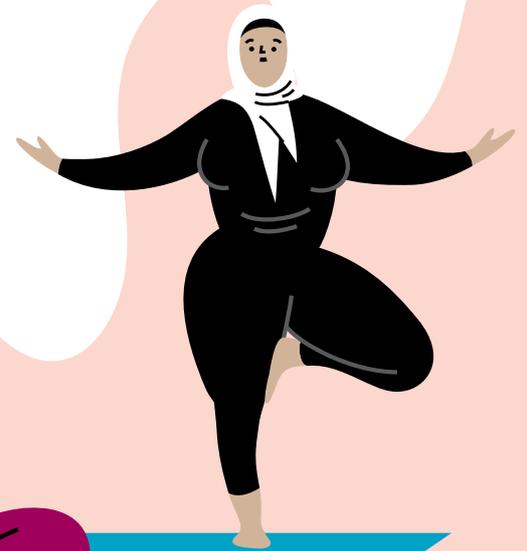


MINO OVER MIRROROR



YOUNG PEOPLE'S
EXPERIENCES OF BODY-
IMAGE ISSUES AND THEIR
IDEAS FOR POLICY SOLUTIONS

July 2021

INTRODUCTION



As our young people increasingly grow up online – immersed in a visual world of social media, celebrity, and advertising – the pressure on their body image has never been greater. Yet this pressure has grown largely unchecked. Young people are taught to aspire to unattainable body ideals by social media influencers and, at the same time, encounter shaming, stigmatising narratives about their weight in the form of government-led anti-obesity campaigns.

Negative body image is not trivial. Research shows that body dissatisfaction is linked with a poorer quality of life and psychological distress¹, greater likelihood of depression^{2,3}, and the risk of developing unhealthy eating habits and eating disorders⁴.

The scale of the problem led us to focus on body image as the topic for Mental Health Awareness Week 2019⁵. Our research, conducted for this awareness week, showed 37% of teenagers had felt upset about their body image in the past week and 31% had felt ashamed⁶.

The development of our new guidance for [young people](#) and their [parents](#), supported by the Joint Council of Cosmetic Practitioners (JCCP) and British Beauty Council, has given us the opportunity to revisit our body image policies with young people themselves, using insights from the coproduction group who worked on the guide for young people.

PERSPECTIVES FROM MHF'S YOUNG LEADERS POLICY GROUP

We worked with our Mental Health Foundation (MHF) Young Leaders Policy Group to understand the sources of negative body image in a young person's life, what body image means for their mental health, and what solutions they think could help to protect their body image and promote self-acceptance. The MHF Young Leaders are a group of 14–25-year-olds from diverse backgrounds and a range of different lived experiences, who are hosted by Leaders Unlocked. Our Policy Group for this topic was a subsection of the wider MHF Young Leaders group.



SOURCES OF BODY DISSATISFACTION

Our discussions with the Young Leaders identified five sources of distress relating to body image: social media, celebrities and cultural influencers, advertising, cultural norms and family pressure, and schools.

The young people identified social media as a place which has a particularly negative effect on their body image.

Social media platforms present a selective view of other people's lives; users are able to post their best pictures, emphasise successes, and gloss over and exclude anything that does not fit their desired narrative or look. This can lead to unhelpful, distorted comparisons between the highly selective, manipulated social media feeds of others, and an individual's own perceived shortcomings. Troublingly, social media has also enabled the rise of image editing, allowing users to alter their face-shape or body image to achieve a level of "perfection" and uniformity in their appearance that would not realistically be achievable offline. This dissonance between online appearance and actual appearance can be hugely detrimental to a young person's body image:

"I'VE STARTED NOT LIKING WHAT MY ACTUAL FACE LOOKS LIKE WITHOUT A FILTER ON. I THINK SOCIAL MEDIA SHOULD TONE DOWN THE AMOUNT OF FILTER USAGE."

"SOCIAL MEDIA MAKES YOUNG PEOPLE THINK IT'S A REALISTIC GOAL TO GET THE PERFECT IMAGE, LOTS OF YOUNGER BOYS AND GIRLS THINK THAT'S WHAT THEY SHOULD LOOK LIKE. BEFORE, PEOPLE DIDN'T TALK ABOUT THE FILTERS THEY USE, BUT NOW THEY'RE STARTING TO."

"MY YOUNGER SISTER WATCHES TIKTOKS, AND SHE ASKS WHY SHE DOESN'T LOOK LIKE THEM OR WHY HER BODY DOESN'T LOOK LIKE THAT?"

