows, H. Altered Images: Understanding the Influence of Unrealistic Images and Beauty Aspirations. *Health Care Anal* 26, 235–245 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10728-016-0327-1>