

Institution: The University of Birmingham		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 30: Philosophy		
Title of case study: Changing how we understand and respond to the rising demands of beauty		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2012–present		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Professor Heather Widdows	John Ferguson Professor of Global Ethics	2000–present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 1 August 2013–31 December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Widdows has challenged and transformed how the rising demands of beauty are understood and responded to. In particular, she has emphasised that body image concerns and beauty issues are serious public health concerns, calling for more than individual consent and resilience. Specifically, she has:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Changed NGO practices and campaign messaging around lookism and appearance discrimination; 2. Stimulated policy debate, by direct collaboration with policy makers and through influence on the Nuffield Council on Bioethics' programme of work; 3. Shaped global public attitudes and understandings with regard to the pressures to be perfect. 		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Widdows' research explores the changing nature of global beauty ideals. Her research on beauty began in 2012, when she ran an interdisciplinary workshop with academics and practitioners on 'Perfect People'. This work drew on her previous research in feminist philosophy, virtue theory and ethics, and since has been supported by a Leverhulme Trust Major Research Fellowship and an AHRC Research Networking Grant. Following from her work in <i>Perfect Me</i>, in which Widdows proposed a social media campaign, "everyday lookism" as a "sister campaign to everyday sexism" [R1], in June 2019 Widdows launched the #EverydayLookism campaign. Individuals submit their lookism stories anonymously to a bespoke website, and these stories are shared on Instagram and blogs. Collectively, the stories, like the Everyday Sexism stories on which the campaign is modelled, are an attempt to show clearly that lookism is discriminatory, that body shaming hurts deeply and that it is never acceptable. The aim is to create social momentum to end body shaming and shift the shame from the victim to perpetrator, as has largely been done with sexism. [S9; R1]</p> <p><i>Perfect Me</i> makes four key arguments which are supported or extended in other publications [R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6]:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. That the beauty ideal is an ethical ideal such that attaining beauty is a moral duty. The beauty ideal provides the value frameworks against which individuals judge themselves and others. It is constitutive of identity, body work is regarded as virtuous and failure is a vice engendering shame and disgust. [R1, R2] 2. That the beauty ideal is more dominant than previous ideals and an emerging global ideal. This convergence results in a narrower range of acceptable appearance norms. As this happens, lines between routine and exceptional practices blur, and more is required to be 'normal'. [R1, R2, R3, R5] 3. That the construction and location of the self is changing in response to beauty ideal. Changing the nature of the self means that body shaming (from fat shaming to bullying) is 		

significant and non-trivial, and literally shaming of the self. Accordingly, body shaming is people shaming. [R1, R4]

4. That, given the dominance of the beauty ideal, choice is exceptionally constrained. Accordingly, relying on individual responses (such as asking individuals to ‘resist’, to stop engaging, to ‘be resilient’, or relying on individual ‘consent’ alone) is not sufficient. [R1, R5] **Perfect Me rejects individual responses as misguided, unethical and ineffective.** To address the devastating epidemic of body anxiety, cultural, communal and **policy change is required, not individual blame.** The pressures to ‘do’ beauty should be **reconceived as a public health concern**, not left to individuals [R1, R5, R6]; hence suggesting culture change and the #EverydayLookism campaign.

3. References to the research

R1. Widdows, H. (2017). *Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal*. Princeton University Press. DOI: 10.2307/j.ctvc77j2q.

R2. Widdows, H., and MacCallum, F. (eds) (2018). ‘The Demands of Beauty’, Special Issue of *Health Care Analysis*, 26 (3): 207–219. DOI: 10.1007/s10728-018-0360-3.

R3. Widdows, H., and Axford, B. (eds) (2016). ‘The Neglect of Beauty: What’s in and what’s out of Global Theorising and Why?’, Special Issue of *Protosociology*, 33: 167–185. DOI: 10.5840/protosociology2016338.

R4. Widdows, H., and MacCallum, F. (2018). ‘Altered Images: Understanding the Influence of Unrealistic Images and Beauty Aspirations’, *Health Care Analysis* 26 (3): 235–245. DOI: 10.1007/s10728-016-0327-1.

R5. Widdows, H. (2017). ‘[The Neglected Harms of Beauty: Beyond Individual Choice](#)’, *Journal of Practical Ethics* 5 (2): 1–29.

R6. Widdows, H. (2017). ‘[Exploitation and the global demands of beauty](#)’. In M. Devereaux and V. Panitch (eds), *Exploitation: From Practice to Theory* (179–194). Rowman & Littlefield.

