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Submission to Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society. As an academic and researcher on social media, body image, and eating disorders, and lead of the EMBodIED research group at La Trobe University, I am highly familiar with the research evidence on the negative impact of engagement with social media on body image and eating disorders. I also recently participated in the Social Media and Eating Disorder Round Table with Hon. Zoe Daniel.

Research has consistently shown that exposure to appearance ideals on social media leads to increased body dissatisfaction and that social media content promotes unrealistic appearance ideals and engagement in unhealthy appearance and weight control behaviours. Furthermore, people with lived experience of an eating disorder frequently attribute social media as interfering with recovery. It is particularly concerning that social media users are often unable to control their exposure to social media content harmful to body image and eating disorders due to the opaque algorithms used by social media platforms to push certain types of content.

Terms of Reference Response

I provide a submission in response to specific areas of the Terms of Reference and recommend that the following policy-related initiatives be implemented.

(d) the algorithms, recommender systems and corporate decision making of digital platforms in influencing what Australians see, and the impacts of this on mental health

- Social media platforms be required to be transparent about their algorithms 1) with regular publicly available algorithm risk audits from independent bodies undertaken and with consequences for non-compliance and inaction if the identified risks are not mitigated, and 2) to explicitly provide social media users the opportunity to reset their recommender algorithms with ease and on demand
- Social media platforms to create and provide a simple to use function for users to opt out of content which may be harmful

(e) other issues in relation to harmful or illegal content disseminated over social media, including scams, age-restricted content, child sexual abuse and violent extremist material

- Harmful social media content (e.g., pro-eating disorder and appearance-based cyberbullying) to be required to be promptly removed by social media platforms



- Social media platforms be required to have accurate age verification for all accounts and to report on their efficacy

(f) any related matters

- Social media platforms to be required to provide free access to their data in a manner that is unbiased and easily interpreted
- The onus on providing a safe social media environment should be the responsibility of social media platforms, not the responsibility of individual users to navigate opaque systems and technology
- Consequences for non-compliance with policy and legislation or lack of prompt action, including fines or other punitive measures to be applied
- Implement the other recommendations from the recent Social Media and Eating Disorders Roundtable

Yours sincerely,

Dr Siân McLean
Senior Lecturer

