

Written evidence submitted by the Government Equalities Office on behalf of HM Government (MISS0057)

Overview

Poor body image is an issue of concern and has the potential to affect anyone. Research and evidence in this area suggests that the pressure to achieve an idealised image can be a serious issue, with wide-reaching consequences for mental and physical wellbeing.¹

Everyone should feel confident and comfortable with their bodies. The Government has therefore worked with the advertising industry to improve young people's ability to evaluate the images and messages they encounter in the media. In 2019 we also held an event with a group of social media influencers and bloggers to help the Government understand how best to raise awareness of the impact of poor body image.

As we continue to build the evidence base, we will seek to engage with media outlets, social media companies, and other key industry partners across advertising, film, TV and fashion to understand more about their influence on poor body image and what can be done to tackle it.

Section 1: The Impact of Poor Body Image

1. The evidence tells us that poor body image has the potential to affect anyone, at any point in their life. Research finds that different groups are likely to experience body image in different ways, and individuals that experience social disadvantage on multiple levels are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction².
2. While both men and women experience poor body image, studies show that women generally have lower satisfaction with their bodies than men. They also suggest that poor body image can also reduce women's economic, political and social opportunities as it is associated with lower confidence and lower aspirations³. It is also part of how gender stereotypes are reinforced and can be a significant barrier to people developing and expressing their individual potential⁴.
3. There are numerous influences that contribute to poor body image. Research⁵ found that pressure from peers, social media, and film and television are the top three contributors to poor body image.
4. Numerous studies show that mass media plays a prominent role in the communication of 'ideal' body standards, and individuals are negatively impacted by media portrayals of unrealistic beauty images⁶. Analysis of advertisements on websites aimed at adolescents found that most figures portrayed were female, young, thin and attractive.⁷

Mental Health

5. Evidence further suggests that poor body image can lead to anxiety, depression and eating disorders⁸.
6. The Government is expanding and transforming mental health services for adults, children and young people in England. We are investing record levels in mental health, and the NHS Long Term Plan is set to increase funding further by at least £2.3 billion a year by 2023/24. Along with this we are implementing waiting time access standards to ensure that more people can receive treatment and care when they need it.
7. The previous administration worked with the advertising industry to develop young people's ability to evaluate the images and messages they encounter in the media, and a great deal of progress has been made in getting the message across that looking after our mental health is just as important as looking after our physical health.
8. Government is also working with social media companies to tackle harmful suicide and self-harm content online, and the big social media companies have agreed to establish a strategic partnership with suicide and self-harm prevention experts to remove this content. This work will also explore action that can be taken to remove harmful pro-eating disorder content. It is important that social media companies take more responsibility for the content on their platforms, and they should have clear systems in place to enable people to report incidences of bullying or harassment as people who go online should have protection available when they need it.
9. Last year, the Chief Medical Officers published their independent systematic map of evidence⁹ on screen and social media use in children and young people. This concluded that although the published scientific research is currently insufficient to support evidence-based guidelines on screen time, there is enough basis to warrant a precautionary approach and action by schools, government and technology companies. They also published advice for parents and carers, giving tips on how to have a healthy balance with screen time.

Body image over the life course

10. A survey¹⁰ of 2,000 UK residents about the impact a person's body image can have on their life has found:
 - 1 in 5 say poor body image has slowed their career progression;
 - 57% of 18-24 year olds said poor body image impacts their mental health;
 - 36% say their love and social lives have been affected; and
 - 37% avoid wearing certain clothes.
11. Research carried out by Girlguiding suggests that women tend to grow unhappier with their bodies between the ages of under 10 and 21, with 51% of girls in the younger cohort saying they are happy with how they look, compared to 16% in the older

cohort¹¹. Recent studies also highlight that how we experience body image is not a linear journey, and life events may be just as important as age when looking at key times that people tend to be more susceptible to poor body image. While puberty is generally recognised as a particularly challenging phase, research¹² suggests that other stages can also trigger more vulnerability to poor body image. These include secondary school, pregnancy, post-pregnancy, starting a new job and relationship breakdown.