Research grants which underpin the publications and impact:

- [Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship](#) (MRF-2013-098, £94,224) October 2014–October 2016.
- [AHRC Networking Grant](#) (AH/L01548X/1, £26,108) PI, January 2015–July 2016, with Jean McHale (Co-I) and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics (Partner).

4. Details of the impact

Widdows has **1. changed NGO practices and campaign messaging** around lookism **2. stimulated policy debate**, by direct collaboration with policy makers and through influence on the Nuffield Council on Bioethics’ programme of work and **3. changed public attitudes and understandings** of the pressures to be perfect.

1. Lookism is becoming a recognised term for appearance discrimination, changing the practice of NGOs and shaping their campaigns.

Lookism and the #EverydayLookism campaign have been incorporated into NGO recommendations and practices and ‘lookism’ is increasingly being used to name appearance discrimination in activist circles. [R1] Widdows’ influence is particularly visible in two campaigns:

- The national **anti-bullying charity Ditch the Label** included a chapter on lookism in the Annual Bullying Survey for the first time in 2019. The report showed that the most prevalent form of bullying is appearance bullying, with 59% reporting that they had experienced bullying “attitudes towards my appearance” in the previous twelve months. Yet appearance bullying is taken less seriously than bullying based on race or gender because it is not recognised as discrimination. The report featured a supporting quote from Widdows: “We need to take this form of bullying very seriously or the epidemic of body image anxiety will spiral out of control. Lookism is discrimination, and in a world where appearance increasingly matters, a particularly devastating form of discrimination”. [S1]
- The **Mental Health Foundation’s briefing paper** ‘Image-editing Apps and Mental Health’ (September 2020) [S2], cited R1 directly and approached Widdows to be its spokesperson, resulting in prominent exposure by the BBC. [S8] The report has six recommendations of action. The first directly recommends that “organisations and individuals should engage with #EverydayLookism.” [S2] The report draws directly on Widdows’ framing of lookism and takes its wording from #EverydayLookism: “negative comments about other people’s

bodies matter. When we shame bodies, we shame people. These are lookist comments. We no longer put up with sexist comments, we don't need to keep putting up with lookist comments. Sharing your lookism stories shows how common lookism is, calls it out, and says it's not ok." [S2, directly quoting S9] Widdows' comments in support of this briefing paper in particular were quoted in 264 outlets directly, reaching an audience of 11.6m. [S8]

2. Policy makers have changed how they regard the demands of beauty seeing it as a public health issue meriting communal and regulatory responses.

2.i. **Policy makers have changed their attitudes with regard to the seriousness of the demands of beauty.** Policy makers at all levels now recognise that beauty and body image raise public health issues which need communal responses and regulation. At the beginning of the impact period, appearance tended to be regarded as trivial, a matter for individuals to choose and not an issue of public concern, making regulation and communal responses unnecessary. That policy makers have changed their views is evidenced by their interventions. For example, following meetings with Nuffield Council on Bioethics executive, **five parliamentary questions** were asked (from Clive Lewis MP, Bambos Charalambous MP and Baroness Gould), showing a commitment to regulate. MP Luke Evans has **produced draft legislation** (Digitally Altered Body Images Bill 2019–2021) that requires advertisers, broadcasters and publishers to display a logo in cases where an image of a human body or body part has been digitally altered. That Widdows is influential is evidenced by Evans discussing the proposed legislation with her. Evans has agreed to participate in a series of Facebook Lives, arranged in December 2020, due to run in 2021. These are hosted by Widdows, with policy makers (MP Luke Evans, MP Bell Ribeiro-Addy, MP Chris Evans) and NGOs (Mental Health Foundation, Anti-Bullying Alliance, Face Equality International, Girlguiding), showcasing the position that body image concerns are public health issues. [R1, R5; S3] In addition, **funding to research the impact of social media on body image was suggested as a matter of urgency by the Women and Equalities Committee's inquiry into body image** (September 2020). Widdows submitted a written response to this inquiry, which resulted in correspondence, and the sending of R1 to the Chair. In addition, Widdows was named and R1 cited directly in the oral evidence for the need for further funding: "That would be absolutely the first step, to get social media companies to fund research [...] [F]rom a philosophical perspective, one thing that is really puzzling and interesting is to understand the connection between our real selves, who we are, and the imagined self, as Professor Heather Widdows puts it, that we present on social media." [S4]

2.ii. The **policy debate was stimulated** by the intervention of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics (NCoB), which in 2017, produced a report, 'Cosmetic Procedures: Ethical Issues' (CP). [S5] Widdows was influential in the NCoB decision to consider this topic and, through collaboration with her AHRC Beauty Demands Network and the publication of The 'Beauty Demands: Briefing Paper' (BDBP) [S6], she directly and substantially influenced the content of the report.

