

**Be Aware, Don't Compare**

**Opening Statement**



**Tuesday, June 28<sup>th</sup> 2022**

First of all, we would like to say how honoured and grateful we are to be invited to speak here today on behalf of our class, our school and the young people of Ireland. We are especially grateful to Deputy Paul Kehoe and Senator Pat Casey for their support of our project.

We are from Coláiste Bhríde, Carnew, County Wicklow which is a large, mixed secondary school on the borders of Wicklow, Wexford and Carlow. We are one of twenty three post primary schools under the patronage of Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board (KWETB). In 2021, we had 969 students enrolled.

Our school mission statement reads 'Caring, Challenging and Achieving Together' and that culture of academic excellence and our desire to be innovative makes the Young Social Innovators (YSI) module an attractive option for our transition year students each year. This module allows our students to work together to research and discuss issues which affect young people today. Once a class consensus is achieved on a topic, students then start their project journey. Some projects merely want to raise awareness or money; we want to change the law with our project.

During our initial classes, our teacher helped us try list issues which were affecting our young people. We did many exercises to explore these issues and it was truly shocking to see just how many problems and obstacles exist for our young people in the Ireland of 2022. As we quickly learned, listing the issues that exist was not difficult; our challenge was finding a topic which all 22 students were interested in and passionate about. Our breakthrough came just before Christmas when our teacher shared an article with us about body shaming and comparison culture. The article explained how the American artist Lizzo had recently worn a sheer dress to an awards ceremony and as a plus sized woman, had been roundly criticised online. She is a talented artist who won awards at this particular award ceremony but none of the articles mentioned this fact, they solely focused on how she looked. Her talent and professional achievements faded into the background and all people wanted to discuss was her choice of clothing. Interestingly, Rihanna had worn a similar dress previously and was widely applauded for her fashion choice. A class discussion started, we had found our passion.

After some research, we decided to focus on the pressure the media puts on people, especially young people to look a certain way. What most people don't realise or accept is that a large percentage of images which bombard us each day are edited. This means that people are comparing themselves against an unrealistic and unachievable beauty standard. In our opinion, this can cause issues with confidence, anxiety and can have an overall negative effect on the mental health of young people. As a class, the most shocking image which we discovered was a photo-shopped image of Prince George of the United Kingdom in the American press. People are so desperate to achieve a perceived level of

perfection that they are willing to photo-shop an image of a baby. There is no exact figure available for the number of images which are edited online. Estimates range from 30% to 70%.

During the course of our research, we learned that Norway passed a law in 2021 which requires social media influencers to declare if they have modified a photo. This includes filters on apps such as Snapchat. The UK attempted a similar bill but it did not make its way through parliament. We are proposing that a similar law is introduced here in Ireland.

Our school community have been amazing and have completed numerous surveys for us which gave us an idea of the scale of the issue. In our most recent school survey which got over 700 responses, 76% of our school felt that this law should be introduced here in Ireland. Only 10% of respondents said that they never compare themselves to images online. Traditionally, this would have been seen as a problem which predominantly affected young girls but our research indicated that this issue affects boys at an increasing rate.

When we spoke on the Ryan Tubridy show we received a massive response after the show aired. We have had two radio interviews on South East radio and have had numerous articles about us appear in our local newspaper and online. We were delighted to receive €1000 from YSI Den which we spent hiring and designing a billboard on the main street of Gorey raising awareness for our project. Senator Casey invited us to the Dáil in May to meet Minister Mary Butler about our project and the effect this issue is having on the mental health of young people in Ireland, particularly the concerning rise in eating disorders among both young males and females.

We understand that any such legislation would be difficult to police and it would require the support of the various social media platforms but on behalf of the young people of Ireland, we need this change to happen. We are all individual and unique and this should be celebrated not hidden behind filters and clever make-up. Children being born today will never know life without a mobile phone and tablets, but let's at least give them a chance to grow up in an Ireland where they can look in the mirror and love who they are.

Thank you.