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THE ‘INSIDER’ CLUB OF ‘DIET CULTURE’: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN CREATING THE ‘PICTURE PERFECT’ BASED ON FILTERED LIFESTYLES?

LAUREN DOYLE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Sunderland for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This thesis explores the avoidable harms posed by social media towards the identity and perceptions of self-worth of social media users. The research begins by addressing the long-standing history of the 'othering' of bodies based on normative values that underpins social perceptions of 'health' and 'attractive', investigating the blurred boundaries between 'health' and 'attractiveness' influenced by narratives of diet culture. This is juxtaposed with trends within online cultural spaces (*diet culture and influencer culture*), and will be linked to the delivery of Personal, Social, Health and Economic curriculum in schools across England and Wales. This thesis recognises the normalisation of weight stigma following a period of normative narratives that have led the diet space and constructed the concept of the 'idealised' body. Experiences of 'shame' and 'stigma' underpin the experiential narratives shared by participants in this research and were key areas of consideration when exploring existing empirical work around online harms, and diet culture.

A two-phase methodology was designed that consisted of a digital ethnographic investigation into the use of Reddit and Tattle.Life, alongside a series of 22 semi-structured interviews to gain a holistic understanding of the potential harms caused by diet culture. This research was underpinned by a theoretical framework that used critical realism (CR) and zemiology to explore experiences of cultural spaces embedded into everyday use of social media. CR was used to support the identification of generative mechanisms that underpin social media use and the user's relationship with different social media platforms, and zemiology supported the researcher to make sense of the existing definition of 'harm' under the Online Safety Act 2023 and explore the potential need to broaden the definition to accurately encompass potentially harmful behaviours perpetrated online. CR continues to encourage the production of such recommendations, by supporting the researcher to identify at times unobservable harms posed by the online space and specifically diet culture.

The thesis identifies the cyclic nature of social media engagement through the notion of addiction and habitual behaviours, using a CR framework to identify the underlying mechanisms that effects (and normalises) stigmatising, and at times hateful, narratives

that perpetuate harms throughout online cultural spaces. Regulation of social media narratives and the sharing of information across social media platforms, under the Online Safety Act 2023 is managed by the platforms directly, unless in the case of criminal activity being reported to the relevant criminal justice agencies. The findings of this thesis identify a gap between the regulation of marketing within *influencer culture* that does not currently align the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) 2023 regulations, and marketing authenticity regulations of 2008. This thesis calls for a standardisation of marketing regulations to address the potential harm posed by filtered images, and diet culture-related narratives online.

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Thank you to Dr Patrick (Paddy) Hutchinson for the theoretical discussions at the times I didn't have a clue where my data analysis would start, and where the data collection would end, and for not being afraid to tell me to quit the nonsense when I would attempt to go into a spiral of initial panic during our office chats.

I am indebted to my family and friends for your patience, time, and energy from the day I told you I was going back to university to do a PhD after saying I didn't want to be a student for a little while… You have endured my lack of sociality for 5 years (that doesn't end here), my attitude when I've not wanted to talk because I'm in 'full PhD mode' and have let me (almost) outstay my welcome in the family home (thank you mam!)

Brandon, I cannot thank you enough for your understanding and appreciation for the time and space I have needed to complete my doctorate and continuing to support me through the nights (and months) I've needed to just sit with my headphones in and write, read, or concentrate – even on those weeks we didn't see a lot of each other. You have taken on my mood swings when approaching deadlines and annual reviews and have listened to my head numbing rants over the ways of the world even when you have no idea what I'm talking about! Thank you for bringing me snacks, the caffeine, and the wine (switching up

to milkshakes when baby boy's cravings started to kick in) while I sat in a 'pain cave' at my desk.

Finally, I would like to take the time to thank the 22 interview participants who took the time to share their stories with me and who trusted me to relay their experiences through this project in a public forum. Without you, this project would not be what it is, so thank you.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This thesis focuses on the social harms perpetuated and caused (directly, and indirectly) by cultural spaces within social media. This work will identify harms that act as generative mechanisms, emerging from a history of socially constructed understandings of beauty. The research explores experiences of body-related anxiety (at times, body dissatisfaction), disordered eating (at times, diagnosed eating disorders), and low self-esteem. A particular focus of this thesis is to consider the role that cultural spaces such as diet culture and influencer culture have in the experience of those listed above, as well as social media users' understanding of the type of content they are engaging with, the authenticity of information or imagery online, and the identity they obtain online as a byproduct of their social media engagement.

Diet culture is a phenomenon that pre-dates mass media advertisements and celebrity culture that acts as a normalised attribute to 'healthy' living and the United Kingdom (UK) obesity strategy. According to Willsky (2023: unpaginated) "diet culture is a system of social beliefs and expectations that values thinness above all… [that] equates having a thin body with being healthy". Jovanovski & Jaeger (2022) argue diet culture is a term that has yet to be defined comprehensively to understand the different perspectives of health professionals, fat activists and the stigmatising narratives that underpin the cultural nature of contemporary dieting. Culture is made up of values, norms, behaviours and beliefs that are shared by a group of people, which can be used to bring people together as a collective, or a community (Hall, 1997). Culture can be represented by using language to understand the norms, values and beliefs that form culture, and underpin cultural spaces. Lessig (2004) recommends a shift towards a 'free culture' that meets the marketised needs of the state but allows individuals to financially benefit from market cultures, as well as wider state infrastructures (i.e., capitalist and privatised markets). Both Hall (1997) and Lessig (2004) acknowledge the practice and representations of platform cultures in online and offline spaces, particularly the work of Lessig (2004) to position individuals in 'power' to be able to create and monetise the content that they produce (influencers/content creators on social media). This thesis understands culture

to be a space in which norms, values, and beliefs are shared to encourage behaviours that align with what forms its cultural practice. Culture, in this case, changes according to normative narratives within the socio-cultural context in which it is positioned, depending on the time, space and place that it is represented.

Discussing harms posed by diet culture and the communities within it is not a new concern caused by social media (see Gagliardi, 2018; Dodier, 2020). Concerns of diet culture have become increasingly popular in parliamentary debate, for social media researchers and throughout content creator narratives (ibid). As will be outlined later in the thesis, the shift in the conditions of diet culture - from offline mass media to online social media - has influenced a growth in popularity of weight-loss supplements and products (Gagliardi, 2018). The lack of regulation of the purchase and use of such products has caused immense levels of concern in the UK Government's consideration for addressing harms in the digital age. This thesis will provide a holistic definition of diet culture encompassing the lived experiences of participants in this research, their understanding of what diet culture consists of and the impact that it can have in online and offline spaces.

1.2 The Research Rationale

This thesis studies social media and diet culture as separate but interlinked social phenomena in late modernity. The impact of social media both directly and indirectly on the lives of its users is highly topical in contemporary research (Tucker & Goodings, 2018; D'Arienzo et al, 2019; Ford *et al.,* 2019), as is the discussion of the 'othering' of bodies and societal stigma (Easter, 2012; Armstrong, 2016; Rusch & Zu, 2016; Clair, 2018; Tyler, 2020; Addison, 2023). Media constructions of the 'idealistic' body existed before the growth of the online world, and expanding popularity of social media, through mass media advertisements, newspaper reporting, and the portrayal of 'attractiveness' through television and film (Dye, 2015; McLean *et al.*, 2016; Quittkat *et al.,* 2019).

The 'idealised' body type is not a new phenomenon, rather it is a phenomenon that has a long-standing history dating back to the Victorian era and has changed over time (Dye, 2015). Whether this construct aligns to the heroin chic trend of super models between the 1990s and the early 2000s in the UK and US or the hourglass figure inspired by celebrities

like Kim Kardashian, Jennifer Lopez, Beyonce and an array of reality television stars and influencers later in the 2000s, to the time of writing (Dias, 2003). The 'idealised body' is a social construct that changes depending on time, space, geographical location, beauty trends and mass media narratives. These social constructs of idealism and attractiveness are underpinned by a history of the societal stigmatisation of difference and diversity. This is reflected more broadly in the work produced by Addison (2023) whereby the social harms caused, or influenced, by societal stigma widen the divide of 'us' and 'them' in contemporary society. This concept of the ideal body will be applied to the analysis of the data collected in this research, whereby the project will consider identity within social media platforms.

There have been various publications by the UK Government announcing a crisis around obesity and thereby, presenting a push for 'healthier lifestyles' through a range of trending 'diets' (Department for Health and Social Care & Churchill, 2021; Gov. UK, 2021; Women & Equalities Committee, 2021). Specific research centres such as the Centre for Appearance Research have been commissioned by the Department for Digital, Culture, Sport, and Media to research concerns of body image and appearance in contemporary society. Publications such as *Changing the Perfect Picture: An Inquiry into Body Image*, published on April 9th, 2021, consider the impact of social media, and education on body image in those under the age of 25. The Digitally Altered Body Images Bill, led by Conservative MP Dr Luke Evans, was taken to Parliament for preliminary discussions on January 13th, 2022, to outline the impact of digital technology and the filtering of images on incidents of low body image and self-esteem. Recommendations have been made to the UK Government, through the *Changing the Picture Perfect* project, that outline mechanisms of support to address the decline in self-esteem amongst the younger generation. The publication asks for the UK Government to eradicate the (at the time) new Bill that would force all restaurants in the UK to publish calorie-based nutritional information on their food menus (Department for Health and Social Care & Churchill, 2021). Further, this publication highlighted the impact of social media on youth mental health, the harms of advertising dietary supplements and altering appearances on advertisements. Regardless of this, on May 12th, 2021, the Department for Health and Social Care announced calorific labelling to be introduced to all food and drinks vendors

that employ more than 100 workers, in a newer attempt to tackle obesity across the nation (ibid).

Mandatory calorie labelling has been advertised by the UK Government as a strategy for tackling the UK obesity crisis (Department for Health and Social Care & Churchill, 2021). Studies such as Frances *et al.* (2024) have outlined the lack of acknowledgement by the UK Government for the wider impact of this exposure to nutritional information for individuals with disordered relationships with food, and that there could be more effective measures to tackle obesity in the UK. To position this within diagnostic cultures, the work of Svend Brinkmann (2016) and cultural disability theorists such as Dan Goodley (2011; 2014) can be used to evaluate the growing use of medical labels that attempt to explain disordered relationships with food, as well as body-related anxieties. The entanglement of 'health' and 'attractiveness' will be considered in the later analysis of this research to deliberate the impact of an individual's self-esteem, as a mechanism of mental wellbeing, and the role of Government agendas in tackling broader health issues such as obesity in the narratives that directly, or indirectly, feed into the 'idealised' body, or construct of attractiveness.

1.3 Forming the Research Question, Aims and Objectives

Wider discussions around the link between social media use and experiences of mental distress have been considered by the UK Government in regard to understanding how to support those who may be struggling with their mental health (Lehman *et al.,* 2017; Frazier, 2020). Such investigations have prolonged social media use to urges to engage in behaviours such as the misuse of substances, alcohol, and gambling: i.e., addictive behaviours (Ashcraft, 2014). The relationship between social media users and the social media platform is a key focus of this research as it will enable the researcher to consider the conditions within which a person engages with social media that may influence their identity online. The motivations for a person's use of social media, whether this be to gain a sense of community, or to catch up with friends, is crucial when understanding an individual's actual experience of social media. Understanding an individual's actual lived experience of social media will allow researchers to understand the likelihood of a person's susceptibility to harm, and therefore the reality of their experience of social

media. This will be achieved through the application of a critical realist (CR) analysis in the data collection stages of this research, whereby social media and the construction of identity will be explored as separate social 'structures', and social media use as well as diet culture will be explored as separate mechanisms under the changing conditions of the digital age.

Existing research that explores the nuance of diet culture online is predominantly located within the discipline of psychology (see Quittkat *et al.,* 2019; Dye, 2016; McLean *et al.,* 2016), which adopts methodologies that rely upon quantitative approaches to understand the prevalence of body dissatisfaction or low mood in individuals who use social media for prolonged periods of time, daily. There is also an array of publications, again within the discipline of psychology, that attempt to understand the relationship between social media and the social media user, in relation to their consumption and production of content online and the potentially addictive nature of social media (see Tullet-Prado *et al.,* 2023; D'Arienzo *et al.,* 2019; Andreassen *et al.,* 2017; 2016; Andreassen & Pallensen, 2014). The lack of socio-cultural research that focuses on social media engagement, harms within social media that are specific to the body and self-esteem as well as the harms posed by, or compounded by, diet culture online, identified a significant gap in knowledge relating to these areas. The complex nature of the digital space and the expansive nature of social media necessitates an enriched understanding of experiences of social media, allowing academics to collate holistic datasets through qualitative accounts of experiential knowledge. A socio-cultural approach to identify harms within cultural spaces online will support academics and scholarship to recognise that the online and offline 'worlds', and the harms within both spaces should not be dealt with as isolated phenomena, but an entanglement of each 'world' that has created the digital contemporary age whereby online spaces are embedded into the daily lives of many across the world. Therefore, qualitative data is required to further research into the meanings, values and believes that underpin the effects of social media on disordered eating, body dissatisfaction and perceptions of self-worth in the digital age.

This led to the following research question being formed:

What is the role of social media in creating the 'picture perfect' based on filtered lifestyles?

This project aimed to understand the retrospective and current experiences of individuals' relationship with their bodies, as well as their relationship with social media. From here the research aimed to develop a critical, cross-dialectic understanding of mental wellbeing, both directly and indirectly impacted by social media use. The research aimed to examine the prominence of issues relating to body image and disordered eating patterns, by exploring perceptions of the influence of social media over this.

Following on from these aims, the research objectives are as follows:

- To investigate the impact of the 'online' diet culture on 'offline' behaviours in social media users.
- To explore experiential perceptions of social media, the 'cultural' spaces that are formed within social media, and experiences of content consumed online.
- To produce knowledge that will contribute to future research and policy in the improvement of people's relationship with their bodies.
- To develop a multi-faceted model approach that will contribute to improving the education concerning social media, and its safe use.

1.4 Theoretical Approach

A particular interest of this research was to acknowledge, and investigate, the blurred boundary between 'health' and 'attractiveness' influenced by narratives of contemporary diet culture. This is later juxtaposed with trends that are based within spaces of diet and influencer culture and will be linked to the political agenda of the UK Government in tackling obesity and the rise in engaging with appearance altering procedures. This thesis will also consider the normalisation of weight stigma and fat stigma following a long-standing history of the normative narratives that have led the diet space and constructed the 'idealised body' (i.e., diet culture) (Clair, 2018). The historical account of mental health and perceptions of medicalised behaviours and the discussion of experiences of hate and hostility in the online space (see James & McBride, 2021) are relevant to understanding the construction of attractiveness, beauty, and worthiness in this research. 'Stigma' and

‘shame’ have a longstanding history in experiences of marginalisation for individuals who do not meet societal normative values (Tyler, 2020), and where the harms of stigma could be avoided (Addison, 2023). Within this research, diet culture and oppressive consequences of these normative narratives will be broadened to consider the idealistic constructs of beauty, success, and productivity, in defining diet culture and the harms experienced within it. The positionality of social media users within the online space will also be considered to evaluate the justification for continual consumption and production of diet culture-related content, despite individuals recognising experiences of harms because of social media use.

This thesis employed a mixed theoretical framework using CR and zemiology to analyse the findings of the research. Mad Studies was used at the preliminary stages of this research as a methodological tool to support the researcher in effectively positioning herself as an ‘insider’ within this research, whilst influencing the design of the research to ensure that experiential knowledge was positioned at the forefront of the project throughout. CR allowed the researcher to engage with deeper levels of empirical reality (experiential knowledge) before critically evaluating findings through a zemiological lens to gain a holistic understanding of the impact, and potential harms, caused by platform cultures such as diet culture. Three core principles of CR (ontological realism, epistemological relativism and judgemental rationality) have enabled the research to arrive at decisions between relative and competing theories, removing the grounds for preferring one theoretical approach to another (Haigh *et al.,* 2019).