The NCoB is the UK's national ethics committee, and the UK's equivalent to the President's Council of Bioethics in the US or the German and French National Ethics committees. Since 1994, NCoB has been funded jointly by the Nuffield Foundation, Wellcome Trust and the Medical Research Council to produce recommendations that have a direct influence on policy debates, and what is seen as good ethical governance. NCoB has established itself as the main UK body that other countries and international bodies look to for guidance on bioethics.

That the NCoB **considered cosmetic surgery at all can be traced to Widdows' intervention.** She influenced the decision as a member of the Council, as a member of the 'Future Work' subgroup, and through Nuffield's formal partner status on the Beauty Demands (BD) project, on which Widdows was PI. Many of the topics and recommendations of the NCoB report were prefigured in the BD documents and the BDBP. [S6] The BDBP was co-authored by Widdows and the Deputy Director of the Nuffield Council, and launched at the Bedford Square Nuffield premises on 9 June 2016. That Widdows' BD project was fundamental to the NCoB's work is explicitly recognised in the acknowledgements of the CP. The acknowledgements are only two paragraphs and the second is wholly dedicated to BD and recognises the NCoB's Working Party (WP) "benefited considerably" from the partnership with BD. [S5] The importance of BD is confirmed by

the Deputy Director who reported to the AHRC that BD “provided both a helpful short-cut to important areas of debate and literature, and also facilitated contact with key individuals working in the field, who have subsequently engaged in the project either as Working Party members, or through providing direct evidence and input through the Working Party’s consultative activities”. [S7] Nine of the twelve WP members were key contributors to BD. Widdows’ central role in the report is shown by the fact it was she who presented the Nuffield’s work on cosmetic procedures to the French and German ethics committees, at the biennial 2017 trilateral meeting. In addition to policy change, following the NCoB’s recommendation, the **Advertising Standards Authority** now considers how adverts can increase the demand for cosmetic procedures and, in September 2019, it sanctioned two beauty chains for adverts featuring celebrities.

3. **Global public understanding and public attitudes are changing, and pressure to engage is increasingly taken seriously and not seen as trivial or individual.**

That **public attitudes are being shaped is shown by extensive media engagement.** Widdows’ work has been discussed and cited by **national and international print, radio, film, TV and social media.** [S8] Widdows is the ‘go to’ expert for discussion of the rising demands of beauty and how they are impacting on individuals and changing culture. Widdows has been cited across all five continents with particular take up in the most dominant national papers in Australia, the UK and the US. To illustrate, a selection of news outlets includes: in the UK, BBC, *The Daily Mail*, *The Guardian*, *The Irish Times*, *The New Statesman*, *The Sunday Times* and *The Telegraph*; in the US, *CNN*, *Time*, *The Atlantic*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Huffington Post*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Vogue* and *Women’s Health*; and in Australia, *Brisbane Times*, *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Her recorded media reach since 2016, according to Kantar and Meltwater reports, is 28m. These citations capture Widdows’ mentions with her University affiliation and do not capture mentions that use her more popularly used title ‘British Philosopher Heather Widdows’. [S8] She has featured on numerous national radio shows, international podcasts, and TV programmes and documentaries. [S8] One documentary on ‘Future Beauty’ (VPRO Tegenlicht), after interviewing Widdows, was released as ‘Perfect Me’. To give details on another, Widdows’ appearance on the BBC4 *Thinking Allowed* has reached a total of 1.25m listeners to date, and her combined listener numbers in 2018 from numerous podcasts and radio programmes numbers are over 2.38m. She has also broken into ‘new media’, including appearing on the popular Vox.com documentary series ‘Explained’ which launched on YouTube and is now hosted on Netflix. Widdows was an invited expert in the 15-minute episode on plastic surgery, with the producer saying, “Perfect Me has been integral in shaping my views on the topic”. [S8] ‘Explained’ (9.1m subscribers) regularly reaches 1.66m views per episode on YouTube.