Social media intersects with the rising power of celebrities and influencers to set expectations around body image:

“INFLUENCERS AND CELEBRITIES HAVE A BIG INFLUENCE ON HOW OTHERS PORTRAY THEMSELVES. SOMETIMES PEOPLE WANT TO LOOK LIKE THEM AND SOMETIMES THERE IS A LACK OF TRANSPARENCY WITH THEIR BODY IMAGE AND HOW THEY LOOK.”

The body types presented on the television programme, Love Island, were seen as being particularly problematic for young people’s body image:

“LOVE ISLAND ONLY PROMOTES ONE BODY TYPE, ‘THIS IS WHAT YOU SHOULD LOOK LIKE IF YOU WANT TO FIND LOVE’. EVERY YEAR THEY ARE ALWAYS SLIM, [WITH] PERFECT GYM BODIES AND THEY’RE NOT REPRESENTATIVE OF NORMAL EVERYDAY PEOPLE. IT’S NOT A GOOD LESSON TO PUT OUT THERE: ‘IF YOU’RE LOOKING FOR A RELATIONSHIP, YOU HAVE TO LOOK LIKE THIS.’”

However, while it is easy to demonise celebrities and influencers for their role in promoting unhealthy, unrealistic body images, the young people in our group were acutely aware of the pressures on celebrities and influencers themselves, and the bullying they would have to endure if they were to deviate from people’s expectations of their appearance. This toxic environment makes it difficult for people in the public eye to celebrate difference and to be body positive.

Advertising is another source of body dissatisfaction for young people.

Like social media, the medium of advertising is successful when it builds by aspiration. In the case of body image, this creates perverse incentives to promote aspiration to unrealistic and unachievable body images; if someone is unhappy about their appearance, they are more likely to be drawn to products and services promising to address those perceived shortcomings:

“WE SEE CELEBS AND INFLUENCERS ADVERTISE THINGS ON THEIR SOCIAL MEDIA, BUT THEY ARE NOT ALWAYS GOING TO HELP AN INDIVIDUAL LOOK LIKE THAT PERSON. IT’S ALMOST LIKE THEY’RE SELLING FALSE ADVERTISEMENTS, BECAUSE DIETS ARE LONGER THAN THE TIMES THAT ARE ADVERTISED IF YOU WANT TO LOOK A CERTAIN WAY, LIKE THEM. THEY MAY HAVE OTHER SUPPLEMENTS, EXERCISE METHODS, AND SELECT DIETS TO HELP THEM KEEP THEIR SHAPE, RATHER THAN A SINGLE WORKOUT OR SUPPLEMENT.”

However, despite this underlying logic, the group did feel that change is possible, and that there are good examples of body-positive advertising, and a public appetite for this:

The young people also reported that family pressure can exert an influence on their perception of their body image.

"WITHOUT REALISING IT, PEOPLE EMPHASISE 'GETTING THEIR BODY READY FOR SUMMER'. THERE WAS A HUGE BILLBOARD WHERE THE IMAGE WAS A MODEL IN A BIKINI WITH THE CAPTION 'ARE YOU BEACH BODY READY?' AND THERE WAS A LOT OF COMPLAINTS AROUND IT, SO THINGS ARE DEFINITELY CHANGING."

"THE OLDER GENERATION WOULD CELEBRATE WHEN YOU LOSE WEIGHT AND OTHERS WOULD COMMENT ON IT TOO. BUT IF YOU GAIN WEIGHT, NOBODY CELEBRATES JUST BEING HEALTHY."

"THERE IS AN ADVERT THAT SHOWS NORMAL BODY TYPES AND UN-AIRBRUSHED FOOTAGE, WHICH CAN MAKE PEOPLE FEEL BETTER ABOUT THEMSELVES."

"MY GIRLFRIEND'S PARENTS CONSTANTLY COMMENTED ON HER WEIGHT WHEN SHE WAS OVERWEIGHT, AND IT HAD A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON HER."



The pressures that a young person might experience within the home vary between different cultures:

"IN MY CULTURE, IT'S NOT REALLY ACCEPTABLE TO BE SKINNY SO I GET 'SKINNY-SHAMED'. I WISH I WASN'T SKINNY; PEOPLE DON'T MEAN HARM WHEN THEY SAY 'I WISH I WAS AS SKINNY AS YOU' BUT THEY DON'T REALISE IT'S NOT GLAMOUROUS TO BE SKINNY, YOU'RE MEANT TO BE CURVY, IT DOESN'T FIT WITH OUR CULTURE."

