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The logo for Internet Matters, featuring the text "internet matters.org" in white lowercase letters on a bright green rectangular background.

Internet Matters submission to the Health and Social Care Committee call for evidence on the impact of body image on physical and mental health

Internet Matters is an award winning, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to supporting parents and professionals to keep children safe and happy online. Half of parents have heard of us and almost 9 in 10 would recommend us. In addition to providing resources and support, we aim to influence policy to ensure that digital participation contributes positively to children's lives. For example, we sit on the Executive Board of the UK Council for Internet Safety (UKCIS).

Internet Matters collaborates with a range of highly respected experts in digital technology and child development to guide and inform our work. One of those experts is Dr Linda Papadopoulos, a well-known psychologist with particular expertise in issues around body image, self-esteem and mental health. In addition to her direct work with clients, Dr Linda is an experienced Government adviser, having conducted an independent view for the Home Office in 2010 on the effects of sexualisation on young people.

Internet Matters and Dr Linda worked together to produce this submission, which focuses on the areas with most relevance to our knowledge and expertise: the influence of digital technology on young people's body image.

Key messages of our submission:

- An individual's experiences in adolescence are pivotal in setting up how they perceive and feel about their body for the rest of their lives. It is important we get things right for young people at this point.
- Negative body image is damaging in its own right, but can also lead to more serious problems including depression, anxiety and eating disorders.
- Online platforms, especially social media, mean that young people are engaging more closely and more frequently with their own images than ever before in history, while also being subject to content (including adverts) that promotes unrealistic beauty standards. This can significantly amplify a young person's negative thoughts about their appearance.
- DHSC and its arms' length bodies can play its part in solving this problem by working closely with DCMS and Ofcom to enhance the Online Safety Bill and Media Literacy Strategy.

What is the relationship between people's perception of their body image and their mental health?

Body image serves an important function in our lives

There is an important evolutionary purpose in being aware of one's appearance. In the earliest part of life, babies are to a great extent oblivious to the way they look. But they quickly learn that by being aware of how they are presenting themselves to others, they can manipulate their external environment to their advantage. For example, babies learn that smiling to an adult helps them to get that adult to do what they want.

But it can also hard-wire us with negative thinking about how we look

Over time, children begin to recognise a link between their appearance (as they perceive it) and how they affect the world – in other words, they form fundamental understandings, or “core beliefs”, about the role their appearance plays in their life.

Core beliefs can be helpful or unhelpful. In some cases, they may lead to the development of negative or irrational thoughts about more specific areas of people’s lives. For example, a core belief that says you absolutely must be appealing and pleasing to others in order to be accepted by them can lead to thoughts such as “I must lose weight in order to find a partner” or “no one will like me the way I look now”. These negative thoughts can be about an individual’s relationship with food, clothes, beauty products or anything else related to appearance.

Negative thinking which derives from these fundamental core beliefs can be very damaging. It can become so routine that not only will individuals find it difficult to stop the thoughts, but they will not even recognise that they are having them. This leads to people experiencing feelings of inadequacy and despair about the way they look.

Poor body image is a gateway to more serious mental health issues

In extreme cases poor body image can fuel the development of serious mental health issues such as eating disorders, depression and anxiety. Indeed, disordered body image often involves hypervigilance and intense self-scrutiny, so there is a sense that one cannot rest from ruminating on the question ‘how do others perceive me’. Simply stated thoughts like “I hate my legs” can quickly turn into “I hate my body” which then often leads to “I hate myself”, and therein lies an insidious connection between poor body image and self-esteem.

How can online platforms create, or contribute to, negative body image in children?

Adolescence is a key moment in the formation of body image

As set out above, core beliefs about the connection between one’s appearance and the world begin to form in early childhood. But in puberty, a young person’s experiences can reinforce or challenge their core beliefs, before the young person enters adulthood and their core beliefs become much more ingrained and fixed. In other words, messages young people receive in adolescence from the people around them can leave a lasting effect on body image. It is therefore particularly important to consider the environment young people are occupying and how it might influence the development of their core beliefs about their appearance and the world.

The online world is incredibly influential in children and young people’s lives – for better and worse

Digital platforms are a massive – and growing – part of modern day childhood and adolescence. Nearly half of 8-11 year olds have their own smartphone, rising to over 9 in 10 12-15 year olds.¹ Between September and November 2020, children aged 7-16 estimated that they were spending on average 3.8 hours online each day. This compares to 3.4 hours the previous year. While some of this uptick is likely to have been caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, it continues a trend of increasing time spent online seen before the pandemic too.²

Being online offers children and families a wide range of benefits. Later this month Internet Matters will launch our first annual index of wellbeing in a digital world, presenting new evidence on the positive impact of digital platforms

¹ Ofcom, ‘Children and parents: media use and attitudes report, 2020/21’, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0025/217825/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2020-21.pdf

² CHILDWISE, ‘The Monitor Report 2021’, <https://www.childwise.co.uk/reports.html#monitorreport>

on children’s developmental, emotional, physical and social wellbeing.³ But this same research, and our previous work also shows that online platforms present risks to children’s wellbeing, including to the development of young people’s body image.

Online platforms lead to young people engaging with their own image more frequently, and more closely, than ever before

Social media is particularly relevant to the formation of body image. This is something that children tend to use more as a teenager than in their younger years: the proportion of children using social media doubles as they move from primary to secondary school, from 44% of 8-11 year olds to 87% for 12-15 year olds.⁴ As set out previously, adolescence is a key point at which core beliefs about one’s appearance can be reinforced or challenged.

