

Note from expert roundtable on 'Body image content'

On 17th September 2024, Ofcom held a roundtable with a range of experts, including frontline organisations and academic researchers, as part of our ongoing work looking into kinds of non-designated content.

The discussion focused on 'body image content', the harm it can cause and how to define it.

External attendees: Beat, Mental Health Foundation; FREED; Bodywhys; Dr Helen Sharpe and Dr Petya Eckler

Key takeaways

- Body image content is challenging to define, it is likely to include some kinds of fitness content and content that amplifies diet culture or weight stigma. We should also consider how different groups are affected by different pressures, such as LGBTQ+ children or ethnic minorities.
- In the online environment, there can be an accumulation of body image content. The intensity and ubiquity of these messages can be particularly impactful on children.
- Several characteristics were identified as problematic. For example, content that focuses on specific body parts as opposed to the holistic body, content that focuses on how the body looks as opposed to what it can do, content that suggests one body type is more worthy than another, content that claims expertise but pushes unsubstantiated information.
- This content is linked to body dissatisfaction, which is in turn linked to a number of harms to children. The challenge is identifying the specific content that drives body dissatisfaction.
- 'Success' in addressing this harm will involve engaging children and experts, and understanding commercial incentives.

Summary of discussion

What is body image content?

Several attendees discussed the difficulties in defining body image content that is harmful to children. They raised different specific points in relation to this:

- The Mental Health foundation stated that while body image content and eating disorder content "shade into each other", some eating disorder content is "clearly a different category".

- The Mental Health foundation also asserted that any conception of what negative body image is must bear in mind that damaging body image content is different for different demographics, such as different sexual or ethnic minorities. For example, they described how: “our young leaders, who are far more steeped in social media than I ever will be, have told us that [face-lightening] is a particular concern of theirs”.
- Bodywhys comment that content around fitness can be a source of pressure, alongside content which “amplifies diet culture or weight stigma”.
- Beat described how they hear a lot about filtered content that is heavily edited and can perpetuate harmful ideals. They described how: “for a lot of people, denial can be an issue and there should be some transparency around edited or heavily filtered content.”

How are different groups affected?

Some attendees highlighted different groups that are affected in different ways by body image content, such as LGBTQ+ populations and men/boys:

- The Mental Health Foundation described how it’s important to look at minoritised groups, particularly gay and trans communities: “we know that the impacts are different and we know that issues around body image can come up at life transition points, which is likely to include coming out, transitioning. The images that social media served to people at that particular time, which may also be a time when they’re vulnerable to mental health problems, are likely to have an outsized influence on them.”
- Beat asserted the importance of considering different ideals amongst different demographic groups . They described how when Beat surveyed men with eating disorders, they “never considered that someone like them could get eating disorders”, or that the “ideal body type was muscular”, whereas “for a young woman, thinness would be the ideal”.
- Dr Helen Sharpe described how there are behaviours or views that are viewed as normal within specifically communities (e.g. gym goers), but to an outsider seem very extreme.

What is specific about the online context?

Attendees asserted that harm lies primarily in the volume of body image content that children encounter, as well as the quality of the information.

- The Mental Health Foundation described how the problem is “accumulation”, specifically of material that’s produced “in bad faith”, such as “advertisers, whether in an open and honesty way, or possibly even more concerningly in a hidden way, promoting ideals to children”
- FREED described how unregulated wellness/fitness bloggers can be harmful, and the importance of teaching patients how to “critically analyse who is recognised healthcare professional offering dietic advice, and who isn’t”. They described working with young people and families who “succumbed to getting really addicted to following those kinds of wellness bloggers as something to do [during the pandemic], and how that emerged in this real crisis and increasing referrals for eating disorder.”
- Dr Helen Sharpe commented how beyond what is already captured as ‘eating disorder content’, she is concerned about “things like What I Eat In a Day or the pure volume and

having algorithms that mean that you get increasingly extreme versions of that". She described how "there's something about the intensity of the message [...] and the ubiquity of the message that means that it can be very powerful, even if the individual post itself might be quite reasonable."

How do you differentiate between harmful and non-harmful content?