CR builds on the recognition that the world is independent to our knowledge of it. Under a CR analysis knowledge is positioned in three levels of empirical reality: the ‘empirical’ being what we observe, the ‘real’ being the underlying knowledge that underpins observable behaviours and the ‘actual’ that are events and effects of generative mechanisms (the ‘real’) (Bhaskar, 1978). This research uses Sayer’s (2000) model of CR to map across the differentiation between conditions of diet culture, mechanisms that remain unobservable in the online space but result in *real* experiences of harm when engaged with. Sayer’s mapping of CR will also allow the research to explore experiences of online hate, hostility within the parameters of diet culture, where appropriate, and

consider the impact of ongoing societal stigma that enables the 'ideal' body image and aesthetic to dominate mass and social media outlets, advertising, and popular culture. A CR analysis will then support the exploration of lived experiences within the diagnostic cultures of contemporary society, specifically focused on body-related anxiety, disordered eating habits and self-esteem. Sayer's (2000) map of CR was used alongside Lawson's (1998) understanding of demi-regularities in events that can emerge in less frequency but are still essential to the *real* and *actual* understandings of social phenomena. This research will demonstrate the importance of flexibility in ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin social science research, to inform established methodological approaches to qualitative research.

As the researcher, I position myself as an 'insider' within the research due to my own lived experience of diet culture and disordered eating as an effect of this in my teenage years, as well as my practice background in mental health and wellbeing services. To truly encompass an experiential knowledge-led project, Mad Studies was used as a methodological tool to support the entrance into the data collection and the design of a semi-structured interview schedule. This underpinned the narrative of participant recruitment and the purpose of this research, for lived experience to lead recommendations into policy and education frameworks aligning to health, body-image, and social media/online safety at the later stages of this research. Mad Studies is a strand of disability studies that is centred on positioning lived experience and service user voices at the forefront of research, to co-construct realistic outcomes for changes to policy and practice (LeFrancios *et al.,* 2013). Mad Studies has supported the research to consider the amplified display of diet culture and cosmetic surgery, or beauty enhancement treatments on individuals' social media newsfeeds daily. Mad Studies has also supported the researcher to consider *real* relationships between social media use and self-esteem. An emotionality diary has been recorded as a reflective tool for the researcher to acknowledge the researcher's subjectivity throughout the data collection process. Reflections from the emotionality diary will also be used as a data source in the analysis of this research where relevant to specific experiences, perspectives and the effects of social media on participants and subject accounts in both phases of the research.

Zemiology has been utilised to support the thesis in accurately positioning its findings within existing harms-based legislation such as the Online Safety Act 2023 and identifying the need to take a more holistic approach to understanding and tackling social harms. A particular focus of the requirement to expand the definition of harm in the Online Safety Act 2023 is the acknowledgement of structural, cultural and iatrogenic harms, these being social harms that are caused by larger social structures (for example, social media platforms, or the social media business models underpinning their platforms), or culture/iatrogenesis (harms caused as a result of parliamentary agendas, or policies such as the UK Government's regulation of calorie labelling in food and drink vendors after April 2022 (see Duffy *et al.,* 2023; Frances *et al.,* 2024).

1.5 Chapter Outlines

Chapter 2 provides a historical account of the development of theoretical approaches to the categorisations of bodies based upon normative, 'health'-related medical perspectives. This starts with the rise of the biomedical model of health that underpinned normative understandings of the body throughout the 20th century, and the stigma that was caused by the medicalisation of behaviours and bodies that deviated away from societal norms and led to the 'othering' of bodies and specific groups. This will use literature within the sociology of the body as a discipline to understand the construction of accepted and shamed bodies over time. The chapter goes on to acknowledge research surrounding beauty standards through an intersectional lens, discussing the racialisation of beauty regarding 'whiteness' as a cultural mark of beauty, and the way that beauty standards can be aligned to social and cultural capital as a mark of self-worth and social acceptance (Hunter, 2007; Aizura, 2009; Stefani, 2019; Mady *et al.,* 2023; Paul, 2023), thus, influencing a person's self-esteem. The consideration of body-related anxiety and disordered eating patterns can be found in the later stages of the chapter that addresses diagnostic cultures of late-modern societies.

Chapter 3 outlines the history of technology and the rise of social media, before discussing the commercialisation of the internet that pre-dates social networking sites (i.e., social media). The commercialisation of the internet will lay the foundations for later discussions of identity within the online space, whereby social media and cultural spaces

within social media have become commodities through the marketisation of the online space. The chapter will briefly outline the role of the 'prosumer' in consumer cultures online (Toffler, 1990; Ritzer & Jurgensen. 2010; Bruns & Schmidt, 2011), through the lens of zemiology, that can be applied to engagement with diet culture and influencers across social media platforms. Then the chapter will consider the way that 'bodies' have been constructed, 'idealised', and treated by the internet. Throughout, the chapter will acknowledge the social harms that are identified by existing literature, as influencing a person's relationship with social media. This chapter will later outline the role of hate and hostility experienced by individuals who are not 'accepted' online, by using critical hate studies to acknowledge the harms of hate incidents, motivated by a person's characteristics that are not covered by the Equality Act 2010.

Chapter 4 focuses on the methodological design of this thesis, including a clear outline of the ontological and epistemological framework that was created for the purpose of investigating harms posed by diet culture, (un)realistic goals and filtered lifestyles, using CR and zemiology. The chapter will discuss the methodological choices of the two-phase research design and sampling process. It will then go on to discuss at length the ethical considerations and dilemmas posed by social media research, which are specific to the digital ethnographic phase of this research. This chapter will also provide a profile of the social media platforms discussed during participatory interviews and those observed as part of the digital ethnography. The latter stages of this chapter will outline the use of Sayer's (2000) mapping of CR and Lawson's (1998) understanding of demi-regularities in qualitative datasets. A visual representation of Bhaskar's (1978) levels of empirical reality will be built upon during this research by positioning the findings of this research into 'empirical', 'actual' and 'real' layers of knowledge. Intersubjectivity and reflexivity in this research, due to the researcher's position as an insider within this research are also outlined in Chapter 4 to demonstrate the strategies utilised to ensure researcher wellbeing and safety throughout the research process.

Chapter 5 presents an analysis of findings from this research that examines the requirement to broaden and formalise the definition of diet culture in sociological and social media-related research. The chapter will start by defining diet culture, using

interpretations produced in the interview phase of the research. From here, the chapter will consider who is responsible for attaining high self-esteem and for the detriment that can be caused to self-esteem and perceptions of worthiness by social media. This will consider the regulation of social media narratives, whilst drawing upon observations that emerged from the digital ethnography whereby incidents of trolling, and engagement with pro-harm content was observed in Reddit communities and Tattle.Life discussion threads. The chapter will then consider the perception of (un)realistic goals as a contribution to knowledge through the somewhat frequent experiences of internalised misogyny reported by interview participants following interaction with filtered (unrealistic) content on image-based social media such as Instagram and TikTok. The chapter will close by considering the impact of social media users in forming identities (for example, making decisions about cosmetic surgery, beauty enhancement, engaging with disordered eating habits or self-injurious behaviours) based on (un)realistic goals that are posed by social media within diet culture spaces.

Chapter 6 presents an analysis of the findings of this research that related to the broader relationship between social media users and social media platforms. In this chapter, the nature of social media will be considered in relation to the *addictive* and *habitual* cycle(s) of social media. This will be positioned alongside participatory accounts of the role that social media platforms have in intentionally drawing users into their platforms for prolonged periods of time. The chapter will then re-visit the concept of Toffler's (1990) 'prosumer' to frame the role of the content creator and evaluate the impact of identity upon the nature of an individual's social media engagement. Finally, this chapter will explore existing regulatory bodies and requirements of social media marketing, and the legal parameters surrounding the consequences for misleading marketing and advertisements. It will then recommend more stringent regulation of the self-branding and commodification of influencers and content creators, in line with alternative self-employed workers, or companies.

Chapter 7 will further outline the contributions to knowledge that have emerged from this research. The chapter will start by applying a harm's framework to the Online Safety Act 2023, by recommending an expansion of the definition of harm currently established by

the policy, to include structural, cultural and iatrogenic harms. This section of the chapter will allow for the considerations of responsibilisation of regulation of social media narratives and the effects of such narratives to be more effectively addressed by the appropriate agency, or regulatory body. The chapter will then go on to address existing PSHE education in England and Wales by recommending a change to the delivery of the existing curriculum, specifically when delivering sessions around body image, diet culture and healthy lifestyles. This section of the chapter will outline recommended amendments to the existing curriculum, as well as offer a potential reconsideration for training to be offered to any teaching or support staff who are involved in the delivery of PSHE in schools (primary and secondary) across England and Wales.

2. The 'Othering' of Bodies as a Consequence of Stigma and Diagnostic Cultures

2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to contextualise existing literature that provides the philosophical base of this study including the political history of the stigmatisation of mental health, disability, and non-normative body types intertwined with progressive theoretical frameworks that attempt to address discriminative language used towards these groups. The medicalisation of behaviours that deviate away from the societal norm has a long-standing history that has led to the stigmatisation and 'othering' of bodies. This chapter will undertake an analysis of existing research that explores the 'othering' of bodies that leads to experiencing stigma, focusing predominantly on experiences of significant mental illness and disability to frame this thesis analysis around experiences of body image, disordered eating and low self-esteem. This chapter will then acknowledge the need to diversify understandings of beauty and 'ideal' body standards through a discussion of racialised beauty standards across the globe (Mitchell, 2020; Aizura, 2009; White, 2005; Rooks, 1996), experiences of body image in ageing for queer women (Bennett *et al.,* 2024), colonial approaches to achieving 'beauty' in the Global South (Mady *et al.*, 2023; Hussain, 2021), and how these areas may influence a person's presentation of identity.

The sociology of the body and body studies will be outlined in this chapter to consider the stigmatisation of alternative body types, over time. The chapter will briefly take into consideration the rise and fall of the biomedical model of health, and its development into the biopsychosocial model of health that has dominated 20th and 21st century Western healthcare (Bolton & Gillet, 2019; Frazier, 2020), and discuss changing discourse surrounding experiences of disability and mental illness that interlink with stigmatisation and non-normative bodies. It will also acknowledge alternative activist and political movements that emerged out of the late 1900s, including disability studies (see Oliver, 1990a; 1990b; Shakespeare, 2006; 2018). The latter stages of this chapter will then discuss contemporary acknowledgements of the role that self-esteem plays in the diagnosis of eating disorders and body-related anxiety using UK Government reports (Gov.UK, 2014; Women & Equalities Committee, 2021; Department of Health and Social

Care, 2023) and academic and third-sector research surrounding similar concerns of appearance pressure and the role that social media plays in the experience of low self-esteem, body-related anxiety or disordered eating (Gill, 2021; Girlguiding, 2023). The chapter will address these contemporary issues by addressing the theoretical understanding of the ‘othering’ of bodies using disability studies as a springboard of empowerment in academic scholarship to promote the impact of experiential voice in research.

Disability studies is a political movement that has become heavily discussed in research that is led by disabled researchers, and that considers the lived experience of disabled people within various social science disciplines. This chapter will consider the rise of disability studies as an academic discipline, and the impact that this has had over the language used towards disabled people, the protection of the disabled people by United Kingdom (UK) equality and discrimination legislation, as well as the influence that disability studies and disabled researchers’ voices have had on the wider treatment of disabled people in contemporary society. Disability studies have developed into an academic discipline with several strands throughout the 21st century, whilst being one of the first frameworks to successfully bring together academic theory and political activism in the Western world (see Shakespeare, 2018). New theoretical approaches to disability have surfaced, offering alternative perspectives of inclusivity and analyses of ableism in wider society: the social model of disability, critical disability studies, critical realist understandings of disability to name a few. Ableism can be defined as the contemporary ideals within which able, autonomous, productive citizens are modelled as “psychological, social, economic, cultural character(s) [whereby society] normatively privileges able-bodiedness; ... [and] creates space fit for normative citizens” (Goodley, 2014: 21). This chapter considers the importance of movements within disability studies in research that is fore fronted, led or co-constructed by experiential knowledge, alongside the ‘othering’ experienced by the disabled community that has led to years of being ostracised and feeling isolated for being 'different’. The emergence of the critical realist (CR) approach to disability studies is of particular interest to this thesis as a means of theorising lived experiences of disability, a ‘disabling’ society (Oliver, 1990b; Shakespeare, 2006), and

understanding the reality of living with a disability, or obtaining behaviours, communication mechanisms or a physical appearance that deviates away from social norms (Goodley *et al*., 2019a).

The political and sociological understanding shaped by this chapter will thereby form the appropriate links needed to thoroughly deliberate more specific concerns around identified 'disorders', and the influence of social media and harms on such 'disorders'. This chapter will consider the process of medicalisation in modern society that have led to the rise of a diagnostic culture whereby increasing behaviours, means of communication and physical appearances that deviate away from social norms and constructs of ‘normality’ are being medically labelled as ‘disordered’ (see Brinkmann, 2016). Or are being used in conjunction with the symptomatic expansion of already established aids and impairments (ibid). The impact of these diagnostic cultures, focused within the UK, will then be considered in line with publications by the UK Government relating to rising mental illness, the rising use of mental health intervention and the rising concerns of body image and disordered eating (Gov.UK, 2014; Women and Equalities Committee, 2021; Department for Health and Social Care, 2023). The real-life impact of diagnostic cultures will be aligned with contemporary understanding of the impact and potential ‘harm’ posed by stigma (Addison, 2023) through stigma-optics and media narratives (stigma-craft) (Tyler, 2020).

2.2 Stigma through Medicalisation

The biomedical model of health argues that biological abnormalities are to be treated through healthcare services and medical intervention (Andreasen, 1985; Deacon, 2013). Until the early 2000s, the biomedical model itself has been entirely silent on issues of social justice and civil rights. Smart (2006) argues that the injustice faced due to biomedical understandings of behaviours and difference goes further than stigmatising public perceptions, as it did not always present itself as a stereotypical form of prejudice. Under the biomedical model of health, for example, disabilities of all kinds are understood as functional limitations (Lilienfield, 2007; Deacon, 2013). This is referred to in academia as the ‘deficit’ model of health; viewing diversity in physical and psychological

characteristics as limitations as opposed to being differences (Macdonald & Peacock, 2024). Connecting disability with 'abnormality' pre-dates the emergence of the biomedical model back to primitive forms of medicine whereby 'abnormalities' - visible and non-visible – were treated through segregation, sacrificing life through religious prayer, and herbal, community-based folk medicine (Porter, 2006). The long-standing history of the segregation and medical treatment of 'abnormality' underpinned by biomedical approach to health has fed into the stigmatisation of 'abnormality' and therefore, the 'othering' of different bodies in society.

Under the biomedical model there is an assumption that significant mental illness, or intellectual impairment, can be reduced or eradicated by addressing their biological causes (Lilienfield, 2007; Deacon, 2013). Doctors, and other medical professionals, are trained to diagnose, treat, and cure disease, or disability, as opposed to considering external, social factors across a person's life course (Lilienfield, 2007).

Conrad (1992: 209) defines medicalisation as "a process by which nonmedical problems become defined and treated as medical problems, usually in terms of illnesses or disorders". The concept of medicalisation stems from the biomedical focus on sickness and deviance as opposed to health more holistically (Zola, 1972). Where a behaviour is medicalised it would be investigated through a biomedical lens to assess the level of medical treatment that would be required as an attempt to treat, and cure said behaviour (Conrad, 1975; 1992; Deacon, 2013). Zola (1972) recognises medical social control (medicalisation) as having the ability to replace other forms of social control as a justification for segregation, discrimination, or incarceration. For Conrad (1975; 1992) the exploration of medicalisation must consider the impact of the medicalisation of all behaviours, whether they be regarded as non-medical or medical concerns, later termed as the process of *diagnostic cultures* by Brinkmann (2016), this will be discussed later in the chapter in relation to late modernity.

The medicalisation of non-medical behaviours can be problematic due to the lack of acknowledgement for the social context surrounding an individual's lifestyle, health, and wellbeing (Zola, 1972; Conrad, 1992; Brinkmann, 2016). By ignoring the social determinants of mental illness, the biomedical model fails to address the barriers to health

and social inclusion that are caused by the stigma faced by individuals with significant mental illness (Deacon, 2013). This lack of holistic consideration taken in understanding individual experiences of mental distress, or ill-health, has led to a long-standing history in the "categorical otherness" (Deacon, 2013: 852) experienced by individuals with significant mental illness and intellectual impairment. The "categorical otherness" termed by Deacon (2013) focuses on the discriminative views historically held towards, for example, diagnosing schizophrenia, and the 'risk' associated for those diagnosed with the illness. The stigmatisation of mental health can be more broadly applied to any diagnoses that label a person 'disordered' and therefore, different: i.e., eating disorders, anxiety disorders, or body dysmorphic disorder.