12. Research released as part of Mental Health Awareness Week 2019 found that in a poll of 4,500 UK adults, a third of those surveyed felt anxious about their bodies, with 1 in 8 experiencing suicidal thoughts¹³.
13. Research (of 1,000 14-21 year olds) also found that:
 - One quarter feel ‘ashamed or disgusted’ by their body;
 - One in six girls and young women in Britain has not attended school or their workplace in the past year because they were anxious about the way they look;
 - 69% have deliberately not gone to at least one social, school or work activity in the last year because of body image anxiety; and
 - Over a quarter have not left the house, and a fifth have avoided public speaking in the last year¹⁴.
14. A further study¹⁵ with 13-19 year olds found that more than a third have stopped eating or have restricted their diets as a result of low body image. Over a third worry about their body image often or daily (35%) or feel upset or ashamed about how they look (37%).

Government Action

15. The Government has provided £3 million to the ‘Disrespect Nobody’ teenage relationship abuse campaign, which is designed to educate teenagers about different types of abusive behaviour. It aims to prevent the onset of domestic abuse in adults by challenging attitudes and behaviours amongst teenage boys and girls that abuse in relationships is acceptable. In the prevention of Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy refresh (March 2019), the Home Office committed to conduct research and develop their approach to communicating messages around VAWG, building on the ‘Disrespect Nobody’ campaign.
16. In the school environment it is important for pupils to know how to be safe and healthy, and how to manage their academic, personal and social lives in a positive way. This is why the Department for Education is making Health Education compulsory in all state-funded schools in England, alongside making Relationships Education compulsory for primary-aged pupils and Relationships and Sex Education compulsory for secondary-aged pupils. This knowledge will be important in the coming months as pupils return to schools and start spending time with friends.

17. We also know that physical activity has numerous benefits for physical and mental wellbeing aside from links to weight control, and daily activity is a key part of developing a healthy lifestyle.
18. Sport England launched its This Girl Can behaviour change campaign in January 2015 to get more women aged 14-40 (now extended to women in their sixties) physically active and help narrow the gender gap in the number of men and women regularly taking part in sport and being physically active. The This Girl Can campaign encourages women and girls to get active, regardless of shape, size and ability - It uses 'real women' doing the sport they normally do in places they normally do it. According to Sport England research the campaign has inspired almost 4 million women to take action including 3 million returning to or increasing their levels of activity. By 2021, Sport England will have invested £27m in the This Girl Can campaign to encourage more women and girls to be active.
19. Being physically active, including through PE and other school sport can also support wider wellbeing. The national curriculum includes PE as a compulsory subject at all four key stages to give all children opportunities to become physically confident in a way which supports their health and fitness. The government published a School Sport and Activity Action Plan in July 2019 – a cross-government action plan to provide all children with greater opportunity to do 60 minutes of sport and physical activity every day inside and outside school. Since 2013 we have provided over £1billion to primary schools to improve the quality of their PE provision, through the Primary PE and Sport Premium.
20. We want more people to be more active more often. The Government will invest nearly £4.5 million over three years in social prescribing. This funding allows GPs to refer patients to social activities such as walking clubs, gardening or arts activities.
21. Through Health Education secondary-aged pupils will be taught about the similarities and differences between the online world and the physical world. This will include content on the impact of unhealthy or obsessive comparison with others online, including through setting unrealistic expectations for body image, how people may curate a specific image of their life online, how information is targeted at them and how to be a discerning consumer of information online. We will work with the Department for Education on what more can be done to address the harms caused by poor body image amongst children and young people.
22. Pupils will also be taught how to recognise the early signs of mental wellbeing concerns, including common types of mental ill health (e.g. anxiety and depression). These subjects will also support pupils by promoting pupils' self-control and ability to self-regulate, as well as strategies for doing so.

23. The statutory guidance¹⁶ for these subjects also links to resources on body image, which have been developed by Public Health England.

