A person sitting at a desk

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**Exploring the Impact of Youth Engagement in Social Media: Shifting the Boundaries of Harms and Criminality in the Digital World?**

Key words: harm, social media, zemiology, vulnerability

Lauren Doyle is a Lecturer in Social Studies, and a PhD researcher, in the Faculty of Education and Society at the University of Sunderland. Her PhD research aims to critically explore the impact of social media on youth mental health and self-image, and criminalising online behaviours by applying critical realist and zemiological thinking. She is interested in researching within the areas of hate crime, harms of the digital world, self-esteem related harm, online diet culture, influencer culture, mental health in criminal justice and applying disability studies within a criminological framework. Lauren’s research reflects a combination of practice background in justice and community disability support in the roles of advocacy and wellbeing coaching, as well as lived experience of attempts to access local mental health support services.

### **Introduction**

Social media, and the broader digital world, have increasingly become an integral part of day-to-day life for many people. This has come alongside the advancement of smartphones and other portable, digital devices that make communication and networking through the virtual space even more accessible. This paper focuses on understanding the way young people engage with social media. It does this by drawing on earlier findings from my PhD research, which is concerned with the lived experience of disorder eating and body-image-related anxieties in 18–30-year-olds; retrospectively reflecting on the ways that social media may have influenced their relationship with their self, body, and food.

When exploring the construct of harm in this context, the application of zemiological values to the understanding of youth engagement in social media is paramount. Zemiology provides a space for criminologists to explore implications of behaviours that do not fall into the binary of ‘crime’; allowing the opportunity to investigate the harm and impact of behaviours that are not constructed under criminal law. For this article, zemiology provides a space to explore the boundaries between harm and criminality on social media for young people, drawing on concepts such as online hate and trolling. This article hopes to provide a springboard for the need for more research into criminological futures and prospective harms posed by the digital world to all its users. By constructing a zemiological framework around the early stages of analysis in this study, it is evident that ongoing changes to UK legislation around vulnerability caused and perpetuated by the digital space remain an area of concern. Specifically, who should hold responsibility for the regulation of hatred on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Twitter. A key area of concern for participants in this study was the potential harm posed to young people in the offline world because of engaging with ‘online diet culture’ and the use of filtered imagery online. The article will conclude that further research is required into these areas, followed by the development of evidence-based education to support the safety of young people online.

### **Growth in social media**

This is not just an assumed growth in social media engagement, but something that is evidenced through various statistical analyses of online access and media use reports. Ofcom (2022) reported 99% of children in their study, aged 3-17 years old, had access to an online device of some form. When narrowing this age range down to 8-17-year-olds, this figured adjusted to 62% reporting the use of at least one social media platform. This demonstrated a rise of just over half of their sample population from a survey analysed in April 2021 (Ofcom, 2022). Just 42% of parents in the sample were able to correctly state the minimum legal age of signing up for social media [13 years old]. If we are to consider periods of time, across 24 hours, where a young person can access social media, potentially unsupervised, having access to a mobile phone was a factor considered by Ofcom during their investigation. The findings of Ofcom’s survey suggested 97% of 12–15-year old’s having access to a mobile phone. Therefore, they were able to access social media, at any time of day. Girlguiding (2022) published the *Girls Attitude Survey*based on a sample of 2,000 young girls and women aged 7-21 years old, with elements of the survey deliberating online harm and experiences of image-based social media platforms, such as Instagram. The findings from their survey suggested that female satisfaction with their self-image decreased as they moved through their teens, with 10% of young women aged 17-21 years old being happy with their appearance compared to 42% of girls aged 7-10 years old. The quantitative data produced by surveys such as those from Ofcom (2022) and Girlguiding (2022) demonstrate a clear need for further understanding of potential harms in the online space. As well as a clearer insight into the regulation of social media due to the potential impact social media content may have on a young person’s self-esteem.