Stigma has been defined as an "attribute that is deeply discrediting", and as something that can spoil one's identity if affiliated with specific attributes (Goffman, 1963: 3), and further placing the individual (and individuals with alike diagnoses) at risk of longer-term ostracisation from society due to their 'stigmatised identity'. Stigma does not always have to present itself through malicious means but can be shown through the intention to dominate and maintain social control (Phelan *et al*., 2008). Albeit a popular point of reference in sociological research when defining stigma, more recent work such as Tyler (2020) is critical of Goffman's evaluation of what stigma is, how it is embedded into society, and how it should be addressed. Tyler agrees with Phelan *et al.* (2008) that stigma is a power mechanism but disagrees with Goffman (1963) that this is an individualised issue, that can be acknowledged based solely on an individual's personal characteristics.

Addison's (2023) explanation of the weaponisation of stigma can be used here to demonstrate the exploitation of a marginalised population. Whereby, stigma is used to administer social control through medical intervention, othering or institutionalisation to gain dominance over those who deviate away from societal norms or are deemed 'abnormal' (Beresford & Wallcroft, 1997; Addison, 2023). The history of opinion towards what constitutes a mental illness, and what does not, has relied upon the social construction of normativity at a given time – this has been relayed earlier in the chapter in relation to inconsistent administration of treatment and diagnosis (Deacon, 2013). The

concepts ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ are also socially constructed, and are changeable over time, space, and place (Goffman, 1959). For Beresford & Wallcroft, the construction of the ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ in society accompanies the further oppression of those with significant mental illness:

> … the construct of the ‘mental illness’ is a part of a modernity project which devalues the diversity of the human experiences and perceptions and is preoccupied with analysis, eradication, physicality, and chemical restraint, rather than understanding empathy, support and a holistic approach to body and self. (Beresford & Wallcroft, 1997: 71)

Goffman (1959; 1961) describes mental illness as a social construct. Alongside various other scholars, Goffman agreed that the construction of ‘madness’ is a mechanism of social control (Foucault, 1967; Szasz, 1974; Scheff, 1999). Steele & Aronson (1995) describe the ‘stereotype threat’ as another mechanism of social control whereby an individual is aware of the discrimination they could experience if labelled with a mental illness, or another disability diagnoses, however, they do not see this as a total barrier to accessing mental health intervention. Steele & Aronson do not view the label of a mental illness as being ‘lesser’ in society but view it to take back control of their life, and to understand their body, their modes of communication, and their emotions (ibid). The acceptance of a label does not eradicate feelings of psychological stress and exhaustion in attempts to be part of the ‘in’ group (i.e., mainstream society) (Jones, 2002). Alternatively, this could lead the individual down the road of trying to fit the criteria of a diagnosis they have received to fit into a social group, in fear of being excluded (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Jones, 2002). More recently, scholarship around this area has evolved to critique these traditional experiences of exclusion, stigma and the (mis)treatment of significant mental illness (Goodley *et al*., 2019a).

The push for policy development through the 1960s by professionals, service users and academics led to the emergence of the biopsychosocial model of health, in 1977 (Engel, 1977). For Engel (1977), the biopsychosocial model set out to deliberate distinct aspects

of daily living believed to have the potential to negatively impact an individual's mental health (Bolton & Gillet, 2019). This would be achieved by considering the complex impact of psychological and social influences on a person's health, alongside their biology. The biopsychosocial model was led by George Engel, who regarded the biomedical approach as too reductionist and to simplify experiences of physical health, mental distress, and disability (Macdonald & Peacock, 2024). Despite being an extension of the biomedical approach, the biopsychosocial framework obtained a more holistic understanding of health and medicalisation, that is embedded into mainstream healthcare to this day (Bolton & Gillet, 2019; Frazier, 2020). The establishment of the biopsychosocial model was the first practical application of a medical model of care specifically put together to enhance the experience of psychiatric service users that considered their social environment as well as their biological symptoms (Bolton & Gillett, 2019). Engel emphasised that the experiences of physical and psychological pain differ in varying parts of an individual's life. Therefore, they must be considered just as much as a person's biological state when considering a person's mental health (Engel, 1977; Beresford, 2010; Macdonald, 2016).

Easter (2012) argues that the biological and genetic framing of mental health diagnoses such as eating disorders reduces stigma as it removes the personal responsibility element of the care they could be provided (Armstrong, 2016). However, this could be deemed problematic, and dangerous for other elements of psychiatry. Concerns around 'disordered' body image thinking and 'eating disorders' are prevalent among adolescent girls and women founded from potential biological, psychological, and sociocultural risks associated with modern-day technologies and lifestyle (Rodgers *et al*, 2014). For example, the construction of beauty as an underlying narrative to diet culture influences the medical approach taken by UK medical professionals in the handling of dietary requirements, as well as the existing obesity strategy; controlling the 'sociocultural' narrative surrounding what a 'healthy' body looks like and what it does not look like. This then has psychological and biological implications on young women who aim to pursue the 'healthy' body through intensive diets, large calorie deficits or engage with 'pro-harm' disordered eating advocates online. The social media and harms elements to this literature will be unpicked

in Chapter 3. To this day, the biopsychosocial model of mental health continues to not only dominate public perceptions of mental illness, but professional capacities in the public, private and third-party sectors of support throughout the UK (Bolton & Gillett, 2019). Thereby, influencing public perceptions of 'health' and the desired appearance that young women, for example, may strive to achieve.

2.3 Diagnostic Cultures and Stigma in 'Othering' Bodies

The evolving understanding of experiences of stigmatisation has allowed academics to recognise the long-term impact that the internalisation of stigma can have on an individual's self-esteem, when they are subjected to unfair treatment, or otherness because of this (Tyler, 2020). The interaction between self-esteem, mental illness and stigma can be positioned in relation to a micro, meso, and macro level framework whereby the consequence of experiencing stigma on a micro level is the experience of significant mental illness, on a meso level is the experience of low self-esteem and on a macro level, the consequence of stigma is the dichotomy of the in/out group (Clair, 2018).

Ross *et al.* (2023: 573) state that individuation in acknowledging experiences, diagnoses and the need for medical intervention is achieved by shifting from the biomedical model questioning of "what is wrong with you" to a biopsychosocial model of questioning of "what has happened to you". For Ross *et al*. (2023) a holistic approach to diagnosing a need for support allows professionals to move past medicalising of behaviours to acknowledge the social and environmental factors that feed into a person's physical and psychological wellbeing. This can be critiqued using the theoretical framework of Brinkmann (2016) in his work *Diagnostic Cultures: A Cultural Approach to the Pathologization of Modern Life.* For Brinkmann (2016) the process of medicalisation has grown in the 20th and 21st centuries whereby medicalising categories and symptoms are no longer used only by professionals as a means of diagnosis and social control. These medicalising labels and symptomisation are happening at the hands of professionals, service users, educators, and the public (Brinkmann, 2016). Therefore, we can no longer blame psychiatrists for the medicalisation of people based on diversification of behaviours, communications, or behaviours as this happens from the 'bottom up', in modern society. This aligns with the work of McGann (2011: 343) who states that "diagnoses have become a part of how we

make sense of ourselves, each other and the world". This thesis, in its findings, will consider the role of diagnostic cultures surrounding body-related anxiety, disordered eating and low self-esteem to acknowledge the impact of media narratives in experiences of this, as well as whether medical intervention and diagnoses of 'disorders' surrounding low self-esteem or body-related anxiety are viewed as stigmatising, or supportive.

In relation to disability, 'disordered' behaviours and 'abnormality', Tyler (2020) discusses Paul Hunt's work and experience of stigma due to his lived experience of physical disability, whereby Hunt criticises Goffman's version of stigma. For Hunt, stigma should not be theorised through a normative lens, but rather "the uncomfortable, subversive position from which we act as a living reproach to any scale of values that puts attributes or possessions before the person" (Hunt, 1966 cited in Tyler, 2020: 104). Stigma, therefore, feeds into the 'othering' of bodies as it allows for the automatic presumption and treatment of disabled bodies as being 'unfortunate' or 'abnormal'. For Addison *et al*. (2022) stigma should be framed as a verb as it is "something that is done between people" (Addison, 2023: 298). Therefore, stigma can be recognised as a direct mechanism of social and cultural control that is used against those with significant mental illness, an intellectual impairment (Cameron, 2010), paupers or criminals (Foucault, 1967). Tyler (2020: 242) suggests that "stigma has become a way of seeing, describing and understanding a vast array of discriminatory social attitudes", stigma is perpetuated through media narratives (stigma-craft) to shape public perceptions of 'othered' populations through 'perceptual frames' and "stigma-optics" (ibid: 107). Messaging set out by mass media outlets is at the crux of how mental health is constructed in society (Lancet Commission, 2022). Therefore, to tackle stigma-craft, revisiting the use of language by media outlets in the discussion of mental health is one of the fundamental actions required to end the stigma of mental health. The Lancet Commission (2022) considers the barriers faced by people with lived experiences of mental health and how this then may lead to experiences of stigma. The locations and manifestations of such experiences of stigma are recognised using the *What Matters Approach* in The Lancet's contribution to end stigma and discrimination in mental health (ibid). This report highlights the importance of person-first language that is therefore non-discriminating and does not contribute to

experiences of public stigma, or structural (systemic) stigma, as identified in work by the likes of Goffman (1963).

Despite an expansion in the diagnostic labelling of mental health illnesses (for example: the expansion of anxiety diagnoses, and eating disorder diagnoses), mental health services have been criticised for not providing an adequate range and level of support for those who feel they need intervention (Easter, 2012). Easter (2012) identifies the key criticism to be an influx in rejected referrals due to not meeting the threshold for support, but no alternative support services being available to prospective service users when their referral is rejected. The continuation of a rise in rejected referrals into mental health services has the potential to normalise dangerous thoughts and self-injurious behaviours when they are viewed as less problematic to professionals during certain periods of a person's life (LeFrancios & Coppock, 2014). The diagnosis of 'problematic thoughts', and therefore the pathologisation of thought patterns (Brinkmann, 2016) can occur at a much more rapid rate nowadays thanks to increasing access to the internet and social media through the popularity of smartphones and devices (Pierce, 2009). This is not only because of the growing access to internet platforms, but due to mental health care also being promoted and provided through social media platforms (Tucker & Goodings, 2018). In terms of body image-related issues, and 'disordered' eating patterns, there is a growing culture around dietetics and the way to gain the 'beach body' that mass media promotes that society work towards (Pierce, 2009). More in-depth discussions around social media and social harms linked to mental health and self-esteem will be unpacked in Chapter 3.

2.4 Intersectionality, Stigma and 'Othering': A Sociology of the Body

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1991, focusing on how "intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies" (Collins & Bilge, 2020: 2), acknowledging the complex nature of experiencing stigma and social injustice. Crenshaw (1991) focuses on the importance of understanding marginalisation and stigma through multiple layers of an individual's identity as opposed to categorising experiences of oppression more generically. Thus, reducing their experience to a metanarrative. Identity in itself is entrenched within power

dynamics and social inequalities as a result of specific characteristics interacting with larger structures of power (Lawler, 2014). Identity is a social construct that is not stable, nor simply embodied by an individual; but is something that is shaped by social processes and influenced by grander social structures and cultural norms (ibid). As a framework, intersectionality can be used to focus on the way that characteristics such as disability, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class and age are interrelated and influence layered experiences of 'othering' (Collins & Bilge, 2020). For example, connections can be made between activist movements such as Mad Studies, Queer theory, Crip theory, feminism and critical race theory to understand the complex nature of the oppression of disabled people (Hughes, 2020), whereby disabled people from different backgrounds and identities may experience stigma differently depending on other personal, and social, intersectional aspects of their identity (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). This section of the literature review will outline research that explores intersectional experiences of beauty standards, and the 'othering' faced by groups of people whose physical appearance, such as their skin colour, ethnicity or body shape, does not meet westernised beauty standards set out by mainstream media outlets and wider society. Throughout, literature surrounding the *sociology of the body* will be discussed to outline wider sociological conceptualisations of idealism and embodiment.

A rise in sociological interest of the body came to light through the second-wave feminism of the 1960s (Hancock *et al.,* 2000), more so placed relating to the control of fertility and abortion rights to take back control of the female body. The 18th Century saw a revolutionary period in sociological consideration of the body, developing the notion of gender as a singular, all-important human attribute that fixed one's identity on one or other side of biological binary opposition (Lacquer, 1990). The Renaissance period determined radically different rights and obligations, sexually, for both men and women. For Lacquer (1990), until the 18th Century, the body was relatively ungendered, but there was an evident power difference between the perceived importance of male genitalia compared to that of a female. Conceptualising gendered bodies came as one of the two great dilemmas in sociological Enlightenment writing. It was not until the 19th Century that different theoretical frameworks, unpicking sexual differentiation, emerged. For example,

elaborating the sexual difference theory in 'socio-biology' (Shilling, 2012). Sexual difference theory was developed at Harvard University in the 1970s based on understanding human behaviours, later becoming linked to Darwinian evolution.

Shilling (2012) discusses changes to the socially ideal body over time. The body can be viewed as a project of society through building a healthy body. According to recent studies, the relationship between health and a person's physical appearance has increased over recent years. This feeds into Goffman's 'presentation of the self' (1959) discussion earlier in the chapter whereby ‘abnormality’ and ‘idealism’ have been constructed through a long-standing history of normative values that influences the ‘othering’ of bodies deemed as abnormal, such as disabled bodies (including visible and non-visible disabilities). Intersectionality values the “richness of multiple identities” and attributes that determine individuation across people and how they have embodied their identity (Collins & Bilge, 2020: 168). Arguably, allowing for a “multifaceted perspective [to be developed], acknowledging the richness of multiple socially constructed identities that combine to create each of us as a unique individual” (Lind, 2010: 3). Stuart Hall (2017) believes there to be a performativity element to an individual’s identity, depending on the context of one social situation to the next (Collins & Bilge, 2020), whereby he states:

> Identity is not a set of fixed attributes, the unchanging essence of the inner self, but a constantly shifting process of *positioning…* identity is always a never-completed *process* of becoming – a process of shifting *identifications,* rather than a singular, complete, finished state of being (Hall, 2017: 16).

The increased pressures on fitting the 'ideal man or woman' image have been noted throughout the noughties – interestingly, coinciding with the spread of social media and image-based social networking (Shilling, 2012), leading to an obsession over physique changes throughout healthy lifestyle, exercise, or the extremes of investing in plastic surgery (Parker, 2010; Chen et al., 2019). Mass media acts as a transmitter of the body ideal and produces messages about the link between appearance and social desirability

(Stice & Argas, 1998). The 'western ideal' for women is a slim, toned physique with minimal to no skin markings such as stretch marks or cellulite (Benton & Karazsie, 2015), and for men, a muscular, defined body with visible muscular indentations in the skin, predominantly around the torso and shoulders (Cohane & Pope, 2001). Over the past 15 years, this has changed minimally for men. For women, the ‘over-emphasised’ hourglass figure has become prominent in fashion (see Dye, 2015; Dias, 2003). Only since the mid-1980s has the body's idea been highlighted within sociological literature, predominantly in Europe and Australia (Shilling, 2012).

In the earlier stages of literature deliberating the relationship between the body and society, classic sociology concerned itself with societal structure and function, which would then branch off to discuss the role of health and embodiment as an entity amongst this. For example, the initial use of the body in sociological writing looks over what the body should be used for and the why/how as opposed to the way the body looks and is presented (Shilling, 2012). This was used to compare the working and upper class, whereby governance over the body was attempted through mainstream representations of the body and how the body influences a person’s social status (Turner, 1991; Shilling, 2012). The former relationship between social class and the body enabled the integration of the body into capitalist technology, shaming a person who could not provide their body with the health and nutrients needed to serve the state and live a longer, fuller life (Marx, 1954). Parsons (1991) argued there to be cultural patterns that underpinned social structures, egos surrounding the body and action towards certain bodies that would justify the treatment of bodies depending on their worth, and their position in society. This aligns with the earlier work of Mauss (1973), which regarded cultures surrounding the bodies being created to provide individuals with specific identities as a means of administering social control. Identity, however, is a complex, contested phenomenon that is deeply embedded within the social contexts that it is being judged, observed or conceptualised (Lawler, 2014).