Section 2: Media

24. The role of social media is complex and varied. Two research studies¹⁷ found a causal relationship between poor body image and a) time spent on social media, b) number of Facebook friends and c) time spent engaging in appearance-related activities. This research found that women who spend more time engaging in these are more likely to experience negative behaviours, such as higher endorsement of the 'thin ideal', more dieting behaviours and greater body dissatisfaction. But it also considered that individual vulnerability (for example perfectionism) may affect the extent of these negative outcomes.
25. Links between social media activities and online harassment, poor sleep, low self-esteem and poor body image have been found, which in turn, related to high depressive symptom scores¹⁸. Engaging in photo-based activities on social media has been found to have a direct negative impact on mood and body image¹⁹. Emerging evidence found that social media allows peers and celebrities to inhabit the same space, which can lead to people viewing celebrities more like they would their peers, and engage in 'upward comparisons'²⁰.
26. Existing evidence suggests that 'thinspiration' content has resulted in thin-ideal imagery and lower body image. A further study found that only one in nine leading UK bloggers making weight management claims provide accurate and trustworthy information²¹.
27. Social media encourages portrait-style photography, and a recent study found that women upload more portrait pictures than full-bodied pictures²². This provides more opportunities to make face, skin and hair-related comparisons rather than the more common full body images in traditional media.
28. It is important to recognise that social media can provide a safe space and allows people to develop and maintain genuine connections with others, and cultivate communities. This research also suggests social media can have an additional positive role in public health by widening access to health information, enabling health surveillance and influencing health policy²³.
29. Evidence suggests that the media has an influence over the way that we view ourselves and society, and media portrayals of men and women can create limiting gender stereotypes which hold people back. We are working with industry to help tackle stereotyping in advertising and broader media including recognising industry leaders who are promoting gender diversity in their work.

30. Recent research by Geena Davis Institute²⁴ discusses body image in the media. Findings demonstrate that people with larger body types are disproportionately featured less in the media, making up 39.8% of the population but only 11.3% of characters, and 5.9% of leading characters. Characters with large body types are often depicted in stereotypical ways, including ‘clumsy’ (12.9%), as a “loser” (7.5%) or poorly dressed (7.8%). They are nearly twice as likely to be depicted as stupid than characters with small/medium body types. Far more characters with large body types (42.3%) are shown as “worse than average” looking or “repulsive” compared to characters with medium and small body types (9.9%).

Government action

31. The Government will seek to engage with media outlets, social media companies, and other key industry partners across advertising, film, TV and fashion to facilitate conversations about the evidence base and what it can teach us about their influence on poor body image. We will work with credible voices and influential partners from these industries to drive action that supports young people in building resilience to negative body image.
32. DCMS maintains a regular ongoing dialogue with the British Fashion Council (BFC) and the Advertising Association (AA). The AA has explored the issue of body image through funding for Media Smart, a non-profit education programme with a mission to ensure young people in the UK can confidently navigate the media they consume. This includes being able to identify, interpret and critically evaluate all forms of advertising. Ofcom also has a media literacy statutory duty.
33. In addition to government action, the fashion industry is already proactively self-regulating misleading portrayals of models online and in print and developing research around issues linked to digitally-enhanced imagery such as mental health. To help protect models in particular, the British Fashion Models Agents Association (BFMA) was set up with the British Fashion Council (BFC) and in 2018 released a Code of Conduct for models. On the issue of model health, DCMS maintains an open dialogue both with the BFC and with the Responsible Trust for Models, which works to protect, educate and support models. The BFC has an annual external advisory board to meet with the BFMA and discuss how the industry as a whole can support health and wellbeing for models.

Section 3: Regulation

34. Advertising in the UK is overseen by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), the industry’s independent regulator, which enforces the Advertising Codes through a system of self-regulation and co-regulation with Ofcom. The Codes apply to all media, including broadcast and online. They incorporate all relevant legislation and set standards for accuracy and honesty to which advertisers must adhere, including

specific conditions on advertising to children, causing offence and social responsibility.

35. They are regularly reviewed and updated by the industry to ensure they remain effective, and proposed changes to the Codes are routinely subject to public consultation. This regulatory system is independent of government and is ultimately responsible for setting the standards in advertising.
36. With specific regard to rules on body image, the ASA applies general rules on offence and social responsibility to ban adverts that include gender stereotypes on grounds of objectification, inappropriate sexualisation and depiction of unhealthy thin body images. In addition, in June 2019, a new rule was introduced to the Codes prohibiting negative gender stereotypes, and the published guidance to advertisers accompanying this rule advises that advertising should take care to avoid suggesting that an individual's happiness or emotional wellbeing should depend on conforming to an idealised gender-stereotypical body shape or physical features.