Unfortunately, the impact of social media on body image can be damaging in a number of ways:

1. Social media often involves young people engaging with their image in an exceptional level of nuance and detail – whether it’s taking a photo again and again before uploading it to get the desired look, or using photo editing software or filters to remove perceived imperfections. In other words, the sheer amount of time children spend looking at pictures of themselves online can fuel negative body image.
2. Social media leaves validation in the hands of their peers, as well as strangers they have never met. Even if an individual child is happy with an image or video of themselves, that is not enough – they are reliant on the content receiving positive feedback from others, through likes or comments, which may not be forthcoming – especially from teenagers.
3. Social media sometimes amplifies ideals of what one ought to look like. For example, many images which appear on social media reflect unrealistic beauty standards, such as perfectly flat stomachs, flawless skin or perfectly sculpted muscles. This content might be uploaded from other users (perhaps after being filtered), by influencers and/or commercial organisations through advertising.
4. When children view this kind of content once, the design of the platforms (e.g. use of algorithms) means that they are often showed more and more of it. This can also result in young people spiralling from less extreme content to more extreme content, such as pro ana and pro mia (content promoting behaviour associated with anorexia and bulimia).

All this means that social media adds fuel to the fire of negative body image among those children who enter adolescence with negative core beliefs about their appearance, creating a vicious cycle. This is consistent with Internet Matters research which shows that children who are vulnerable offline, including those with mental health conditions, are more vulnerable online too.⁵ Forthcoming research from Internet Matters will shine further light on the relationship between social media use and social wellbeing, particularly for teenage girls.⁶

How can DHSC and its arms’ length bodies work collaboratively across Government to tackle the health impacts of a negative perception of body image?

Working with DCMS and Ofcom on the new regulatory framework resulting from the Online Safety Bill

³ Internet Matters, University of Leicester and Revealing Reality, ‘Children’s Wellbeing in a Digital World’, forthcoming

⁴ Ofcom, ‘Children and parents: media use and attitudes report, 2020/21’, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0025/217825/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2020-21.pdf

⁵ Internet Matters and Youthworks, ‘Vulnerable children in a digital world’, <https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Internet-Matters-Report-Vulnerable-Children-in-a-Digital-World.pdf>

⁶ Internet Matters, University of Leicester and Revealing Reality, ‘Children’s Wellbeing in a Digital World’, forthcoming

We welcome the actions taken by some companies already to mitigate the risks posed by their platforms to young people's body image. The forthcoming Online Safety Bill represents an important opportunity to address these challenges further, placing clearer expectations on companies so that they can help children to enjoy all the benefits that connected technology offers while reducing the risks.

A wider definition of harm to children

The draft bill aims to hold platforms responsible for content children harmful to children, defined as that which might have a "significant adverse physical or psychological impact on a child of ordinary sensibilities". This is intended to include the most damaging content connected with body image, e.g. pro ana and pro mia content. But it is unclear how far it will extend to less serious content, such as images which have been heavily filtered and promote unrealistic beauty standards. This is problematic because, as set out above, when children access this less serious content it can quickly lead to issues with their self-esteem, and escalate to them accessing more and more serious content. In other words, the current bill fails to take a preventative approach to protecting children from harm.

This problem could be addressed by widening the definition of content which is harmful to children. Internet Matters believes that the definition should include a focus on wellbeing and the best interests of the child – an approach taken successfully in the ICO's Children's Code (otherwise known as the Age Appropriate Design Code). This would have the added benefit of greater alignment between the two regulatory regimes. We would also like to see children's broader health and wellbeing addressed directly in the codes of practice which will be produced by Ofcom.

Bringing commercial advertising into scope

Some of the content children see which promotes unrealistic beauty standards, cosmetic interventions and eating disorder behaviours is not user generated content, but commercial advertising. Therefore this content currently falls out of scope of the bill. We agree with the Joint Committee on the Draft Online Safety Bill which states that "Excluding paid-for advertising will leave service providers with little incentive to remove harmful adverts, and risks encouraging further proliferation of such content".⁷ Commercial advertising should be brought into scope of the bill, as argued by the Committee.

Engaging with DCMS, Ofcom and the DfE on media literacy

Regulation is only part of the answer to this problem. It is also important to educate and empower young people to have more positive online experiences. Young people need to be supported to reflect on their online activities and assess the content they see with a critical eye, asking questions such as "What feelings is this image of a model trying to provoke in me?", and "How is scrolling through my feed impacting on my mood?". Parents, carers and professionals are critical in supporting children and they themselves need to be supported to take on this role.

Internet Matters works closely with DCMS and Ofcom on their ongoing work programmes on media literacy. We would like to see DHSC playing a more active role in participating in this work, given its implications for young people's health. We would also welcome further collaboration between DfE and DHSC on the implementation of the new RSHE curriculum within schools.

Carefully considering any advice disseminated to parents on this issue

⁷ Joint Committee on the Draft Online Safety Bill,
<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt5802/jtselect/jtonlinesafety/129/129.pdf>

Our work has shown that parents who are worried about their children's online lives often focus heavily on the amount of time their children are spending online. While a healthy balance between online and offline activity is important, parents need to also consider the type of activity that children and young people are participating in. For example, an hour spent looking at educational resources is very different to an hour spent scrolling through a stream of pro-anorexia material. It is therefore important that public health communications and health professionals do not simply focus on the issue of screen time. Internet Matters has a comprehensive range of resources on our website (www.internetmatters.org) which may be helpful for DHSC and its related agencies to signpost to, including these [practical tips for parents to promote positive body image](#).