Reconstructing the body to create a ‘youthfulness’, or to adhere to beauty standards, has been associated with attempts to receive validation and popularity online (Wolf, 1991; Edmonds, 2011; Hearn, 2017; Naftali *et al.,* 2018). For example, over recent years for

women reconstruction of body image has attempted to achieve the extreme hourglass figure like Kim Kardashian, Beyonce Knowles, and Jennifer Lopez (Bunsell & Shilling, 2011; Shilling, 2012). For men, the idealised body type generally has stayed the same by muscular and toned (Mishkind *et al.,* 1986; Bunsell & Shilling, 2011). Evan *et al.* (2005) coined the term 'corporeal perfection' to describe the desired body image, for both men and women, at a specific period. As deliberated earlier, such perfection is adaptable through social construction and trends over time (ibid). Some of the most popular surgeries are facelifts, breast surgery, liposuction, tummy tucks and jaw surgery (Parker, 2010; Edmonds, 2011). A topical criticism of this rise in plastic surgery concerns the safety and professionalism of some operations depending on the country they take place in (Shilling, 2012; Chen et al., 2019). With Turkey attracting some of the most significant numbers of British people, annually, to their clinics to undertake an array of reconstructive surgeries. Significant alterations to one's appearance alike, thereby forming an identity that this individual feels comfortable and socially accepted within (Giddens, 1991).

The racialisation of beauty has underpinned beauty standards for many years, with research identifying 'whiteness' as a cultural indicator of beauty across the globe (Stefani, 2019; Mady *et al.,* 2023). 'Whiteness' as a mark of beauty feeds into a "privilege [for] light-skinned people of color over dark in areas such as income, education, housing, and marriage market" (Hunter, 2007: 237) even within multicultural, postcolonial societies across the Western world (Mady *et al.,* 2023). Yan & Bissell (2014) regard the need for a woman to be pale skinned to be as rigidly placed as a mark of attractiveness as the standard of thinness. This occurs through a process of 'whitewashing' women to believe their social status is impacted by the paleness of their skin (Mitchell, 2020; Mady *et al.,* 2023). Products such as skin lightening creams have become more accessible since the rise in modern technology (Hussain, 2021), and as a result have made the procedure more popular across Europe, North America, Asia and Africa – dating back to the 1920s with advertisements reporting that depigmenting creams (skin lighteners) could clear a person's complexion and protect skin from the rising climate (Bartky, 2015; Hussain, 2021). Ponds Cream in 1940 was the first product to self-advertise as exclusively being able to make women more attractive through the lightening of their skin (Hussain, 2021). White (2005) broadens the scope of discussing the need to decolonise standards of

beauty to the pressures as a woman from the African American community to have straight hair, as well as pale skin. Within which, a hierarchy is formed based on how 'European' a woman in comparison to others in their community; representing the continuation of "cultural hegemony and white supremacy that originated in slavery" (White, 2005: 297). The integral role of intersectionality in exploring the embodiment of beauty standards is reflected in black feminist research by those such as Patricia Hill Collins, whereby she states that African American women have been subject to intersectional discrimination based on their race, class, gender and sexuality throughout history, in many walks of life (Collins, 1990; White, 2005).

According to Aizura (2009) the concept of beauty in relation to transgender identity is racialised because of the desirability to appear feminine being portrayed by mainstream media outlets as white (or pale-skinned) and "Westernised" (p. 304). This is embodied by cosmetic surgeons and clinics across the globe that offer gender reassignment surgery for the purpose of *kathoey* identity, or transgender identity. For example, Thai culture indicates that beauty can be enhanced through engaging with processes such as nose surgery, skin bleaching (skin lightening), teeth whitening, or "double fold eyelid surgery" to name a few (Aizura, 2009: 303). A heteronormative capitalist market within which companies profiteer from advertising their products as being able to enhance a woman's attractiveness by altering their appearance to meet the Westernised 'ideal' appearance demonstrates the complexity of achieving heterogenous beauty standards.

The body has become a commodity in contemporary cosmetic surgery practices due to the aim of surgery being to change a person's appearance, in line with complex beauty standards as opposed to being for the purpose of extending or medically enhancing a person's life (Aizura, 2009). Thereby, referring back to a person's embodiment of beauty standards and how this affects their identity and their experience of corporeality rather than being a merely surface-level appearance alteration (Davis, 2003: 16). Social comparison theory is heavily applied to plastic surgery operations growth when trying to understand negative body image and self-sabotage (Festinger, 1954; Shilling, 2012). Exposing our physique and more personal characteristics with the online world allows more extended periods of exposure and more time to produce side by side comparisons

between our images and the images of those we may aspire to look like (Naftali *et al.,* 2018; Arab *et al.,* 2019). It is said that further online validation is desired, which could lead to self-sabotaging behaviours, such as posting images that are filtered and are not true to reality (Mess *et al.,* 2019). In more extreme cases, it leads to the booking of appearance altering surgery that will allow the individual to achieve as close to their desired appearance as possible (ibid).

The embodiment of beauty standards, and thus engagement with appearance altering procedures, are made more complicated by the Westernisation of beauty and 'idealism' that underpin mass media representations of attractiveness and success. A person's everyday aesthetic and their ability to achieve their desired aesthetic are (in)directly influenced by their gender, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity and ability and, if these layers of their identity are homogenous to the constructed 'ideal'. A person's embodiment of their self-worth can be aligned to wider studies of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), whereby everyday aesthetics can enhance a person's social and cultural capital, or can hinder them (Aizura, 2009; Hussain, 2021). This constructed ideal can be influenced by social and political social structures (Smith *et al.,* 2021), which can be represented as underlying generative mechanisms within cultural spaces online and offline.

The way that aesthetics are socially prescribed, and perceived by society, can impact on the way that a person encounters social phenomena (Smith et al., 2021), - in the case of this research, social media or diet culture) - as well as the way that their experience of embodiment. Piran (2017) believes there to be 5 dimensions that determine an individual's 'quality' of embodiment, and therefore the way they encounter daily events: *body connection and comfort, agency and functionality, experience and expression of desire, attuned self-care and inhabiting the body as a subjective site, resisting objectification.* All five dimensions are argued to shape the experience of embodiment and therefore can be experienced on a spectrum from positive to negative. For example, if a person has a negative experience of embodiment, they may engage in behaviours that represent self-harm, neglect, a disconnection from their body (and their own needs), and will potentially feel uncomfortable with their identity, appearance or self-worth (ibid). Feminist literature that explores the experiences of embodiment are heavily focused on

disordered eating patterns and low self-esteem in relation to physical appearance (Bordo, 1993; Katzman & Lee, 1997; Piran, 2010; 2016), as opposed to investigating wider experiences of embodiment. However, the review of literature here explores intersectional understandings of embodiment that attempt to support achieving heterogeneous beauty standards can be likened to Piran's continuum of embodiment. Feeling a loss of power, or a need to change oneself to suit the needs of society as opposed to being attuned to self-needs and individualised perceptions of happiness, success and worth are common themes that underpin these areas of work, linking to an embodiment of social and cultural capital (Aizura, 2009; Hussain, 2021; Smith *et al.,* 2021). McRobbie (2004) take a wider lens to the exploration of embodiment whereby she explores what she terms a 'postfeminist' era where the embodiment of feminist identity has changed, and women are expected to be more reflexive in the way that they choose to present oneself. Within this, McRobbie (2004; 2007; 2009) argues a postfeminist era has undone the work of feminists, as a result of extrinsic influences over the female body in contemporary society. For example, McRobbie acknowledges a range of modern media representations of women in postfeminist society, outlining the influence that this may have over the power women have over their experience of embodiment and the shaping of their self-worth (McRobbie, 2004).

Although an intersectional analysis into the embodiment of diet culture, and online cultural space is not an avenue of analysis that this study plans to follow, a review of literature outlining the decolonisation of Westernised beauty standards, and the experience of women from different backgrounds is imperative to acknowledge when addressing the need to diversify and tackle the idealistic narratives that underpin the commodification of 'ideal' beauty standards in today's society. By acknowledging the role that physical appearance plays in a person's embodiment of self-esteem, we are acknowledging that there are 'preferable' characteristics that meet societal constructions of 'beauty' and are therefore, representing the 'norm'. A person's presented identity relating to their ethnicity, skin colour, natural hair style, or the shape of their physique is therefore used to craft experiences of discrimination as opposed to celebrating diversification and recognising 'beauty' in heterogenous forms (Hussain, 2021; Smith *et al.,* 2021; Aizura, 2009).

2.5 Mental Health and Disability Studies: Understanding the Role of CR in the Study of 'Othered' Bodies

This section of the chapter will discuss the theoretical development of disability studies from the positioning of Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation's (UPIAS) social model approach to disability in academia by Mike Oliver in 1990s, to the more recent developments relating to significant mental illness, and the "second wave of disability studies" (Hughes, 2020: 52) known as critical disability studies that will build upon former explanations of disability and impairment that have been acknowledged under the biomedical model, the social model of disability and the biopsychosocial model of health. Various tensions led to the overhaul of mental health policy throughout the 20th Century (Moncrieff & Crawford, 2001). Conflicting views are evident in the literature around the use of medicalised treatment for mental illness. Some academics describe the 20th Century as a breakthrough period for psychiatry; unveiling new medicines to treat mental health because of 'solid scientific footing' (Shorter, 1997). However, others have argued that this continual urge to medicalise behaviours labelled as 'abnormal', and people as 'mentally unwell', has caused a fundamental continuation of psychiatrists merely paying attention to said behaviours as opposed to taking time to understand an individual's circumstances (Grob, 1973), and potential reasons for their actions and independent values. Newly developing sociological frameworks used to research mental health, and how it impacts subtle elements of a person's life, were identified as potential threats to modern psychiatry (Moncrieff & Crawford, 2001; Goodley, 2014).

Disability Studies emerged as a growing area of academic and professional research in the 1980s across the US, the UK, and Canada, heavily influenced by Marxist-inspired social models of disability (Bengtsson, 2016; Goodley *et al*., 2019a). Marxist theorists focus on the body and mind being conditioned by society to compete for the highest functionality and use within a capitalist system (Bengtsson, 2016). This movement acknowledges its purpose within academia to be an attempt to intervene in the academic understanding of disability, impairment and experiences of disabling barriers in society (Shildrick, 2012; Goodley, 2014; Goodley *et al*., 2019a). As an academic movement,

Disability Studies aims to present an opportunity for academics with lived experience of disability, stigma or institutionalisation to undertake research within their area of expertise, to prevent their voice and others with similar experiences. Shalin (2014) regards Goffman as being one of the first academics to be concerned with the mistreatment of the insane, who had experienced traditional psychiatric treatment first-hand. At the time of his publication, Goffman's discussions of asylums and ‘madness’ were discredited due to personal involvement with mental health services, in relation to his wife suffering from low mood and suicidal ideation (Goffman, 1961; Shalin, 2014). After the loss of his wife to suicide in 1964, there is a notable shift in Goffman's work showing the way that healthcare professionals would categorise behaviour under potential labels by acknowledging the physical aspects of 'mental illness' and individual circumstances (Goffman, 1961; Shalin, 2014). For some, Goffman's work has been driven by emotion as opposed to scientific, rational evidence (Chauncey, 1974). However, this personal experience and understanding of how a service user may feel and how they may prefer to be treated is central to the development of sociological theory around health and disability.

Disability Studies acknowledges the construction of social relations between the 'disabled' and the 'able' (Shildrick, 2012). This theoretical discussion will support this doctoral work to justify the role of CR in researching and understanding actual lived experiences of ‘othered’ bodies such as people with disabilities and significant mental illness.

2.5.1 Social Model of Disability

Vic Finkelstein and Paul Hunt established UPIAS to focus on those who faced barriers in their daily life because of their impairment. UPIAS was founded in 1974 and became the first established organisation to campaign for the inclusion of disabled people into mainstream society (Davis, 2016). UPIAS was a small controversial group of activists who were inspired by Marxist beliefs that hierarchy and prejudice permeate society (Shakespeare, 2006; Davis, 2016). Mid-20th century became a period of political change towards oppressed populations in society (activist movements such as feminism, critical race, Mad Pride, Queer Pride, just to name a few). The values of equality and empowerment underpinned all these movements within British culture and the support for

equality was growing (UPIAS, 2015). The rise of activist groups that represented other marginalised groups such as those above encouraged involvement to fight for change and success in being heard became an attractive goal for groups such as UPIAS (ibid). For Oliver, UPIAS reflected the key message of disability studies as an academic discipline that would attempt to tackle social inequalities faced by disabled people, and structural exclusion that they face:

> In our view, it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of impairment by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society (Oliver, 1996: 33).

For Finkelstein and Hunt, the dominance of the biomedical model enabled the structural exclusion of disabled people from full participation in society, by suggesting the problem sat with the disabled person and what they were unable to do, as opposed to recognising the disabling barriers posed by society (Hughes, 2020; Oliver, 1990a). The issues faced were not because they could not stand up unaided (both are wheelchair users), but due to environmental factors such as access to public spaces and limited reasonable adjustments within the workplace (Macdonald, 2016). Later work within disability studies by Tom Shakespeare supports this idea of one being disabled by society, not one's body (Shakespeare, 2006). UPIAS were the first platform to provide disabled people with an active voice, within the UK, before disability studies or the Mad Studies movement. Despite barriers set in their way by the biomedical model and structures like the state and the healthcare system, UPIAS is recognised to be the driving force for developing theoretical foundations of the British social model of disability (ibid). In their initial publication Fundamental Principles of Disability, UPIAS provided a vision of their values and what they aimed to achieve (UPIAS, 1976), through the campaigning for care and acceptance amongst mainstream society for disabled people (Shakespeare, 2006).

The social model of disability is two-fold: firstly, considering disability, i.e., the exclusion from society and secondly, impairment, i.e., how the individual is impaired (Cameron, 2014). Arguably, this materialist approach to disability studies looks to move focus away from the physical and mental deficit, and towards the impact social exclusion can have

over a person who is already struggling. The social model of disability, as per Oliver's work, discards the biological understanding of disability stating that disability is caused by disabling barriers posed by society as opposed to being a disability or issue with a person's body, or mind (Oliver, 1996), thus rejecting the biomedical and biopsychosocial approaches to healthcare. By attempting to place this mode of critical sociology alongside frameworks such as Marxism and third-wave feminism, it will hold the potential to influence a significant political shift in barrier removal; as well as the devastating acknowledgement of chronic oppression (Shakespeare, 2006; Shildrick, 2012). Disability Studies emphasises a great recognition of liberation and openness towards disabilities and ailments of all forms, within which disability should not be treated through a medical lens or 'othered'; with hopes to create strong connections with other marginalised groups across society (Oliver, 1996; Cameron, 2014).

Berger & Luckmann (1991) highlight the role of the social constructionist approach to social science as important to recognise, as social ideals change over and can influence changes in an individual's mental representation. Identifying the social context that influences the social construction of disability within disability studies is important. As discussed by Goodley (2014), the experience of impairment that leads to experiencing disability is constructed through the lens of medical professionals and the diagnostic manual of the time, of which "disabled people become projection objects in the psychoanalytical splitting of good/bad, able/unable, whole/fragmented selves" (Goodley, 2011: 97). This treatment comes from being viewed as symptomatic bodies that require a diagnosis as opposed to their sociocultural surroundings being considered when support or care is offered (ibid). Dan Goodley recognised that the social model remains a "hugely inspirational" (Goodley, 2014: 7) movement, but argued that impairment should not be fully disregarded if dis/ableism were to be tackled effectively. Throughout his work, Goodley (2014) considers the use of language towards groups of people diagnosed with 'disability'; either physical or mental, in comparison to someone who is fully able. The notion of dis/ableism will be positioned in the work of critical disability scholars in Chapter 2.4.2, where academics like Dan Goodley, Maria Corker and Tom Shakespeare critique the social model of disability as simplistic and requiring development.