While different cultures have different beauty ideals, the young leaders also spoke of the body image pressures caused by exposure to different cultural beauty standards.

"WHITE WOMEN WEAR A LOT OF TAN AND BLACK OR ASIAN WOMEN LIGHTEN THEIR SKIN TO LOOK WHITE. A LOT OF PEOPLE DO NOT FEEL COMFORTABLE IN THEIR OWN SKIN DUE TO THE COLOUR OF IT."

"SOME CULTURES ARE DIFFERENT. MY CARIBBEAN FAMILY MEMBERS ALMOST CONGRATULATED ME FOR GAINING WEIGHT TO GET CURVES. WHEREAS OTHER BACKGROUNDS WOULD SHAME YOU FOR GAINING WEIGHT AND NOT BE ACCEPTING."

"COLOURISM IS A THING TOO, AS PEOPLE HAVE BEEN MADE TO FEEL DIFFERENT BECAUSE OF THE COLOUR OF THEIR SKIN. I HAVE BEEN TOLD, AS A MIXED-RACED INDIVIDUAL, THAT I AM 'LUCKY' THAT MY SKIN ISN'T AS DARK, AND IT IS WRONG FOR PEOPLE TO SAY THAT. THERE SHOULD BE NO IDEAL SKIN TYPE AS WE ARE ALL DIFFERENT."



"A LOT OF SCHOOLS AND WORKPLACES PREVENT CERTAIN HAIRSTYLES BEING WORN THERE WHEN IT CAN BE A CULTURAL THING."

Schools are a potential source of support for young people and their body image. However, this was not the experience of our young leaders:

“YOUNG PEOPLE IN EDUCATION ARE BEING BULLIED FOR THE SHAPE AND SIZE OF THEIR BODY. THEY FEEL LIKE THEY CAN'T GO TO ANYONE AS THEY WILL JUST 'GET TOLD TO GET ON WITH IT' OR 'IT'S A PART OF LIFE'. IT'S AN EXTRA FORM OF STRESS ON AN ALREADY STRESSFUL TIME FOR SCHOOL STUDENTS.”

“BMI HAS A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON INDIVIDUALS' MENTAL HEALTH SCHOOL STUDENTS HAVE HAD A LOT OF ANXIETY AROUND GOING BACK TO SCHOOL DUE TO THE EMPHASIS ON LOOKING AT YOUR BMI. THIS EVEN [HAS] AN IMPACT ON EDUCATION.”

Our work with the young leaders suggests that government messaging in their obesity campaigns can seriously undermine competing messages of body positivity and self-acceptance that they might otherwise hear at school. This is supported by evidence given to the Women and Equalities Select Committee, which they highlighted in their report, concluding that “The current Obesity Strategy is at best ineffective and at worst perpetuating unhealthy behaviours”.⁷ They recommend that PHE should stop using BMI as a measure of individual health and adopt a ‘Health at Every Size’ approach.



THE MENTAL HEALTH IMPACT OF POOR BODY IMAGE

The multiple body image pressures that exist can make the world feel like a judgemental, appearance-focused place, putting beauty at the centre of a person's worth.

With the body changes that occur during adolescence, young people are especially vulnerable to these pressures, and this can lead to a range of negative emotions:

"YOUR BODY IS ALWAYS CHANGING THROUGH PUBERTY SO THAT'S AN ADDED STRESS TO PEOPLE'S BODY IMAGE."

The young people in our policy group told us that **body image can be central to a person's self-worth:**

Your self-worth is not there when you're feeling low. We get called snowflakes for being more open with our emotions and mental health, but some people don't realise how much of an impact body image

can have on your day-to-day life and it impacts so many of us. People who are seen as 'ugly' are treated differently, in a more negative way, compared to someone who is seen as 'better looking'."

When body image is particularly low, it can take a toll on a person's life. In particular, the young people reported that it can feed into self-isolation, which can contribute to feelings of loneliness, another important driver of young people's poor mental health⁸.

"IT CAN IMPACT ALL WALKS OF YOUR LIFE AND I HAD A FRIEND THAT STRUGGLED WITH HER MENTAL HEALTH AND HER WELLBEING, SO SHE MISSED OUT ON SO MANY THINGS BECAUSE SHE REFUSED TO GO OUTSIDE IF SHE DIDN'T FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH HERSELF."