Attendees described the potential benefits of some kinds of fitness or eating disorder recovery content, and made suggestions on how to differentiate from harmful content:

- FREED described how they talk about social media with their patients in therapy, and that there are some recovery accounts that "really inspire people", but that it's a "minefield" and "hard to define what recovery is." They would endorse those "with good healthcare qualifications" or those "providing messaging that's aligned to research."
- Dr Helen Sharpe discussed how fitness content is particularly "slippery", as while "fitness is a good thing [...] we have lots of things like 'before and after' images [...] which I would view as being quite unhelpful if viewed en masse."
- Considering body image content more broadly, Dr Helen Sharpe asked "where do you draw the line?", before arguing that it has to consider "context", such as the volume or "homogenous nature of the message".
- The Mental Health Foundation described how we "should be encouraging people move and be fit", without falling into unrealistic body ideals. They proposed reconciling this by "focusing on the utility of your body and what you can do with it, rather than specifically how it looks and its size" or other aesthetic features. They also described how "self-compassion is a fundamental factor behind good mental health" so we need to "encourage people to have positive views towards their body" and what it can or could do, rather than "creating comparisons with themselves and other people."

What characteristics of this content do we consider to be harmful?

Some identified posited that fixation of specific body parts or negative comparison could help identify harmful body image content:

- Dr Petya Eckler suggested that "focus on certain body parts versus the body itself [...] as a holistic thing" can be problematic, because it "tends to drive objectification [...] then negative body image and so on".
- The Mental Health Foundation while there was some nuance, social media trends that are focused "trying to remove every bit of fat from a specific part of the human body [...] would seem reasonably easy to address."
- Dr Helen Sharpe suggested that content "equating different types of bodies with more or less value" might help identify harmful content: "[the issue is] the idea that like thinner bodies are better, more valuable, more worthy of love, respect [...] It's perfectly fine to have a, you know, a fitness kind of goal and use social media as a way of kind of motivating yourself through that. But it's the idea that, a body [...] is more worthy than another type of body that somehow gets at the crux of the issue." She suggested that that there might already be processes in place for similar language and content for other categories like race.

Are there characteristics that suggest this content is not harmful?

Some attendees discussed the nuances of 'body positive' content:

- FREED stated that they see body positive content as having "quite a positive influence on people" but that they "know there are controversial views around it too"
- Mental Health Foundation argued that when body positive content is framed around "compassion and healthy lifestyles" can be "harnessed as a force for good", but that it needs to be done in a way that "doesn't actually prevent people from wanting to be fit and healthy."

How would you describe the harm caused by this content?

One attendee set out the impacts of body dissatisfaction, and described the research landscape:

- Dr Helen Sharpe described how there is clear evidence that "if you increase people's body dissatisfaction [...] it has a clear downstream impact on a wide range of physical and mental health outcomes, as well as things like school engagement, engagement with sport, sexual health, smoking like loads of things". "[Body image] is a central hub of so many aspects of, particularly young people's lives": they are "really common" and "don't just transition away after adolescence".
- Dr Helen Sharpe then described the limitations of the research landscape linking body dissatisfaction to specific kinds of content. She explained how there is some "well-controlled experimental research" that "doesn't mirror reality, but generally shows all these harms." In studies into "people's genuine day-to-day uses" it is harder to pin down harm to specific content. She commented that "both kind of point in the direction of this content, if viewed en masse, as being harmful".

What would success in addressing harm from body image content look like to you?

Attendees were pleased that body image content was being considered with regards to harmful impacts on children, and sought greater engagement with young people moving forward:

- For the Mental Health Foundation, success would be about not suppressing young people's self-expression, but generally "requiring social media companies give people a varied, diverse feed where it's difficult or impossible for them to get into rabbit holes or to fall into obsessive behaviour." They also described the importance of "co-production" and engaging with young people on this topic.
- Dr Helen Sharpe expressed her gratitude that body image was being considered, describing how some see it as a "rite of passage" but its "really a big deal": "I know it's going to be a really knotty [...] it's going to be OK that it's not absolutely perfect [...] I would be very sad if it fell off completely because of that complexity."
- Beat stated that they hoped to protect freedom of expression, while making sure that the content people are receiving isn't "rooted in misinformation [...] doing damage [and instead] rooted in research and actual professional advice."
- Dr Petya Eckler agreed with the other attendees and added that more attention should be paid to content that is "put there for commercial purposes": "they're selling something and

that selling often comes with the idea that all you need to do is look better or parts of you need to look better or you need to change yourself in certain ways.” She commented that this should be treated as advertising and regulated more.

- Bodywhys commented on the need to make people with eating disorders feel heard, and for platforms to listen to “the day-to-day experience of people with eating disorders.”