Mike Oliver (1996) assisted in establishing the social model approach to disability studies literature as a means of pushing for this social change by recognising disability as a social problem rather than an individual problem. Controversially, Shakespeare (2015) disagrees with Oliver's want to make this wholly about social arrangements, believing that impairment should not be removed from the consideration of disability and experiences of disabling barriers. For Shakespeare, focusing only on social structures, rather than civil rights and the specific barriers faced by those with diagnosable 'disabilities' day-to-day, eliminates the likelihood of practical support and change. Architectural and political obstacles can be easier to alter, and remove, than social and economic (Shakespeare, 2006), but to do so the ‘body’ and biological experiences of impairment must be recognised alongside the structural barriers posed by society (ibid).

According to Hughes (1999: 65) the social model had the potential the transform the way in which disabled people were treated by the medical system, as well as wider society, by addressing the barriers that were posed through “relations of power [that] are expressed in social patterns that exclude disabled people”. Before the social model of disability, disability was understood as a biological, pathological condition requiring medical intervention or rehabilitation (ibid). By redefining disability as a ‘social issue’, the social model can allow researchers and policymakers to pay closer attention to the disabling barriers posed to disabled people by society, as opposed to taking a ‘deficit’ medical-based approach to assessing inclusivity in healthcare, the workplace or education, for example (Barnes, 2019; Thomas, 2004; Oliver, 1990b). For Thomas (2004: 21) structural barriers “serve to disadvantage and exclude people with impairments”, although they may be stubborn, they are removable and should be addressed (Oliver, 1990b). This will be discussed in relation to the enactment of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, and more recently, the Equality Act 2010 in Chapter 2.5, relating the inclusion of experiences of body-related anxiety, appearance-based hate, and disordered eating as a result of exposure to social media, or the direct targeting of weight stigma and fatphobia in contemporary society.

2.5.2 Critical Disability Studies

At the turn of the 21st century, disability studies scholars recognised that the social model of disability had started to be considered pragmatically in social care practice, within the third sector and by disabled people's organisations (DPOs) in the provision of support for disabled people, and in raising awareness of disability. However, there were concerns raised about this framework's simplicity as it did not consider the impact an impairment can have on a person's daily lifestyle (Macdonald, 2016). Crow (1996) highlighted that the social model needed to be extended to incorporate the impact of impairment alongside a more inclusive understanding of universal barriers faced by people, through an intersectional lens (Goodley, 2014). Tom Shakespeare had also shifted his perspective of the social model from his original work in 2006, through to *Facing up to Disability* in 2013. Where Shakespeare (2006) had originally advocated for the potential that the social model had in making change in policy and practice, Shakespeare (2013; 2018) acknowledged the importance of impairment in the experience of disability and later, regarded himself as a "critical friend" of the social model (Shakespeare, 2007: 278). As per Crow (1996), Shakespeare agreed that the body must be reintroduced into discussions of disability to understand real-life experiences of disability, and the individualisation of experiencing barriers in society. Thus, the critical element of critical disability studies builds on Liz Crow's notion of expanding knowledge to collate expansive and evolving knowledge through its' research (Goodley *et al*., 2019b).

At a similar time, Swain & French (2010) developed the affirmation model as an intervention based upon the development of the social model, and the debates surrounding its' need to expand its approach to understanding disability. The affirmation model highlighted the overemphasis of universal structural barriers under the social model of disability (Cameron, 2014), describing the model as a "non-tragic view of disability and impairment... grounded in the benefits of a lifestyle of being impaired and disabled" (Swain & French, 2010: 569). The distinction between disability and impairment became a central value of critical disability theory whereby disabled academics determine disability as "the relationship between a person with impairment and their society" and impairment as being "in the individual's functioning" (Shakespeare, 2013: 1). For Shakespeare (2013),

universal social barriers cannot be truly recognised without understanding the real impact of impairment on an individual's life, similar to Crow.

Critical disability studies are underpinned by a post-structural framework, that is heavily influenced by the earlier work of Michel Foucault (1967), whereby stigma marginalises individuals who deviate away from social norms, who have an impairment, or identify as disabled (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Cameron, 2010). Poststructuralism is a philosophical approach to social research that investigates the constant changes of contemporary society, whilst considering cultural, social, political, and economic contexts that underwrite the conditions of how we view the world. Therefore, poststructuralism has supported critical disability theorist to challenge the segregation of disabled people, from the 'normal' mainstream population (Feely, 2015).

Hughes (2020) identifies the link between the ontological focus of critical disability studies and critical realism, whereby critical disability studies focus on the raw experiences of disabled people by considering the reality of pain caused by an impairment as well as the inconveniences of living with an impairment. Thomas (1999) terms this as the effects of impairment, that must be considered to understand the biological realities of impairment as well as the social barriers faced because of an impairment. Critical realism (CR) aims to develop an understanding of the relationship between observable knowledge and reality (Brunner, 2019). It is a multi-layered framework that brings together theoretical thinking with methodological concerns at a deeper level; aiming to unearth reality as having an existence that is completely independent of existing observable knowledge (Bhaskar, 1978). Realism views the social world as open and complex in which multiple entities exist, and should be able to co-exist alongside one another, despite a difference in function and purpose. Realist models of research conceptualise the world as recognising the materiality of social factors. Whereas the critical form of realism critiques empiricism within natural sciences by arguing that empirical research reduces the reality of social phenomenon (Bhaskar, 1978), thus producing actual knowledge. Disability studies research strives to position lived experiences voices at the heart of research, and to empower disabled academics.

Shakespeare & Watson (2001) emphasise that disability is not a binary concept, and individual fluctuations should be considered in disability research, generalised research outputs discussing overarching experiences of social barriers is problematic and will not accurately reflect lived experiences of disabled people. Therefore Shakespeare (2013) calls for a relational approach to be taken to understanding disability (i.e., disability is a relationship between 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' factors) - providing scope for understanding an individual's physical behaviours and thought processes on an isolated basis. Tom Shakespeare is recognised as a key member of the critical disability studies movement, in his attempts to enhance the cultural elements of this framework by contextualising disability in an anti-hegemonic manner using cultural reproduction (Shakespeare, 2006; 2013). Cultural reproduction allows the transmission of existing cultural values and norms from generation to generation; this continuing social apparatus into younger generations through their family unit (Oliver, 1990b; Shakespeare, 2006). This continuation of family values can contribute to ongoing prejudiced perceptions of individuals with significant mental illness, and those who may struggle with low self-esteem and their relationship with food. This will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 2.6.

By applying CR analysis to a disability studies project, the researcher is empowered to understand the actual lived experiences faced by disabled people, as opposed to attempt to affiliate lived experiences within existing categories of socially constructed knowledge (King & Gregg, 2021), such as stigma, discrimination, universal social barriers and medicalisation. Brunner (2019) therefore refers to CR in disability studies as the 'fourth wave' of disability studies. CR in disability studies therefore provides scope for academics to analyse experiences of disability through a broader ontological lens, by delving past the socially constructed knowledge that has underpinned the treatment of and the understanding of disability and impairment, pre-dating the 19th century.

The work of critical disability theorists aims to evidence that disability is not just about the medical condition, but about the stigma that is associated with the label of a disability and the impact this can have over a person's day-to-day life (Shakespeare, 2006). Critical

disability theorists such as Shakespeare (2018) aim to bring the body and individualised experiences of disability back into disability studies, an area he argued to have been neglected by the social model of disability in its rejection of impairment (Shakespeare, 2013). When discussing whether impairment is natural or social, a comparison to the work of Judith Butler (1993) can be made. This work disregards the biological element of a woman's being, to argue sex being an already existing social issue that at no stage starts as a cause of biology (ibid). In terms of this research, some of the medical conditions that can be critiqued through the lens of diagnostic cultures are as follows: body dysmorphic disorder, Snapchat dysmorphia, health anxiety, and an array of eating disorders due to the developing medical knowledge surrounding disordered eating. Ian Hacking in his 1986 '*Making Up People'* article, discusses fashion trends around illnesses, and what may be highlighted in the media and diagnosed at elevated levels, at one time. By emphasising different 'trending' diagnoses, this can alter throughout a person's lifetime, as to how problematic this diagnosis can be (ibid). From here, the idea of impairment, as opposed to disability, is deliberated.

CR academics would argue, however, that regardless of the trending diagnosis, constructed by various media sources, a person-centred approach of care needs to be adopted. CR, as a theoretical framework, aims to explore underlying knowledge that goes beyond the observable (Sayer, 2000). In this research, this relates to the lived experiences of body-related anxiety, disordered eating and self-esteem whilst exploring the conditions these experiences are compounded under such as how they are experienced by the individual. Rachel Potterton has led on work recently, through a medical lens, that uses a CR informed methodology to explore the nuanced individualised experience of eating disorder intervention (see Potterton *et al*., 2020; Potterton *et al*., 2021). This work focused on the First Episode Rapid Early Intervention for Eating Disorders (FREED), to explore the efficacy of this medical intervention. Earlier work by Deborah Lupton (1996) addresses the cultural nature of food and nutrition that can be applied to underlying influences on perceptions of the self, and disordered eating. For Lupton (1996):

> Food itself is a term which makes cultural distinctions between acceptable and non-acceptable... for human consumption... a distinction which is closely related to other common binary oppositions such as self/other, inside/outside, good/bad and culture/nature (Lupton, 1996: 29).

At the time of writing, there is no work within the discipline of social science that applies a CR informed methodology to understand the impact of the political or sociocultural frameworks surrounding eating disorders and wellbeing services addressing self-esteem support.

2.6 Practical Implications of the 'Othering' of Bodies: Normativity in Policy

The diagnostic cultures that have emerged because of the stigma surrounding 'othered' bodies, whether they be disabled bodies, 'fat' bodies, 'skinny' bodies, bodies that are not aesthetically toned, has real life impact that has been explored through an array of Government reports, parliamentary debate, and Government funded research. For example, in 2014 the Government Equalities Office published the '*Taking Action on Body Image – An Active Citizenship Toolkit for Those Working with Young People'* due to a concern that the British Social Attitudes Survey demonstrated a rise in body image concerns in young people (Gov.UK, 2014). There have been no further reviews of the impact of this toolkit, nor any publicly available reports to demonstrate the continuation of its' use. The Girls' Attitudes Survey (2023) produces a report that has oversight of the comparative data of girls' lives over a 15-year period, of which pays particular attention to the role of social media in self-esteem and body-related anxiety. The survey explored young girls' experiences of body image, body satisfaction and the influence that the media has had over their experiences of these areas. 52% of young women and girls, between the ages of 11- and 21-years old stating that they felt ashamed of how they looked, in comparison to 46% in 2016, and 52% feeling the need to 'look perfect' in 2023 in comparison to 43% in 2016 (Girlguiding, 2023: 15). 23% of young women in the Girlguiding (2023) survey, between the ages of 11 and 21 years old had witnessed an influencer, or an individual they followed on social media, undergoing cosmetic procedures and had then gone on to undergo a procedure themselves. Further to this,

34% of young women in this survey had tried a diet after hearing an influencer or celebrity using or promoting this diet in comparison to 22% in 2016. In her work *Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal,* Heather Widdows (2018) discusses the role of beauty ideals, portrayed through cultural spaces such as influencer and diet culture online and how they can shape the embodiment of contemporary identity as part of a neoliberal consumer-driven society. Such a society sees people being judged for not just their appearance but their personal, financial and moral worth through mechanisms of social status and social constructions of success. Whereby, people are expected to constantly strive for 'perfection' and therefore, embody a certain idealistic image that aligns with societal beauty norms. The role of platform cultures such as *diet culture* and *influencer culture* in the embodiment of broadened beauty standards are of interest to this thesis and will be discussed at length in Chapter 5.

Following on from the 2014 publication by the Government Equalities Office, a separate piece of research led by the Women and Equalities Committee took place in 2021 to address the ongoing concern and academic interest in the stigmatisation of 'othered' bodies through media and advertising over the years with "systems of oppression including ableism, racism, and colourism as well as misogyny, homophobia and transphobia" (Women & Equalities Committee, 2021: 7). The *Changing the Picture Perfect: An Inquiry into Body Image* report was formulated between 2019 and 2021 whereby MP's who held membership in the Women and Equalities Committee (a sub-committee of the Government Equalities Office) considered the evidence that had been submitted as a consultation into reviewing practitioners' concerns, lived experiences of body image and academic knowledge of the impact of social media and alternative mass media outlets on body image. '*Changing the Picture Perfect'* reported to be interested in appearance-based discriminations with a specific focus on protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010, acknowledging that experiences of appearance-based discrimination (or hate) closely align to experiences of negative body image (ibid). The Body Image survey that occurred as part of the consultation period of this work found that 61% of adults and 62% young people felt "negative or very negative about their body most of the time" (Women & Equalities Committee, 2021: 9). Diagnostic cultures, and the

view that body-related anxiety is a demonstration of 'disordered' behaviour is demonstrated throughout this report within which the report takes a medical approach to the experience of body image, focusing on the intersection between poor body image and "weight-based health problems such as eating disorders and obesity" (ibid: 15), recognising Body Dysmorphic Disorder, as well as Muscle Dysphoria.

Rosalind Gill published her own '*Changing the Picture Perfect'* project, also in 2021, with a focus on 'smartphones, social media, and appearance pressures'. Gill's (2021) publication aligned with the Women & Equalities Committee report intentionally to demonstrate a separate, academic output that was based upon experiences of women and non-binary people, in the UK, aged 18-30. The findings of this research demonstrated that social media plays a key role in the experience of pressure to look 'perfect' or live a 'perfect' life, for young women, referring to social media as addictive (Gill, 2021), as did the Women & Equalities Committee inquiry. What Gill (2021) did recognise, that was not highlighted in Women & Equalities Committee (2021) was the representations of 'body positivity' that were used an attempt to tackle the 'idealistic' body, and to normalise previously 'othered' bodies online. Widdows (2018) acknowledges social media and wider digital technologies as having exacerbated the pursuit of beauty ideals, by creating an environment where people can constantly compare themselves to others. For Gill (2021) representations of 'body positivity' across image-based social media platforms tended to be focused on cisgender, heterosexual and non-disabled bodies. Therefore, the content narrative may intend to demonstrate body positive activism but does not provide a platform for 'othered' bodies to lead the 'body positivity' movement (ibid). The rise in image-based social media plays a paramount role in the embodiment of identity by users of social media (Hurst, 2015) and can later influence the decision to engage with cosmetic surgery or self-injurious behaviours offline. In both '*Changing the Picture Perfect'* publications there was an identified need to address the potential harms caused (or perpetuated) by the filtering of images online, the heightened use of filtering applications that is normalised in platform cultures such as *diet culture* and *influencer culture,* as well as the subtly of filtered imagery when presented as being 'authentic' (Gill, 2021; Women & Equalities Committee, 2021). This aligns with the work of Hurst (2015)

who outlines a tension between ‘authentic’ and ‘constructed’ bodies influenced by the rise in cosmetic surgery and more broadly, the filtering of appearance that can influence the embodied identity offline. Hurst regards cosmetic surgery to be gendered and situates engagement with such procedures within patriarchal mechanisms of power that reinforce women’s role as objects of visual consumption (ibid). Within which, cosmetic surgery and less invasive beauty procedures that are appearance-altering become a way to reconcile personal identity with external expectations whilst complicating the notion of an ‘authentic’ presentation of the self online. There is a gendered nature to existing research surrounding the creating the ‘picture perfect’ that focuses predominantly on the experiences and harms posed towards young women. The gendered nature of dieting stems from the 1960s and is not a new harm that young women are susceptible to (Dodier, 2020; Gagliardi, 2018) but is something that underpins contemporary diet culture and the selling of weight loss products (Gagliardi, 2018). Kanayama *et al.* (2020) discuss the need to focus on the impact of filtered images and ‘idealistic’ body standards on young men, which has remained an under researched area due to the expectation that diet culture and its audience is still gendered. This thesis welcomed the experience of individuals of all backgrounds, where they felt ready to share their story, to take an intersectional lens to the discussion of their experience of diet culture and filtered imagery online.