The young people also felt a keen sense of injustice that the government and other authority figures in their lives perpetuate a shaming narrative around weight gain, BMI, and obesity, yet government policy does not support make it easy for disadvantaged people to live a healthy lifestyle. This places impossible expectations on individuals to look after their own health, without empowering them to actually do so:

"SCHOOLS COULD TEACH YOUNG PEOPLE HOW TO MAKE HEALTHY MEALS THAT ARE AFFORDABLE TO MAKE."

"HEALTHY FOOD IS SO EXPENSIVE AND YOUNG PEOPLE ARE SHAMED FOR BEING OVERWEIGHT WHEN IT'S HARD FOR SOME PEOPLE TO GET HEALTHIER FOODS."

Even following conventional advice to take control of social media by strategically following or unfollowing accounts to minimise unhelpful influences and to maximise positive images and sentiments can be challenging, contributing to a sense of powerlessness to control the situation:

"THE PRESSURE TO LOOK A CERTAIN WAY MADE ME CHANGE MY HABITS ON SOCIAL MEDIA TO MAKE MYSELF FEEL BETTER ABOUT MYSELF, BUT SOMETIMES LOOKING AT PERSONAL TRAINERS WHO TRY TO ENCOURAGE YOU TO LIVE A HEALTHIER LIFESTYLE CAN ALSO HAVE A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON ME TOO."



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

1. The Department for Education should include education on promoting body positivity in the Health Education curriculum, embracing who we are as individuals; how to be healthy in an affordable way; normalising, acknowledging, and raising awareness of 'differences'; and teaching us how to talk to others about body image.

The young leaders felt that education should be a setting in which they are taught to recognise the sources of negative body image, address the cognitive distortions at play, and understand the mental health impact of a negative body image. Education should promote body positivity and self-acceptance and raise awareness and embrace difference in a culturally sensitive way. Culture, heritage, colourism, and awareness around skin colours, textures, and other features of our bodies that are stigmatised despite being natural (birthmarks, scarring, cellulite, moles, differences in pigmentation) should be addressed in school when discussing body image and acceptance.

The Health Education strand of the Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) curriculum is the right place for this content. There is a solitary reference to body image in the existing statutory guidance, stating that pupils should be able to recognise

“the impact of unhealthy or obsessive comparison with others online (including through setting unrealistic expectations for body image)”. This should be much more comprehensive: the Government’s decision to favour flexibility over being prescriptive in the curriculum means that schools can make as much or as little of this topic as they want, resulting in a disparity of experience in England’s schools.

There are however some good resources from Public Health England, the Be Real Campaign, PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic education) Association, and National Citizen Service. We are also publishing our own guides on improving body image and self-acceptance for young people, parents, and adults. Resources such as these should be available in all schools in England and should routinely be used when teaching about this issue within the Health Education curriculum.

2. DCMS should work with the Advertising Standards Authority, social media companies, and app stores to increase regulation of advertisements, especially on dietary products and filters. Image-editing apps and filters should be age-restricted.

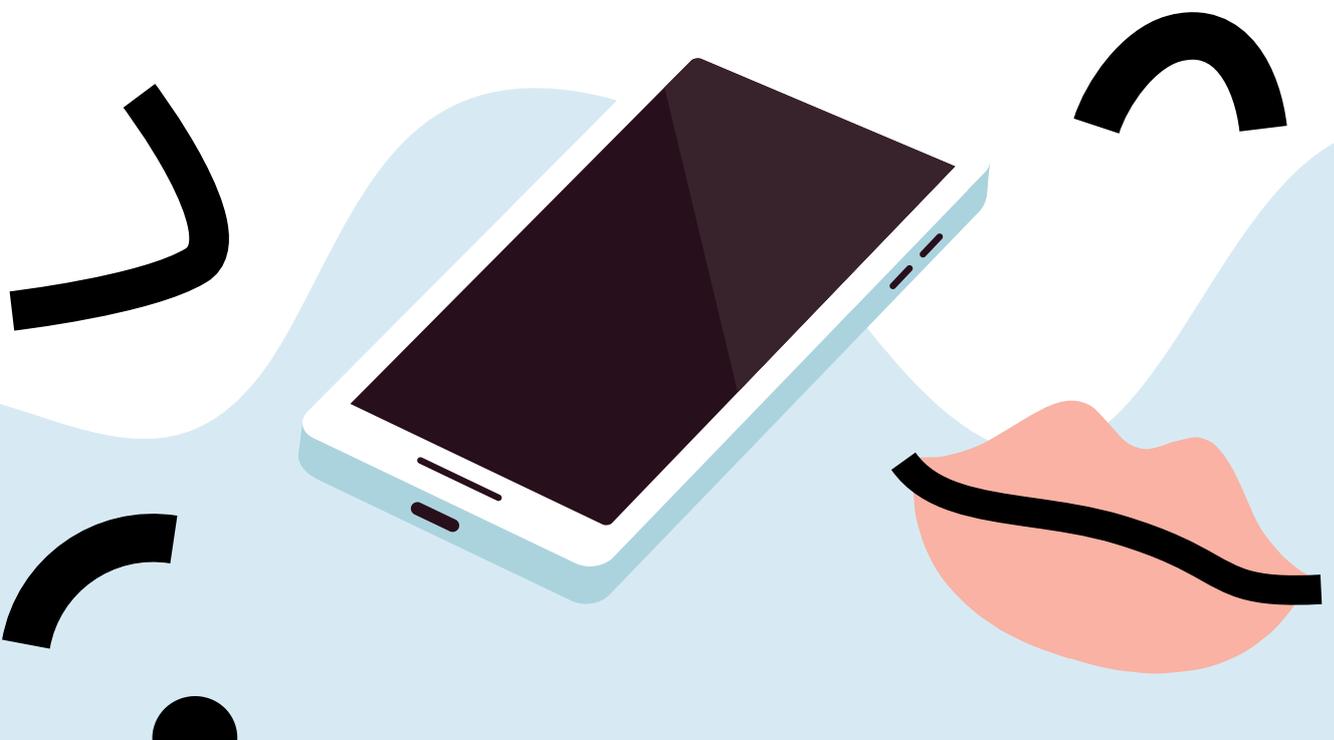
There are financial incentives for advertising beauty products, dietary products, and fitness products to promote unrealistic and unattainable body images. Therefore, there should be enhanced regulation to disincentivise this practice.