Widdows’ voice is unique in this space; that she is **leading and changing the debate** is shown by the way her work is considered transformative of the debate. This is well illustrated by the following examples:

- *Perfect Me* was listed as one of the best 19 books of 2018, by *The Atlantic Magazine*, which said it is “urgently relevant to the current cultural moment”. [S8]
- *Vogue* described *Perfect Me* as “groundbreaking” and *Maclean’s* as “a buzzed about book”.
- *Edarabia* listed *Perfect Me* as one of the 100 books to read in a lifetime. [S8]
- Bri Lee, Australian journalist and author of *Beauty* (2019) and the award-winning *Eggshell Skull* (2018), wrote that *Perfect Me* “freed me from years of accidentally accumulated bullshit thinking” in an article based on four *Books That Changed Me*. [S8]

Public understanding change is further evidenced by the way the public engage with Widdows’ work. The strongest **evidence of the depth of the attitude change** is shown by the engagement with Widdows’ #EverydayLookism campaign, which has been picked up by the media, has a successful Instagram account, and resonates with hundreds of people who have shared **their very personal #EverydayLookism stories.** [S9] In the three weeks following the launch, the campaign received 74,886 video views, 13,449 engagements and 1.03m saw the campaign. The stories are body shaming stories, deeply personal and full of feeling, and convey just how deeply lookism cuts. To give just two representative examples: “I can’t believe grandma spoil you so much! You are so fat! You need to loose (sic) weight right now!” said my mom as she

put me on a diet when I was 6 years old. I battle food addiction to this day — I am 36.” (Story 530), and “My friends called me ‘finger toes’ when I wore sandals to an evening out. I never buy or wear open shoes because of that and it was 15 years ago” (Story 411). [S9] To date, the #EverydayLookism blogs have over 46,000 views and the campaign has received over 800 story submissions. The campaign produced the first anti-body shaming (#stopbodyshaming) GIPHY (with 523,987 views) and #EverydayLookism posts are regularly ‘top’ results for the Instagram #stopbodyshaming hashtag (with 171,000 posts), showing Widdows is leading the debate on this platform. [S8]



Pictured: A still image of the #EverydayLookism GIPHY. It depicts the words Stop Body Shaming next to a sketch of a red megaphone.

That the campaign is successful is shown in the take up of an anti-lookism mantle across a broad church of organisations and campaigners. For example, journalists and presenters from the *Atlantic*, *Vogue* and the BBC (Molly Forbes, Shahidha Bari, Melissa Seley, Clem Prendergast) and social media influencers (Love Disfigure and Anti Diet Riot Club) with a total public following of 279,761 on Instagram joined Widdows in a series of Instagram Lives which ran from the #EverydayLookism account. The mini-series ran for eight weeks and the #EverydayLookism Instagram now has over 300 posts, with up to 4,820 engagements per post. The #EverydayLookism campaign has been picked up by the ITV Central News, *Birmingham Mail*, Free Radio, Adrian Goldberg’s Talk Show and Body Cons podcast in media showing secondary reach. It is also being picked up by schools: sixth-formers at Hillcreast School agreed all body shamming should stop; Altrincham Grammar School for Girls have included the campaign in their Citizenship and PSHE classes; St Swithun’s sixth-form had a reading group on *Perfect Me* and tweeted that they were “filling

in our examples of #EverydayLookism” [S8]; and a Year 12 student in Toronto was “inspired” to undertake a school project with her class and set up a YouTube channel. Since the #EverydayLookism campaign began in 2019, people from over 123 countries have taken Widdows’ MOOC. [S8] Over 3,000 people have attended over 20 public events on beauty, highlights of which include, Widdows appearing at the Hay Festival twice (2014 and 2018). [S8] Data collected from just four of Widdows’ talks, (to over 1,000 people in Birmingham, Oxford and Swindon) show that 81% of the attendees who filled out questionnaires agreed that the talk had changed their perception of beauty, and 78% agreed that beauty raises ethical and moral dilemmas. [S10]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1. Ditch the Label’s [Annual Bullying Survey](#) report (2019).
- S2. Mental Health Foundation briefing paper: [Image-editing Apps and Mental Health](#) (2020).
- S3. Appearance is a Policy Issue Facebook Live talks [web page](#).
- S4. Women and Equalities Committee oral evidence: [Changing the perfect picture: an inquiry into body image](#) (2020).
- S5. Nuffield Council Report bundle featuring *Cosmetic Procedures: Ethical issues* (2017) and its update, *Cosmetic Procedures: Ethical Issues — One Year On* (2018).
- S6. [Beauty Demands Briefing Paper](#) (2016).
- S7. Nuffield Council of Bioethics statement, submitted as part of AHRC funding report.
- S8. [Webpage](#) detailing media coverage and activity.
- S9. #EverydayLookism [website](#).
- S10. Audience feedback forms from events.