Government action

37. The Government is developing an online media literacy strategy aimed at equipping users with the skills they need to spot dangers online, critically appraise information and take steps to keep themselves and others safe online.
38. The strategy will ensure a coordinated and strategic approach to online media literacy education and awareness for children, young people and adults. It will complement existing initiatives, including the work the Department for Education is leading on ensuring that schools are equipped to teach online safety and digital literacy.
39. To the extent that this may be a particular concern online, last year we announced that we are considering how online advertising as a whole is regulated in the UK. Among other concerns, this DCMS-led work is seeking to ensure that standards about the placement and content of advertising can be effectively applied and enforced online so that consumers have limited exposure to harmful advertising, noting that the work is not looking at the application of specific rules.

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Endnotes

¹ Body Image – A Rapid Evidence Assessment of the Literature” – Government Equalities Office (2013)

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³ Women’s Business Council Report. (2013) “Maximising Women’s Contribution to Future Economic Growth”

⁴ “A Body Confident Future – British Youth Council, Youth Select Committee (2017)

⁵ ‘Half of the UK Suffer from Low Body Confidence Issues’- study by Better (led by OnePoll)

<https://www.valuewalk.com/2019/08/low-body-confidence/>

⁶ Thompson, J. K., Heinberg, L. J., Altabe, M., & Tantleff-Dunn, S. (1999). Sociocultural theory: The media and society. In J. K. Thompson, L. J. Heinberg, M. Altabe, & S. Tantleff-Dunn, *Exacting beauty: Theory, assessment, and treatment of body image disturbance* (pp. 85-124). Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association.

⁷ Slater, Amy & Tiggemann, Marika & Hawkins, Kimberley & Werchon, Douglas. (2012). Just One Click: A Content Analysis of Advertisements on Teen Web Sites. *The Journal of adolescent health : official publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine*. 50.

⁸ Body Image – A Rapid Evidence Assessment of the Literature” – Government Equalities Office (2013)

⁹ UK Chief Medical Officers’ (CMO) commentary on ‘Screen-based activities and children and young people’s mental health and psychosocial wellbeing: a systematic map of reviews’

¹⁰ ‘Half of the UK Suffer from Low Body Confidence Issues’- study by Better (led by OnePoll)

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¹¹ Girlguiding (2019). <https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/social-action-advocacy-and-campaigns/research/girls-attitudes-survey/> ‘Girls’ Attitudes Survey’

¹² Tiggemann, M. Slater, A. (2013). Selfie-Esteem: The Relationship Between Body Dissatisfaction and Social Media in Adolescent and Young Women

¹³ Mental Health Foundation (2019), “Body Image: How we think and feel about our bodies”

¹⁴ The Independent (by Charity Plan International) poll of 1000 14-21 year olds

¹⁵ Mental Health Foundation (2019), “Body Image: How we think and feel about our bodies”

¹⁶ The statutory guidance can be accessed via the following link:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/805781/Relationships Education Relationships and Sex Education RSE and Health Education.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/805781/Relationships_Education_Relationships_and_Sex_Education_RSE_and_Health_Education.pdf).

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¹⁹ Meier, E.P. Gray, J. (2014). Facebook photoactivity associated with body image disturbance in adolescent girls.

²⁰ Brown, Tiggemann, 2016

²¹ Eysenbach, G. (2013). Misleading Health-Related Information Promoted Through Video-Based Social Media: Anorexia on YouTube.

²² Haferkamp, Nina & Krämer, Nicole. (2010). Social Comparison 2.0: Examining the Effects of Online Profiles on Social-Networking Sites. *Cyberpsychology, behavior and social networking*. 14.

²³ Moorhead, S. A., Hazlett, D. E., Harrison, L., Carroll, J. K., Irwin, A., & Hoving, C. (2013). A new dimension of healthcare: systematic review of the uses, benefits, and limitations of social media for health communication. *Journal for medical internet research*, 15(4).

²⁴ https://seejane.org/research-informs-empowers/2020-tv-historic-screen-time-speaking-time-for-female-characters/?itm_term=home Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media (2020)