Alongside rising rates of social media use, there has been a rise in using social media to generate business opportunities and income through posting content on social media platforms, through building vast followings online. Where the role of the celebrity and people of ‘influence’ in mass media may have been reflected through the status of a sportsperson, television presenter, politician, or a model – for example – social media has seen a shift in where influence can now heavily come through ‘content creators’. ‘Content creators’ also known as ‘influencers’ are individuals who have specific followings on their social media platform(s), and who build “trusting relationships with audiences and create[s] both commercial and non-commercial social media content across topics and genres” (Department for Digital, Media, Culture and Sport, 2022a: 4). The rise of ‘influencer culture’ in social media is a new political discussion, in terms of being able to understand this shift in influential power from offline to online, and how this can be regulated through new technology. Government investigations into ‘influencer culture’ and filtered imagery online for young people have started to consider the role of young people online, as ‘influencers’, as content consumers and as individuals who may be susceptible to being misled by misinformation and disingenuous content (Women & Equalities Committee, 2021; Department for Digital Media, Culture and Sport 2022a; 2022b; 2022c; 2022d).

### **Methodology**

As alluded to earlier, the findings discussed in this article frame the early stages of analyses of the researcher’s current PhD project. This study adopted a two-step methodological approach to collating a depth of qualitative data surrounding areas such as ‘social media use’, ‘influencer culture’, ‘diet culture’, and people’s experience of this. Firstly, a digital ethnography was conducted over a 6-month period; observing discussions held on two selected chat forums: Tattle.Life and Reddit. Underberg & Zorn (2013: 10) define digital ethnography to be a process of “representing real-life cultures through combining characteristic features of digital media with the elements of story”. The types of behaviours, and reactions, that are usually analysed through digital ethnography tend to be forms of text, images, online spaces, and videos. Tattle.Life advertises itself to be a gossip forum that is designed to provide a space for users to ‘gossip’ about individuals who publicly post their day-to-day life on social media (Tattle.Life, no date). Threads of conversation are formed on Tattle.Life based on specific individuals. They can consist of screenshots of posts their chosen ‘influencer’ has created on social media or more generic discussions about the ‘influencer’ or public figure themselves. This provided a baseline understanding of certain influencers that may be discussed online, ahead of hosting interviews with participants. Discussion pages on Reddit, however, are categorized by topic as opposed to being person specific. For this research, ‘subreddits’ i.e., discussion pages on Reddit, under the category of ‘health and fitness’ were explored. This was used to determine discussions around ‘online diet culture’ within a broader ‘health and fitness’ context online. The data provided by digital ethnography has been an informative process for moving into data analysis. Specifically, when attempting to compare online discussions of ‘influencer culture’, the ‘ideal body’ and engagement with ‘diet culture’ with offline interpretations.

The second stage of the fieldwork consisted of 22 semi-structured interviews that focused on retrospective self-analysis of social media use throughout a participant’s lifetime. A snowball sampling approach was used to recruit participants for this research, via social media, with participatory criteria being for a person to have experience engaging with social media, and to be aged 18-30 years old. Within their interviews participants were enabled to discuss different social media platforms that they had used previously and/or use now – the most popular being Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok – and, to discuss their experience of social media. This was considered alongside the types of content that they choose to follow as well as the content they find is ‘suggested for them’ via their social media search functions. Throughout this process, participants were able to provide their own interpretation of this experience, and if/how this had ever shaped their behaviour towards themselves, food, or nutrition, offline.

### **Is the digital space harmful: online filtering applications and image-based networks**

Although interviews were not framed to assume negative experiences, in adolescent years, of social media, a concept that was highlighted by a significant number of participants (21 – 95%), was the rise of ‘online diet culture’. Diet culture is a highly contested term, with a variety of defining statements, depending on the theoretical perspective it is being researched from. In this study, ‘diet culture’ was considered to have a variety of key areas that participants believed should be considered when researching the area. Moreso when proposing recommendations to support young people in navigating their way around ‘online diet culture’ and potential misinformation in the online space. This was specifically related to their own experiences of low self-esteem, minimal self-fulfilment and bearing witness to various levels of ‘hate’ on social media. Examples of online hate provided by participants were based on comments they could see being made towards other people’s content, or on their own. The hateful language they described included comments about a person’s body weight, their fashion sense, or on the way that they posed in a photo, for example. With such ‘hate’ being geared towards characteristics such as idealistic beauty standards, lifestyle routine, and wealth standards set through ‘influencer culture’ on social media, 20 participants (90.1%) considered ‘hate’ within these areas to be a ‘normal’ part of engaging with social media. This was not specific to the experience of one social media platform, but that of an array of platforms that encouraged the sharing of images, and visual materials, across their user engagement: Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitch were among those named.