The Digitally Altered Body Images Bill was taken to UK Parliament by Conservative MP Luke Evans in January 2022 for its first reporting session. This Bill aimed to address and regulate the increasing use of digitally altered (filtered) imagery on social media, that is presented as authentic, aiming to address the use of digitally altered imagery by advertisers, broadcasters, and social media publishers (content creators/influencers). Following the 2022 parliamentary discussion it was agreed by MPs in attendance that the Bill would make no further progress. The most recent acknowledgement of digitally altered imagery and its impact on body image, self-esteem, or mental health, by the UK Government sits within the Department of Health and Social Care (2023) policy paper ‘*Impact of Body Image on Physical and Mental Health’.* The policy paper acknowledges the relationship between filtered imagery (or as termed by the UK Government digital altered body image), and mental health, aiming to address this through the improvement

of the Online Advertising Programme – working with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport to address how products should be appropriately advertised, when it comes to the portrayal of body image, cosmetic procedures and airbrushing of imagery for mass media and advertising purposes. Along with the Online Safety Act 2023, the Online Advertising Programme acts as a wider strategy to place the responsibility of regulating and tackling filtered imagery on social media, and advertising, with Ofcom and the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA). This thesis will later consider the role of regulators such as the ASA in the management of filtered imagery online and in the branding of influencers when working and advertising their brand on social media (see Chapter 6).

2.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter has explored the long-standing history behind the "categorical otherness" experienced by individuals who have significant mental illness (Deacon, 2013: 852), as well as those who are viewed as deviating away from the societal norm due to how they behave, communicate or how they appear. Although the ostracisation of 'othered' bodies has been apparent throughout history, the 20th and 21st centuries have recognised a shift in the way that such ostracisation may occur due to changes in technology. The constructed idea of the 'ideal' body, or society's understanding of 'normativity' has shifted over time, depending on celebrity/influencer figures leading on trends, the medical understanding of 'health' and 'normality' as well as the theoretical understanding of 'othering' or diversity. As had been detailed throughout this chapter, the 20th and 21st centuries have witnessed a plethora of changes specifically relating to the treatment of disabled bodies and individuals who have experienced significant mental distress. This has taken the UK from utilising an oppressive approach to a more inclusive, participatory approach to care and social inclusion.

Although there is an extensive range of academic work that aim to understand the history of the medical approach to mental health, stigma surrounding mental health and disability and the 'othering' of bodies, there has historically been little attention paid to the experiences of body-related anxiety, disordered eating, and self-esteem using qualitative,

experiential accounts of knowledge. What is available is politicised, gendered or lacks experiential knowledge. This chapter has demonstrated this, as well as the lack of focus placed on the prevalence of harm caused to social media users, specifically relating to their experience of body image and self-esteem. Although the parliamentary discussions and reported discussed in Chapter 2.6 demonstrate that the UK Government have acknowledged between 2014 to 2023 that there is a relationship between platform culture, social media engagement and digitally altered images on the rise of body-related anxiety and disordered eating (particularly in young people), all publications have shown a lack of review by the UK Government, and therefore a lack of strategy in tackling these areas. What the UK Government have demonstrated, however, is a rise in diagnostic cultures and a continuation of medicalisation through the 'othering' of bodies using 'disorder' diagnoses to label and understand an individual's relationship with their body rather than tackling the harms they have loosely identified through work of the Government Equalities Office (2014), the Women and Equalities Committee (2021) and the Department of Health and Social Care (2023). This thesis aims to address and understand these harms and identify recommendations for the UK Government and their sub-departments to consider in taking a pragmatic approach to body-related anxiety, disordered eating and self-esteem implicated by mechanisms of the digital age, which will inform the 'effects' of the 'othering' of bodies, as shown in Figure 2.1.

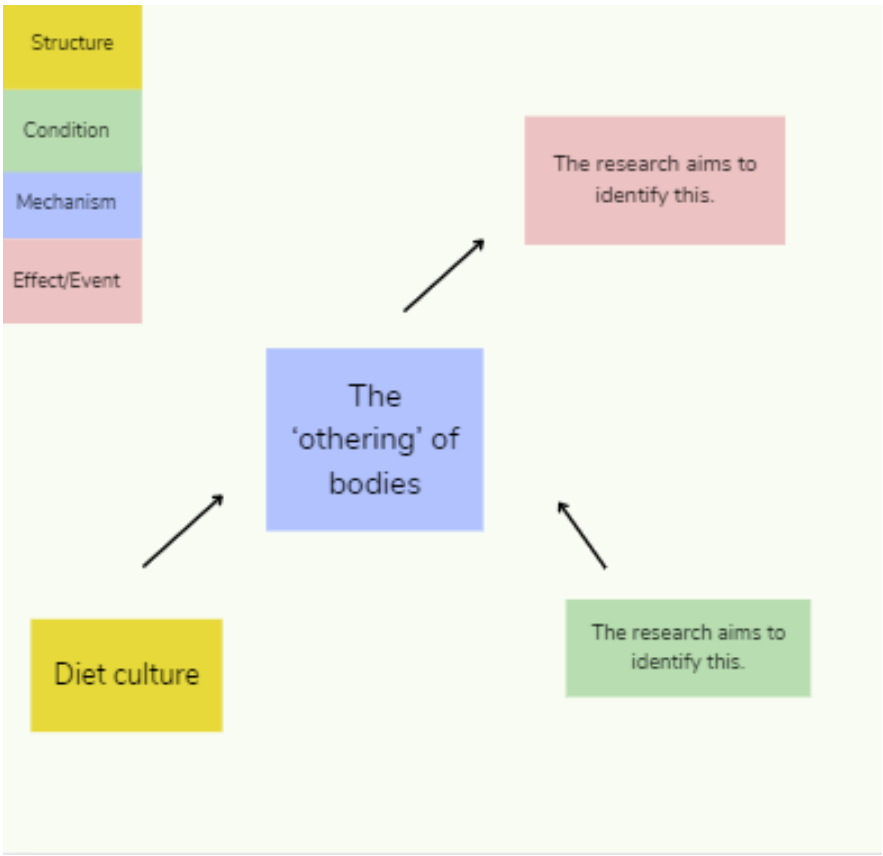

Figure 2.1: Adapted from Sayer's (2000) model diagram to demonstrate the aim of this research following review of literature

Figure 2.1 above demonstrates a CR understanding of the aims of the research following a review of the literature surrounding the 'othering' of bodies following stigmatisation that has influenced the 'normative' narratives underpinning diet culture. The diagram positions diet culture as a structure in contemporary society, with the 'othering' of bodies acting as a generative mechanism (unobservable events or causal factors) that are underlying of the actions, behaviours, perceptions and experiences of diet culture. Following the identification of diet culture as a structure, and the 'othering' of bodies as a mechanism, this thesis will go on to identify the conditions under which the 'othering' of bodies may occur and how the 'othering' of bodies may change under different conditions. It will also identify the effects and events that follow the activation of 'othering' bodies through diet culture narratives, as highlighted above. The role of Sayer's (2000) CR model in achieving the aims of this research will be detailed in Chapter 4.

3. Social Media and Harms

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the contextual background into the development of digital technologies and the impact this may have on the way individuals interact with one another offline (McKinnon, 1995). This chapter provides the context to the second key element of this thesis - social media and social harm. Social harm will be explored in terms of zemiological theory; a contemporary strand of criminology said to work beyond classical criminological discussions. The late 1990's saw the start of conversations around how the concept of social harm could be progressively developed as an alternative to criminology (Boukli & Kotze, 2018). Online abuse is grounded by differentiations in entrenched 'norms' within wider society (i.e., expectations around gender, sexuality, behaviour etc.) (Salter, 2017). Due to the complex and ever-changing nature of the online space there are a variety of concerns that are not currently regulated or criminalised under UK legislation. This chapter will discuss the literature surrounding content and behaviours online that are believed to pose a risk to young online users. In this chapter academic knowledge relating to social media engagement will be considered in line with the Online Safety Act 2023 by considering the role of selected regulatory bodies, criminal justice agencies and social media platforms in managing harm posed through online spaces (Department for Digital, Media, Culture, and Sport, 2022d). The chapter will take a chronological approach to outlining the context behind the role of cultural spaces online, including *diet culture* and *influencer culture,* in the marketisation of social media and the profiteering of social media corporations at the potential detriment of their consumers.

Following the historical foundations and the development of social media through the rise of Web 2.0 and Web 3.0, this chapter will present alternative arguments exploring the vulnerabilities and risk factors involved with the virtual world. Notably, the chapter will make connections between the modern growth in diet culture and plastic surgery to achieve body alterations specific to the time's social trends. At the time of writing, there

has been minimal research that investigates the direct impact of prolonged social media use on mental wellbeing, specifically in terms of body image issues and disordered eating patterns. While creating an understanding of emerging social trends, feminism within technology will be investigated to provide a more holistic understanding of the ways existing theoretical writing can be applied to the impact of social media and technology on mental wellbeing and individual's perceptions of their own bodies.

Despite social media's perceived influence over daily life, especially in relation to the younger generation (i.e., those under the age of 25), there are minimal academic or political publications that discuss the pragmatic changes required to keep people young people safe online, or the actions that will be taken by the UK Government to build on recommendations of online regulation and safeguarding, therefore justifying the importance of research of this nature, especially when emphasising service user voice. In terms of most recent publications, recommendations were posed to the Government, through a Women and Equalities Committee, House of Commons, publication *Changing the Perfect Picture: An Inquiry into Body Image* on April 9th, 2021. At the time of writing, there is yet to be any follow-up to such recommendations, or response, from the UK Government. This resonates with the lack of published action planning following the Department for Digital, Media, Culture, and Sport (2022a; 2022b; 2022c; 2022d), and the UK's Government work on regulating influencer culture, the promotion of influencers as self-employed commodities (Butler & Turenne, 2022). Following recommendations by Department for Digital, Media, Culture, and Sport (2022c), the Advertising Standards Authority (2023) published updated guidance for influencers that outlines the expectations of clarity in advertisements as well as ensuring the accuracy of information that is being presented (ASA, 2023). This will be discussed further in Chapter 6 but will be outlined in the later stages of this chapter in line with the theoretical exploration of identity with platform cultures online. This will draw upon the understanding of production and consumption of social media content (Toffler, 1990; Bruns & Schmidt, 2011), the relevance that social media engagement and validation has over a young person's day-to-day life (Hearn, 2008; Hearn, 2017; Brown & Kuss, 2020).

As capabilities of digital technology have improved, the complexity of online platforms has heightened at the same time; one of the most concerning elements of this being the false representation of the self-online (Turkle, 1997; Daniels, 2016; Fardouly *et al*., 2017; Dent, 2020). This will link back to Chapter 2's consideration of Goffman (1959) and the presentation of the self, but in the digital age (Hearn, 2008). Throughout this chapter, there will be a consideration of the harms of hate within the online space by bringing together established theoretical discussions of social harms in late modernity (Hillyard & Tombs, 2007; 2017; Boukli & Kotze, 2018) in line with considerations of hate studies (Chakraborti, 2010; 2015; James & McBride, 2021; Wiliams, 2021). This will allow the chapter to conceptualise key mechanisms that occur within social media users' interaction with platforms (Andreaasen, 2015; Andreaasen *et al*., 2016; 2017; D'Arienzo *et al*., 2019; Hou *et al.*, 2019) as well as engagement with trolling (Coleman, 2012), fat shaming (Spratt, 2021; Achilles *et al.*, 2022) and appearance-related activism online (Bordo, 1993; Fardouly *et al.*, 2017; Brooks, 2019).

3.2 Commercialising the Internet Before the Rise of Diet Culture: Advertising and the Growth of the Prosumer

In its earlier stages, computer networking was used mostly for storing data and hacking purposes, with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) being home to the early edition of the IBM 704 model during this period (Levy, 1984). Interconnectivity emerged at a rapid pace across online networks, compared to the initial development of computer models in earlier years. These later developments not only promoted connectivity of networks on different sites and businesses, but they encouraged the commercialisation of the broader internet in the form of online advertising, promotion, and sales etc. (Hampton & Wellman, 2003). This period saw the rise in *phreaking* as a form of disingenuous communication via the telephone, consisting of the manipulation of phone lines, likened to computer hacking from the 1970s onwards (Taprial & Kanwar, 2019). *Phreaking* involved gaining access to the call recipient's phone line through the phone box that was attached to the perpetrator's phone line to intentionally manipulate their phone line and gain personal details (Coleman, 2012; Donovan, 2016). This process was accomplished by using homemade electronic devices that facilitated unauthorised access to the telephone system to make free calls. Phreaks were able to find telephone company

test lines and conference circuits to complete their task. Brett Borders stated phreaks could hack into corporate unused voice mailboxes to host the first blogs and podcasts (Donovan, 2016).

In the late 1960s that the internet's first workable prototype was created under the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET), at UCLA, in the U.S. (Levy, 1984). ARPANET was a funded project by the U.S. Department of Defence, installed by the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) in 1969 (Hafner & Lyon, 1998; Weber, 2003). ARPANET had two primary purposes: firstly, to provide a facility for research into computer networks, and second, to enable researchers to engage with any defence-related work across different institutions relating to hacking and data storage (Cole, 1982). This network initially aimed to allow a maximum of 1,000 users online at one time. To achieve this, permission was required from the connecting agency to access the appropriate information and data packets (ibid).

Throughout the 1960s and 70s, there was a revolution in interconnectivity that became considered on a grander scale (Hampton & Wellman, 2003). Technicians working on advancing computer networks during this time highlighted the need for various networks, like ARPANET, to achieve successful online communication on a broader spectrum, with hopes to reach global connectivity at some stage (Cole, 1982; Hampton & Wellman, 2003). On the 29th of October 1969, computers at UCLA and Stanford University connected online for the first time (Levy, 1984). A message with the word 'login' was sent as a test run, which reportedly crashed after sending the first two letters (ibid). Due to protocols at this stage of online communication being experimental, technicians had not considered the virtual world's security in detail at this time (ibid). The internet's initial design was flexible and open-ended to support communication; security risks and harms identified in more recent years due to the design of the internet being more difficult to control that had been initially considered (Breslin *et al.,* 2009).

Moving into online sales and advertising, in 1972, AT&T declined the opportunity to take shares in online networking, as they felt this would not be a long-term, profitable investment (Hafner & Lyon, 1998). This opinion did not change until almost twenty years later, as the virtual world's commercial value started to gain recognition (ibid). During the

early 1990s, secure online payments methods began to rise, which became a solid mode of sales-based business growth by 1995 – for example, both eBay and Amazon.com were established in 1995. Online stores provide platforms that could be used by small businesses a space to promote their product outside of their local area. In 1998 Google was founded; the popularity of search engines such as Google continued to add to the exponential value of the internet, influencing its gradual introduction into daily living (Jewkes & Yar, 2013).

The internet has become a commercialised forum over time, through the extensive use of advertising and online sales. The commercialisation of the internet began in small stages with UUNET becoming the first company to sell successful Transmission Control Protocols (TCP)/Internet Protocal (IP) addresses. As the first Government approved company to purchase privately owned shares in Internet production, UUNET was one of the largest internet service providers in its' initial stages (Greenstein, 2001). TCP/IP addresses are to acknowledge the sender and recipient of information across the internet and provide a numerical address to identify where an internet user is located, when accessing the internet (Grech, 2001). This was initially sold to Government corporations in 1988, and then opened to the public realm in early 1990 (Kesan & Shah, 2001). Although the internet was mostly owned by private companies until 1993, buying and selling shares started to prove difficult due to concerns around the lack of security and the prominent level of risk involved in investing in this new forum (ibid). Despite concerns around the lack of security online for stakeholders, it became abundantly obvious to established and hopeful entrepreneurs from early on that there was major potential in business expansion using the internet. Following on from the Netscape Navigator development of the 'https' protocol for safe transactions online, the use of online sales and advertisement grew in popularity. Also, there became a rapid entry of firms bidding for commercial ownership in TCP/IP addresses (Greenstein, 2001). While the TCP/IP procedures and the Internet are separate entities in terms of their place within academic discussions, their histories and development merge alongside one another and are important to consider collaboratively (Kessler, 2019). The 'world wide web' (WWW) (also known as Web 1.0) was established by Tim Berners-Lee in 1990 in an attempt to widen

the scope of information sharing, across internet networks (Grech, 2001); it was anticipated that the WWW would be hugely successful in the multidimensional nature of information and document sharing, however it became clear from its primitive stages that the rapid growth of the WWW was difficult to filter, regulate and control the quality, or security, of information shared by online users (ibid). The development of the WWW was followed by the emergence of Web 2.0 in 2004 and later, Web 3.0 in 2014 (Barassi & Trere, 2012). Web 2.0 was known for attempting to establish a shift in the way that users would consume the internet, focusing more on the collaborative storing of data on online clouds and connectivity between users through the use of chatrooms, blogs and interactive social networking spaces (ibid). The age of Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 saw an apparent change in the commercialisation of social media and its users on a global scale, that can be attributed to the growing accessibility of the internet (Gonzalez-Perez, 2020). With the use of data mining to generate the targeted advertisement of products across social media, Web 2.0 was deemed fundamentally flawed in its attempts to monetise social media spaces (Sfetcu, 2017). In Web 2.0, companies would use social media producers (i.e., influencers/content creators) to promote their products through paid advertisements or the gifting of products at the cost of posting a specific product or service on their social media page for their followers to see (ibid). This technique would focus on widening the reach of product advertisements through individuals with vast followings on social media, therefore attempting to avoid the saturation of product advertisement in paying for general advertisements that are not affiliated with content shared by ‘popular’ influencers.