The Advertising Standards Authority has already carried out some good work in this area, and has most recently completed (though not yet reported on) a consultation on the placement and scheduling of ads for cosmetic surgery interventions⁹.

However, the young leaders felt that there is still work to be done on discouraging the use of heavily edited bodies and faces and encouraging a diversity of body images in advertising. There are isolated examples of good, industry-led practice in this area, but the wider industry needs regulating to safeguard the public's health and wellbeing.

The rise of image editing apps, and their easy availability to often quite young children, is particularly troubling. Apps that are targeted specifically at facial alterations and body manipulation should be age restricted, either by the app stores themselves, or through Government legislation.

The Online Harms legislation and, in particular, the development of a new Social Media Code of Practice by Ofcom in its new role as the independent regulator, is a significant opportunity for taking action in this area. We recommend that as part of this process Ofcom works with social media companies and app stores to take positive steps to limit the mental health harms associated with the portrayal of idealised body images, encourage positive diversity, and limit the availability of image-editing apps.



3. The Government should review the psychological impact of its obesity campaigns and increase access to exercise, sports and healthy food options , especially in disadvantaged communities.

The young leaders felt that the Government's current approach to reducing obesity indirectly contributes to appearance-related bullying, stigma, and feelings of shame around size, and that this is not conducive to promoting healthy living and healthy weight loss. They further felt that Government messaging is not supported with policies to promote affordable healthy eating, access to exercise and sports, and knowledge around living and eating well affordably. As a result, young people are made to feel ashamed about themselves and their appearance but are not given the tools to do anything about it. They felt that this particularly affects young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Government should carefully review the psychological impact of their anti-obesity strategy and investigate new ways of promoting healthy eating without the negative consequences of the current approach. It should shift its focus from personal responsibility for obesity to investigating ways that Government policy and society in general can enable and support people to achieve a healthy weight. The young leaders suggested, for example, having fruit and vegetable gardens in schools and having cookery lessons that demonstrate how to prepare cheap and healthy meals.



4. The Government must involve young people in decisions that directly affect them, and work with influencers relevant to them.

The Government should co-design of policies relating to body image. There is clearly a need for young people's voices to be heard in the development of campaigns such as the Government's anti-obesity work, but they should also be closely involved in designing curriculum resources and - as a general principle - in the development of any policy that aims to benefit them.

The young leaders also told us that the Government should work with influencers who are relevant to young people so that they can speak about the realities of body image, body dysmorphia, and eating disorders. They mentioned the youth ambassador for mental health from Love Island, Dr Alex, and Marcus Rashford's free school meals campaign, as examples of positive influence.

For further information, please contact Adam Nice at ANice@mentalhealth.org.uk.

Policy development: Adam Nice and Lucy Thorpe with thanks to Leaders Unlocked for their involvement.

Design: David Peasland.



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