The normalisation of online hate became a recurring discussion point throughout the interview process with participants across this study. Participants made it clear that although they did not agree with posting negative comments on a person’s post – and it was not something that they did themselves – it was something they had witnessed on a number of occasions. *Lizzie*highlighted that negativity on social media is not just an ‘accepted’ part of social media but is something that people will large followings are just ‘expected to receive’. This was supported by a finding from the Tattle.Life ethnographic dataset. On registering your details to create an account on Tattle.Life, a statement of terms and conditions must be signed: one rule being that this forum does not allow commentary about an individual who does not ‘put themselves in the public eye’ (Tattle.Life, 2022: unpaginated). These findings suggest an attempt to create a digital justification for victim-blaming behaviour, as opposed to holding the perpetrator accountable - if you live your life openly online, on a publicly accessible account, you are open to scrutiny. This demonstrates a potential regression back to victim-blaming tendencies, but in the online space, when categorising who is likely to become a victim of online hate, and who is not.

The term ‘self-sabotage’ was constructed by participants in this study to conceptualise the way that they would continue to use social media, for up to 10 hours per day, despite recognising the negative impact it was having on their self-esteem. One participant*, Alice*, referred to a ‘vicious cycle’ of wanting to demonstrate her productivity and ‘healthy’ routine online to her social media followers while being able to recognise that if she was not able to keep up this level of online activity [for example, due to a busy day at work], she would ruminate over whether her followers would think badly of her, or label her as lazy. Another participant, *Grace,* talked about how this was not just a ‘vicious cycle’ of wanting her online following to think of her as productive and successful, but that scrolling through her social media feed, particularly Instagram, would lead her to inquire about appearance altering procedures, including liposuction, face fillers and breast augmentation. Within these discussions, clear links were made between ‘attractiveness’, ‘desiring validation over appearance’, and the urge to change the way participants look – whether this be through appearance-altering procedures [physical], or image filtering applications [virtual] such as FaceTune, FaceApp or Airbrush.

It is important that we consider the accessibility to appearance alteration; physical or virtual, and the harm that this has the potential to cause. If individuals, such as those involved in this research are exposed to non-disclosed, filtered images via social media platforms, and it is directly influencing their decision to undergo cosmetic surgery, this is something that must be investigated, and support must be implemented through public health measures. *Grace* deliberated her experience of undergoing some of the cosmetic procedures we discussed and the physical health implications she suffered as a result – likening terms such as ‘harm’, ‘regret’ and wishing she had been more informed of potential implications before undergoing such permanent changes to her body. Something she believed to be directly influenced by idealistic beauty standards set through mass media, not just image-based social media platforms. This finding of the urge to alter one’s appearance as a young woman is not just reflected in my research, but in broader datasets collated from across the UK. Patient Claim Line produced a set of *Cosmetic Surgery Statistics UK*after conducting a nationwide survey; from 2,000 participants they found 45% of respondents between the ages of 18 and 24 reported ‘influencers’ to have inspired a want for cosmetic surgery (Buscoe, 2022). An equal percentage stated that this desire to undergo plastic surgery came from discussions with peers, and 41% agreed that filtered images on their social media applications, such as Snapchat, had influenced their decision to undergo surgery (Buscoe, 2022). When constructing a notion of ‘harm’ in the online space, it is essential that the rise in accessing appearance-altering surgeries, and its’ connection to prolonged social media use are carefully considered. Where studies such as Sharp & Gerrard (2022) emphasise the need for further research into the complexities of constructing knowledge around the impact of social media over self-perception of body image, for me, such research requires the voice of those with lived experience. Lived experience-led research could aid the understanding as to how the reality of these experiences of low self-esteem and self-hatred, or online hate, could have been prevented or better supported.