Before this growth in online advertising and sales came the expansion of mass media, virtual reality and the emergence of accessible pornography and sexuality. The sexual revolution of the 1960s came alongside the increase in mass media and the availability of pornography before the existence of the internet (Garlick, 2011). The term pornography directly translates to 'writing about prostitutes' in Greek (Katz, 2006: 188). Early examples of pornography displayed women to be powerful, independent, and scornful in the way they presented their bodies and sexual advances (Garlick, 2011). For academics such as Hardy (2008), this supports the idea that pornography does not reflect the real-life sexual

experiences of the majority but does hold a significant part of daily reality and fantasy. A popular element of the expansion of the porn industry was the introduction to video cameras, and the ability to personally purchase a live recorded performance. The work of Hardy (2008) considering the impact of the rise of pornography in the blurring of boundaries between real-life sexual relationships, and fantasy through pornography, is reflected in experiences of the internet more broadly. For Williams (2006: 99) we must not separate understanding of the “real” and the “virtual” worlds, by treating them as individual entities, but consider the relationship between the two when attempting to understand where online behaviours blur into the offline world.

There have been a variety of research papers published considering the harms of the developing online space, to physical harm in the real world. These include harms that can be categorised into physical, emotional, psychological, and structural harms. For example, growing statistics coinciding with the increase in accessing porn supports the argument that women in rural communities across the Western world are at an increased risk of becoming intimate violence victims (DeKeseredy & Hall-Sanchez, 2017). Violent sex has been promoted through pornography, in a growing variation, over recent years. This is becoming increasingly available to the general population through a simple Google search, and the popularity of smartphones (Atkinson & Rodgers, 2016; DeKeseredy & Hall-Sanchez, 2017). Findings produced from the work of DeKeseredy, over the past 20 years, describes much of the U.K. and the U.S. to be 'pornified' (DeKeseredy *et al.,* 2014; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009; DeKeseredy & Hall-Sanchez, 2017). Society has struggled to regulate pornographic materials online (Casanova *et al.*, 2000; Lessig, 2004). As the internet has continued to grow, it has given global information and connections at a lower price (Casanova *et al.*, 2000). The expansion of the online world has not only led to a growth in accessible pornographic imagery. Still, it has opened the opportunity to produce and sell images to a niche, specific audience – sometimes created for individuals instead of broader populations (Garlick, 2011; Atkinson & Rodgers, 2016). Whilst harms such as those above have been recognised, very little work has been conducted to examine potential for the harms examined as part of this thesis. This thesis considers the implication of ‘idealised’ body types that are shared across social media platforms and at

times filtered to meet the aesthetic of socially constructed beauty and the impact of this on social media user's and the relationship they hold with their own self-esteem and body. This will specifically concentrate on the role of filtered imagery in imagery online.

From the late 1990s through to the early 2000s, internet users appeared excited by the prospect of a future with the internet and more effortless ability to advertise future job prospects and network with broader audiences along the way (Yar, 2018). This period of utopia and anticipation was quick to be overtaken by fear and anxieties across mainstream society. The impact of global networking and digital technology is influential over the spread of social acceptability and contemporary understandings of normativity (Daniels, 2016; Cambre & Lavrence, 2023), feeding into trends of beauty, dieting, lifestyle, home decoration, and business prospects. Lessig (2004) recommends a shift towards a 'free culture' that meets the marketised needs of contemporary society, one which allows individuals to financially benefit from market cultures, as well as wider state infrastructures (i.e., capitalist and privatised markets). This has fed into the growth of the advertisement of products via social media, as well as the monetisation of producing social media content through influencer culture (Freberg *et al.*, 2011; Maly, 2020). Where more content is created by 'content creators' (i.e., social media producers), further social media consumption is encouraged (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), aligned to the wider capitalist market.

Many producers of social media content start as consumers whereby they explore the nature of a social media platforms what types of content receives a vast level of attention and want to post their interpretations of this content, or trends. The scoping exercise prior to becoming a producer of social media is important when acknowledging the monetisation of social media through influencer culture (Maly, 2020), as there needs to be a gain for the consumer in investing time and potentially finances into producing content. The shift in positionality as to *why* social media is being used by such consumers can be referred to as 'produsage', whereby the production of content is sporadic but aims to encourage collaboration between the producer, consumer(s) and brands, where advertisements are involved in content (Bruns & Schmidt, 2011). This can be likened to the work of Alvin Toffler (1990) in his distinction of the *prosumer.* The prosumer, for Toffler,

was an individual or group of people who fed into the decline of consumerism throughout the Post-Industrial Age (mid to late 1900s). The prosumer will produce their own goods through recycling or would not rely on the consumer market to provide them with material goods (Toffler, 1990).

The role of the prosumer is clear in the digital age through the production of one's own content, as opposed to relying on other content creators to provide the trends, or narratives, that as a consumer one would like to see. This aligns with the work of Yar (2012) who outlines the "will-to-representation" influenced by social media, which he frames as "the imperative to represent the self via electronic mediation" (p. 7). Within this, the self-representation of oneself through digital mediums (for example, through one's social media profile) encourages social media users to produce and share content, whilst engaging with and feeding the neoliberal needs of digital consumerism (ibid). New digital technologies have therefore blurred the lines between the producer and the consumer of media content; the prosumer is both a consumer and producer within platform cultures, across various social media platforms. An example of this being the rise in OnlyFans whereby the agency is placed in the hands of the content creator to manufacture their own market, the content they wish to produce, and usually consuming other OnlyFans or Instagram image-based content to adhere to trends that will bring a larger audience to their page (Sanchez, 2022).

Digital technology has forced an adjustment in forms of communication with peers, family members as well as with celebrities/famous figures, which has led to the growth of *influencer culture* along with other platform cultures, such as *diet culture.* Platform culture(s) stems from increasing interaction between individuals through social media as a communication mechanism (Ye, 2022). Cultural criminologists, such as Ferrell (1999) are interested in cultural dynamics, in which the formation and changing nature of cultures occur. Although Ferrell (1999) poses the agenda of cultural criminology to be interested in the way that cultural dynamics influence criminality and crime control measures, the acknowledgement of popular cultures construction of normativity that underpins cultural criminology (Ilan, 2019) can be used to acknowledge the stigma-craft of 'othered' bodies

within social media, using platform cultures as a mechanism of information sharing. More contemporary applications of cultural criminology in research have acknowledged the role of power and social control through macro, meso and micro analyses of social structures and behaviours (Hayward, 2011; Ilan, 2019). Micro analyses of social phenomena, according to Ilan (2019) can be used to identify the cultural context that underpins the reality of behaviours and the complexities of late modernity (Hall, 2019). This understanding of contemporary culture aligns with the aim of this thesis to investigate the reality of potential harms posed and perpetuated by the online space, particularly social media and the underlying generative mechanisms of social media content consumption and production. Platform cultures established through the rise of social media can influence users' choices and perceived identity within the online space (Dyer & Abidin, 2022).

Ritzer & Jurgenson (2010) recognise that there is little involvement of social media platforms themselves in content production on websites, and that this form of production is led by the prosumer/producer and the collaborative companies when creating advertisements of products. This however can demonstrate a lack of regulation of social media production, and the impact of potentially harmful content that may be generated, and consumed by its' users (Fergie *et al.,* 2016). Media representations such as those shared across social media shapes public perceptions of identity, the crafting and shifting of social norms (Yar, 2012) and therefore the 'idealistic' standards set by wider society in terms of beauty, worth and success. Media representations are not neutral but are permeated with ideological meanings that reflect broader social and political dynamics and are therefore heavily influenced by the content that people consume through contemporary media outlets, in this case social media (ibid) (i.e., the standards that cultural spaces such as *diet culture* and *influencer culture* are built upon).

As a worldwide 'information superhighway', the exponential growth of the internet has created opportunities for communities to access information that is discouraged by mainstream Western culture (Hura, 1998). There exists a power hierarchy between the social media producers who have a large following, which would then consider them to

be an influencer (Nouri, 2018), as there is between business owners, leaders, and individuals with vast wealth in the offline space which is usually based on the size of a person's online following. This failure to regulate internet content was not made a secret at any stage by the cyber world, causing this element of apprehension towards the new virtual world's potential (Lessig, 2004; Wall, 2007; Yar, 2018), leading to moral panic surrounding grooming in chatrooms, access to pornography and the sharing of 'pro-ana' content online. The regulation of online spaces will continue to be considered throughout this chapter, and in Chapters 5 and 6.

3.3 Algorithmic Business Strategies: Changes to the Monetisation of Social Media

Social media has revolutionised modes of communication and interaction on a global scale. Social media did not start with online blogging in the way many believe, but over the telephone (Rimskii, 2011). The definition of social media includes "all web-based applications which allow for the creation/exchange of user-generated content and enable interaction between the users" (Taprial & Kanwar, 2012: 8). The first social networking site launched in 1997, known as Bolt and Six Degrees which encouraged teenagers and adolescents (aged 15-20-years-old, predominantly) to use instant messaging, discussion boards, email functions and calls via their desktop computer to communication with one another (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). This was later followed by online blogging and the broadening of social networking through forums such as LiveJournal (1999) and the most well-known platforms such as MySpace and LinkedIn (2003), and Facebook (2004) (Edosomwan *et al.,* 2011). LinkedIn is sometimes not recognised as a social media platform due to its professional nature, despite having the same characteristics and communicative profiling as MySpace, Facebook, X (formerly, Twitter), and others. The purpose of LinkedIn has always been to provide a forum for companies to advertise vacancies, campaigns, and any updates for their business, as well as enable a place for professionals to liaise with another regarding their professional lives (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). MySpace, alternatively, became 'the' social media platform of its time - designed as a social platform that could allow users to become slightly more personable and share an activity with friends. This involved personalising a profile page completely whilst including images, music and videos if the user wished (Natta, 2010). By 2006, MySpace had

become the most popular social networking site across the Western world, with approximately 43.2 million users visiting their site every month (Edosomwam et al, 2011).

As whilst MySpace continued to grow, Mark Zuckerberg and fellow students founded and created The Facebook Inc. in 2004 (now, more popularly known as Facebook), initially restricted to the use of Harvard University students only, before it officially launched to an unrestricted audience two years later. (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). As of early 2024, Facebook self-reported that nearly 3 billion user accounts had the Facebook application downloaded on their device (Facebook, nd). Like MySpace, and potentially the reason that Facebook overtook MySpace in popularity, users can join private and public common interest groups and customise their profile to share memories, photographs, and statuses with 'friend connections'. As it currently stands, to join Facebook, users need to be 13 years of age, however, no formal identification is required to verify an account. Young people are engaging in social media platforms from as young as 9-years old (Natta, 2009). This is the case for various other popular social networking sites such as Instagram (2010) – an image-based social media platform that uses images to capture of a grid of an individual's life - and Snapchat (2011) – a platform originally designed for images to be sent to a recipient for up to be able to view for up to 10 seconds, of which has seen multiple updates that has since introduced a conversation function, and a function that allows recipients and senders to store images for a longer period of time. Image-based social media has become increasingly popular over recent years due to fast-paced nature of the platforms this is reflected in the rapid rise of TikTok in 2017 (Jaffar *et al.,* 2019) that has become the reportedly one of most utilised forums by many social media users alongside YouTube, Snapchat and Instagram (Ofcom, 2023).

The creation of social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and BeReal has resulted in a rapid increase in adolescents engaging with social media for a significant percentage of their day. Regardless of following constantly changing 'trends' online, there is no guarantee of gaining a significant audience for your creativity - although there are a growing number of individuals who have found fame through their social media persona (Dent, 2020). As noted previously in this chapter, the growth in social media use and

global information openly available on the internet has caused complexity in the surveillance of what platforms identify as socially appropriateness of content and what could be potentially detrimental to a platform's audience; especially for those users of the younger generation (Greenwood *et al.,* 2016).

Approximately 14 billion photographs are uploaded to social media platforms each day (Broz, 2024). The potential harm and risk around the increasing use and manipulation of images on social media will be considered in Chapter 3.8. At this stage of the chapter, we can note the impact of social media algorithms in keeping a social media 'hooked' to its platform. Academic writing into digital communications was dominated by digital technicians employed by the companies themselves for many years, as opposed to academics more broadly (Schroeder, 2018). It is only of late that academia has started to consider the purposeful business strategies of the social media platforms discussed, and the impact that may have on a person's livelihood and mental wellbeing. Research emerges predominantly from a psychological perspective (Andreassen & Pallesen, 2014; Andreassen *et al.*, 2017; 2016; D'Arienzo *et al.,* 2019; Hou *et al.,* 2019; Brown & Kuss, 2020). According to Tristan Harris (Founder of Centre for Humane Technology), social media platforms released new features and continue to enhance their platforms with hopes of furthering their popularity and value, without genuinely understanding the way that it can develop a life of its own in the hands of individuals, singularly or combined with like-minded contacts. For Harris, it is not the social media platform that is problematic; it is the business models that unfold as they develop. This aligns with the work of Turrow (2011) which recognises the prioritization of financial gain, for social media platforms, over the potential harm that their 'addictive' algorithms could pose on social media users.

Studies and discussion threads on forums such as X (Twitter) have discussed the selling of social media users' data as means of platforms and external companies being in tune with products we may be wishing to purchase (Lanier, 2018). This is justified by social media business owners using the rationale of marketisation, an attempting to manufacture targeted advertising for their users (Turrow, 2011; Crocco *et al.,* 2020). This, alongside the user of suggested content for social media users (Goodyear *et al.,* 2018),

is considered by Zuboff (2019) to be a capitalist mechanism of social control in the digital age, with the aim to encourage a rise in consumerism online. However, academics such as Lanier (2018) state that digital technicians are specifically hired to immerse themselves in sites' data and create an algorithm around this. Therefore, audiences are facilitated by algorithms as opposed to intentional engagement with social media content (Riemer & Peter, 2021). For example, this will enable applications on a smartphone to alert its owner with a notification of their friends' activities, or a 'news' update, when they have not been active on their phone for some time – or when the algorithm shows that at that specific time the user is usually busy on their phone, to promote heightened engagement with social media (Lanier, 2018). If notifications are successful in drawing a social media user back to their phone, the type of content that they choose to engage with is also manufactured into their account's algorithm, which will generate suggested content for a user to view (Goodyear *et al.,* 2018). For Guess et al. (2020) the algorithmic nature of contemporary social media does not only encourage suggestions of content to be consumed, but feeds into echo chambers of misinformation. This can lead to the wider spreading of misinformation through sharing, commenting and attention paid through suggested content, in an easy and effective way (Riemer & Peter, 2019; Guess et al., 2020). Rifkin (2022) discusses the resilience required to keep up with the expectations of social media and the level of engagement that is encouraged through such business models, as those discussed. This resonates with the findings of Sandford & Quarmby (2018) who specifically focus on the changing conditions of pressure faced by young people across the digital space. For Rifkin (2022) lacking this resilience can lead to a loss of agency and identity when it comes to using the digital space. This demonstrates a requirement for further regulatory measures to put into place surrounding influencer culture, the algorithmic nature of social media and the consumerist market that it attempts to encourage (Sharp & Gerrard, 2022).