### **Future directions of criminality and harm**

The portrayal of the ‘ideal’ body type existed prior to the growth of social media, through newspapers, magazines, and television advertisements (Quittkat et al., 2019). The ‘ideal’ body type has transformed across different decades depending on social trends at specific times (Quittkat et al., 2019). Whether this is the urge to look like supermodels at a UK size 0, in the late 1990s through to early 2000s, or the need for an enhanced hourglass figure alike many reality TV stars of the 2010s. Mass media are experiencing a similar trend shift now, with the publication of a New York Post article, in November 2022, idealising a change in women’s body-type trends as *“Bye-Bye Booty: Heroin Chic is Back”*(Diaz, 2022). As demonstrated through responses by *Alice*and *Grace*earlier in the article, online hate experienced by and witnessed by participants in this research was described to be based on the personal aesthetic – weight, body shape, lifestyle, and ‘what I eat in a day’ trends online. If we attempt to contextualise this in a framing of hate incidents, and hate crime, none of the examples provided here is incidents of hate geared towards a categorised protected characteristic, currently residing under the Equality Act 2010. If online hate and incidents of trolling take place, and are not geared towards a recognised protected characteristic, can we support a person in pursuing a case of online hate, through the justice system, that will be successful in a criminal conviction? Despite this, does it justify a criminal conviction if the detrimental impact on an individual’s feeling of personal safety, and mental wellbeing, is considered to be at risk?

It is not as simple as regulating social media platforms through appropriate regulatory bodies and updating legislation such as the Malicious Communications Act 1988 or the Communications Act 2003 when considering potential legislative shifts around the management of social media. At the time of writing this article, the UK Online Safety Bill sits within a ‘reporting stage’ with the House of Commons and has since July 2022; with 101 submissions of written evidence from academics, commissioners, online companies, and organisations concerned with the need to regulate the digital world. All concerned with different elements of this – safeguarding online, understanding mental health implications of using social media, online hate, online advertising of products, ‘influencer culture’, and the use of filtering applications - this is just to name a few. Findings in this article construct harm as being the way that some of the areas listed above can leave a young person feeling – feeling not good enough, wanting to undergo cosmetic surgery, not wanting to eat, wanting to engage in FAD diets, and being aware of the ‘vicious cycle’ of feeling some of these emotions and still engaging with social media anyway. Although participants stated how this had changed over time, as they had built up knowledge of how social media can present dishonest content, 20 (90.1%) participants could recognise how their younger selves had adjusted their behaviour according to the social media content they engaged with. Retrospectively, all participants concluded that education was a key source to addressing concerns around online safety, online hate, and low self-esteem in young people. This is not just educating young people, but educating parents, politicians, academics, healthcare professionals and other categories of caregivers in the advancing nature of social media – the great ways that it can promote wider communication and the sharing of business opportunities [with participants alluding to the way social media allowed connectivity during the Covid-19 pandemic when they felt otherwise isolated], but also the misinformation and potentially harmful content that young people can be susceptible to viewing when going down the ‘rabbit hole of social media’.

### **Conclusion**

This article aims to leave you with an appreciation of the intricate nature of attempting to construct a unified understanding of online safety and harms in the digital world, specifically social media, and its impact on young people. Despite the extensive period of evidence collection, the UK Government have undertaken to construct an effective Online Safety Bill, this will remain a complex task while we await the outcome of ongoing government investigations into the responsibility of appropriate regulatory bodies, social media platforms themselves and policymakers in safeguarding social media users. Specific to the regulation of ‘online diet culture’, defining diet culture and understanding its role in the digital world is yet to be determined in the discipline of zemiology, or in government policy. Diet culture is not new – although it is highly topical and demonised when placed in an online context. Discussions of body image and the ‘ideal’ body have been around for many years; through televised advertisements, gossip magazines, newspaper gossip columns etc. Just now, we can engage with it far easier than ever before. As emphasised earlier, through Ofcom (2022) statistics, almost every young person has access to a smart device by the age of 17; where, without parental locks, they can access the internet at all hours of the day. This is no longer us spending time at the local supermarket, picking up a gossip or health magazine, reading dietary advice or berating of a public figure’s body and then throwing the magazine away a week or so later. This has the potential to be a constant in our life – therefore, it has the potential to make us feel far more vulnerable to internal and external scrutiny of not just the way we look, but the way we lead our lives. If such scrutiny leads to hate online, policymakers must consider where the line is drawn between hate incidents and hate crimes for ‘trolling’ behaviours that are not driven by aggravating factors, such as those categorised as protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010.

As suggested in earlier stages of this article, it is essential that future legislation puts pragmatic strategies in place to safeguard young people in their engagement with social media, and how this may influence their behaviour and wellbeing in the offline world. A concluding recommendation from the early findings of this study is the need for the development of education to be provided to young people about social media – both the good and the bad, and the best ways to manage the use of time and communicate safely online. Education is key, and there remains a need for furthering young people’s understanding of the level of disinformation and filtered imagery that they may face online.

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