As outlined in Chapter 3.2, the fundamental distinction between Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 in the connectivity of producers and consumers of social media markets is the scope of connectivity it aims to achieve; with Web 2.0 being centred around vast social networking, user-generated content and relying on larger-scale algorithms and influencers to drive

platform profiteering (Parise & Guinan, 2008). In comparison to Web 3.0 that focused more closely on peer-to-peer interactions, the encryption of communication, and a focus on cryptocurrencies and the tokenization of online assets (Barassi & Trere, 2012). Due to concerns surrounding the security of data-sharing in the centralised approach taken by Web 2.0, Web 3.0 looks to place control over data management and security at the hands of individual users. The digital age has posed challenges for the governance of society. Dent (2020) believes that a lack of security measures during the earlier stages of online connectivity holds partial responsibility for the ever-growing list of social harm caused by the virtual world (ibid). Alike earlier discussions of Garland's (1996) framing of responsibilisation, this demonstrates a sense of heightened privacy and ownership for social media users, but places the onus on individual social media users to generate popularity of their own social media profiles, to compete with one another for heightened engagement with their social media content, and to work in collaboration with brands and products to enhance the popularity of their social media profile, and therefore heighten the income that they are generating from producing social media content. This allows for social media platforms to profiteer from the rising levels of traffic that are running through their forums, as a result of a decentralised approach to social networking (Barassi & Trere, 2012). Web 3.0 saw the rise in artificial intelligence (AI) interactivity across social media platforms, including the spreading of misinformation led by AI imagery, the use of filtering applications that are underpinned by AI software, and the use of deepfakes as a mechanism of hateful or threatening behaviour (Bharadiya, 2023). Engagement with AI relating to filtering applications will be revisited throughout this thesis as a generative mechanism that influences an individual's experience of embodiment, relationship with social media and construction of their self-worth.

Changes in the marketing of social media across Web 2.0 and 3.0 can also be aligned to the shift in the algorithmic nature of platforms. Whether the marketing approach is to engage users in vast levels of social networking, or to focus on personalising advertisements, the goal of these corporations is for its' users to engage with their platforms for prolonged periods of their day (D'Arienzo *et al*., 2019). Scrolling through social media in the 21st Century has become increasingly popular as a result of this. So

much so that popular smartwatches such as the Apple Watch and the Fitbit have incorporated notifications into social media and messaging applications instead of being geared around fitness and health goals (Hou *et al.,* 2020). Social media addiction is a form of behavioural addiction, based around becoming overly emphatic over checking through the validation one is receiving online and scrolling through and checking what our friends and celebrity idols are doing (ibid). It is important to note that frequent use of social media does not automatically qualify as overuse or addiction; Andreassen (2015) distinguishes explicitly the compulsive need to spend time on social media to be the critical factor in this engagement becoming a behavioural addiction. Griffiths (1995, cited in D'Arienzo *et al*., 2019) outlined 6 ways that social media addiction can be presented: *salience* (social media is the most important thing to the individual), *mood modification* (the individual is reliant on social media to support their mood if they have had a bad day), *tolerance* (the individual starts to build up tolerance towards spending significant amounts of time on social media), *withdrawal symptoms* (psychological or physiological symptoms can present themselves when removing oneself from social media), *conflict* (the individual has compromising or damaging relationship that are encouraged by or encompassed within social media platforms that they then bring into the offline world), or *relapse* (following abstinence from social media the individuals starts to demonstrate similar, or the same, behaviours as they did previously when using social media).

Social media use, and addiction to this, can be likened to that of substance abuse due to the similarity in the potential to alter the mood of its users, and the addictive tendencies it produces (Andreassen & Pallesen, 2014; Tullet-Prado *et al.,* 2023). Social media use becomes problematic when individuals view this as a coping strategy or a therapeutic outlet for times of need, as opposed to verbally communicating to a loved one or a professional (Andreassen & Pallesen, 2014; Andreassen *et al.*, 2016). The use of social media during the working day has also been considered as a symptom of social media addiction (Andreassen *et al.,* 2014), that then impacts a person's productivity, their success in the workplace and their likelihood to sustain long-term employment. Existing research looking at the relationship between social media use and mental health issues has shown that prolonged use of social media has a significant negative impact on anxiety

and depression (D'Arienzo *et al.,* 2019; Ford *et al.,* 2019; Hou *et al.,* 2019; McGregor & Clancy, 2019). Paradoxically, social media has also been found to be used to boost self-esteem or ego (Andreassen *et al.,* 2017), despite the array of findings that suggest that prolonged social media use can be detrimental to a person's mental wellbeing.

Whereby prolonged social media has been deemed detrimental to a person's mental wellbeing, abstinence from social media use can be considered as a healing mechanism. Radtke et al (2022: 192) term this as a 'digital detox' whereby an individual should focus on "abstinence, break, disconnection, detox, time-out, and unplugging" from their platforms. This could be a complete break from social media, or this could be pursued through the active reduction in time spent across social media, or digital devices (ibid). This becomes difficult when social media use has become embedded into an individual's daily routine (Coyne & Woodruff, 2023: 12), however should aim to support individuals to feel *enjoyment, relief* and *disconnection.* For some, social media enables the opportunity to create a "community-at-a-distance" (Williams & Burnap, 2016: 15), which may not be something they wish to break away from at all, or entirely. Brown & Kuss (2020) report the fear of missing out (FOMO) as causing more harm to a person's wellbeing than spending long periods of time online. Therefore, FOMO can be a potential barrier to abstinence from social media (ibid).

The findings presented from the above research demonstrate the complex and individualised nature of social media use, whether this be as a consumer, producer, or prosumer. It is difficult for largely quantitative based datasets (Andreassen & Pallensen, 2014; Andreassen *et al.,* 2016; 2017; D'Arienzo *et al.,* 2019; Tullet-Prado *et al.,* 2023) to enable researchers to delve into the individualised experiences of social media platforms, the motivations to abstain from social media, but also the reasons for abstaining not being appropriate for an individual. The importance of gathering experiential knowledge using qualitative methodologies will be demonstrated in Chapter 4.

3.4 Hate and Social Harm in Social Networking: The 'Digital Detox'?

Social media platforms thrive in their stated ability to enhance opportunities of global connectivity. There has been an apparent growth of vulnerability in young generations over recent years, due to their susceptibility to prospective harm posed by the online space, that we do not have the facilities or regulatory measures to address. Technology offers a great range of opportunities for all its users, such as global exploration, potential growth in business opportunities, the chance to communicate and maintain relationships with friends or family across the globe at ease, and increased access to information in an area of interest (Byron, 2008), however, this also brings risk. There have been various investigations into the harms posed by social media, specifically around 12-25-year-olds, over recent years – both generic and specific to certain platforms (Byron, 2008; Lewis *et al.,* 2011; Meier & Gray, 2014; Santarossa & Woodruff, 2017; Marengo *et al.,* 2018; Veldhuis *et al.,* 2018). However, minimal to minor changes have been made to safeguard users of social media (Marengo *et al.,* 2018). Although users of all ages are exposed to the potential harm discussed throughout this chapter, there is evidence to support the argument that its younger users are at a more significant risk of damage (Greenfield, 2014). Despite the range of publications listed outlining the potential harms of social media, no existing publications focus on the role of platform cultures such as diet culture or influencer culture in the exertion of online harms, a key focus of this thesis.

Research suggests the adolescent brain thrives from dopamine rushes, as opposed to an adult with a more developed emotional regulation ability, causing them to be more emotionally unstable and more inclined to act impulsively upon their emotional state (Byron, 2008; Greenfield, 2014). Relationships at this age are built upon thrill-seeking and a need for fun and adventure (ibid). This may explain the reason for adolescent relationships to be sometimes more fragmented, turbulent, and potentially short-lived, depending on the nature of this relationship. More recent findings make connections between adolescents' thrill-seeking urge to the changing look of their social media profiles (Breslin *et al.,* 2009).

In the Netflix Original documentary, *The Social Dilemma*, the former design ethicist for Google, and current President of the Center for Humane Technology, alongside other former design, and business computers scientists, link the traditional utilitarian pleasure-

pain principle and the attraction to online validation and communications (Oktavianty & Retnowati, 2023). Humans crave immediate gratification as a means of feeling pleasure and wish to avoid pain whilst seeking fun (Katz *et al.*, 1973; Oktavianty & Retnowati, 2023). Social media platforms such as Facebook and X (Twitter) have adopted the pleasure-pain balance successfully by providing a simplistic service to which a person will only receive notifications of reactions they have received on anything they have posted to their profile (Nirvaan & Goel, 2018). If they wish to see what their 'friends' have reacted to or responses posted on their friends' online content, they will have to go searching for this or scroll through the social media site; this being an informed choice (Yar, 2018). For example, the adolescent brain seeks immediate gratification, validation and acceptance thereby building new relationships or changing their online portfolio facilitating connections in both the online world and in real terms. Craving this online validation can feed into their addiction to social media as well as their inability to appropriately determine between the real and virtual worlds (Greenfield, 2014; Lanier, 2018) as discussed in Chapter 3.4. For Byron (2008), emphasising a direct cause and effect between the online world's dangers is too simplistic and does not address ‘real’ experiences of potential harm, or perceived harms in the online space.

Following such critiques, the study of zemiology was established in the late 1990s (ibid) with a focus on the structural production of harm as opposed to the individual crime and consequences (Lacey, 2002). According to Criger (2011), crime has no ontological reality and is, as a result, a social construct varying across space, time, and cultures. The study of social harm looks at the broader picture of human suffering compared to classical sociological and criminological understanding (Lacey, 2002; Hillyard & Tombs, 2007). Zemiology, since the 1990s, has been used to underpin research investigating an array of social phenomena; all of which are concerned with inequity of treatment towards groups in society, that are not considered criminal under UK legislative framework, at the time of writing, but have the potential to perpetuate harm (Hopici, 2016; Canning, 2018; Boukli, 2018). Such publications represent the utility of zemiological analyses in reframing the lens that we view the world, which is relevant to this research’s aim to explore harms posed by the online space, as opposed to ‘criminal’ behaviours within the space.

Hillyard & Tombs (2007) identify four key areas to social harm that allow researchers to acknowledge the empirical knowledge surrounding harm: physical, economic, emotional/psychological, cultural safety and sexual. Canning & Tombs (2021) expand these typologies of harm to include structural and cultural harms posed by broader social structures and agencies, which may be less visible to its victims. Further to this, the normalisation of harm in cultural spaces surrounding sports, nutrition, body image and social media known as 'embedded harms', according to Hall (2019), will be utilised in the later stages of this thesis. For Hall (2019: 174) embedded harms are those that are "entrenched in conventional, everyday consumer markets", as well as the impact of pressures faced to perform well within everyday encounters such as when in intimate relationships, working environments, and with peers. There are rising concerns within discussions of the potential harm that social media poses, that fall into all the categories identified by Hillyard & Tombs (2007), Hall (2019), and Canning & Tombs (2021). For example, the pressure towards the sexualised body has become a prominent concern within social media users (see Chapter 3.7); the definition of the harm under the Online Safety Act 2023 (see Chapter 5 and 7); the physical and psychological harm posed by misinformation surrounding beauty, body image and diet on social media (see Chapter 5); or, the addictive features embedded in social media algorithms (see Chapter 6). The growing pressure to produce images with minimal clothing, on public forums, or in private conversations online, amplifies the glorification of the 'ideal' body type, in both young men and women, this can be recognised as the changing conditions faced by young people in a postmodern digital age. Succumbing to these pressures, unwantedly, could lead to emotional, physical and/or sexual harm for the individual. This thesis will look to identify 'actual' understandings of harm and positioning them alongside the causal mechanisms that may influence their occurrence.

Zemiology can be used to understand harms within a range of behaviours within the online space that are both regulated and are criminalised for being motivated by hate and hostility. For example, this can include trolling, hate incidents, and hate crimes online. James & McBride (2021) have developed critical hate studies to attempt to theorise the harms within hate, which can be applied to the online space. Research employing a critical hate studies perspective explores the reasons why hate occurs and the impact of

hate incidents, in various spaces, through accounts of lived experience (ibid). For Chakraborti & Garland (2015: 1741) “hate crime is a social construct which has multiple meanings to different actors and is subject to a myriad of interpretations” which uses intimidation or violent behaviours to intentionally other those who are different, based on their identity (Perry, 2001; Chakraborti, 2010). There is an array of ways that incidents of hate can be experienced, that cannot be directly aligned to the construction of harm under the Online Safety Act 2023. The Online Safety Act aims to minimise risks within the online space (Coe, 2022), while focusing on harms that are categorised as physical, psychological, and emotional. The Online Safety Act’s construction of harm is critiqued by Davidson *et al.* (2019) who identifies a variety of harms that may be experienced by a victim of a hate incident including: mental stress, relationship problems, reputational damage, work issues or financial loss. The range of harms identified by Davidson *et al.* (2019) can be mapped using a critical realist (CR) analysis to identify the underlying mechanism that impact a person’s experience of ‘mental stress’ or the events that follow ‘reputational damage’. Although there may be physical, psychological, and emotional implications of experiencing hatred, or experiencing social harm more generally, the simplification of experiencing harm into a 3-fold categorisation may minimise the experience of the victim as it does not consider their actual lived experience (James & McBride, 2021). The Online Safety Act 2023 readdresses the Malicious Communications Act 1988 and the Communications Act 2003 as the first piece of formal online safety legislation in the world (Coe, 2022). The severe impact of hate and being targeted based on your identity is severe, but acknowledging the harms of hate within zemiology and hate studies is a relatively new area of conversation (James & McBride, 2021; Schweppe, 2021).

When considering experiences of hostility or hate within this research, trolling is a behaviour that will be incorporated into the data analysis due to the harm that victims of trolling may be exposed to as a result of their experience (Davidson *et al.,* 2019). Hate incidents and crimes vary in how they are presented and regardless of how they are presented, the impact of the experience will also vary (James & McBride, 2021). Whereas Bernatzky *et al.* (2021) suggest hate crime is more intentional and complex than liking, commenting or sharing of posts that consist of hateful content, online, experiences of hate

or othering do not need to be intentional or violent in nature, they may present themselves in the form of microaggressions or more subtle behaviours (Schweppe, 2021). For Schweppe (2021), microaggressions tend to be normalised everyday occurrence that are not recognised as slurs, therefore do not need to be underpinned by intent or malice. Sue *et al.* (2007) builds on this by providing 3 categories of subtle, micro behaviours that can cause harm to the recipient: *microassaults* (intentional discrimination), *microinsults* (like microassaults, but they are unintentional acts), or *microindividualisations* (trivialised questioning of lived experience of marginalisation). At the time of writing, there is no universal approach to understanding hate crime either online or offline (Schweppe, 2021).

Williams & Burnap (2016) align their work to Cohen's deviancy amplification spiral to understand cyberhate which allows them to identify trigger events that occur that feed into the rise of specific cyberhate incidents whereby such events tend to take place offline. Events, therefore, take place that result in the rise of hate incidents, hate crimes or trolling online (a form of cyberhate) directed towards specific minority groups (Williams, 2021). The experience of hate and hostility motivated by personal characteristics such as general appearance, race, religion, gender, sexuality, or disability has resulted in the formalisation of hate crime legislation in the UK through the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, Criminal Justice Act 2003, the Sentencing Act 2020 and the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. The development of hate crime legislation in the UK has formalised the use of a sentencing uplift, during the sentencing and courts process (Williams, 2021), whereby a heightened custodial sentence can be administered concurrent to a person's relevant custodial sentence to demonstrate the severity of hate crime. Williams (2021) discusses the influence of the tragic death of Sophie Lancaster in 2007 on the inclusion of appearance-based hate crime. Appearance-based hate crime focuses on elements of a person's appearance that do not need to be associated with the protected characteristics of Equality Act 2010 (ibid). In this thesis, 'trigger events' can be recognised as conditions when using a CR analysis to understand changes to experiences and behaviours shared by participants in the research.

The differentiation between the online and offline self, as highlighted earlier in the chapter, may pose potential harms for social media users, as the aesthetic that they are working

towards for selfies, or on their social media platforms may be based on unauthentic, filtered images (Lavrence & Cambre, 2020; Cambre & Lavrence, 2023). Consumer culture, and the pressure to engage with consumerism and the prosumption of social media is intensified in the digital age (McRobbie, 2008), predominantly in young women. The gendered nature of dieting stems from the 1960s and is not a new harm that young women are susceptible to (Gagliardi, 2018; Dodier, 2020) but is something that underpins contemporary diet culture and the selling of weight loss products (Gagliardi, 2018). This may also feed into the growth of pro-harm forums through discussions threads or online communities (Carrabine, 2008; McGregor & Clancy, 2019). Within these spaces, young people are likely to engage with self-injurious behaviours prior to accessing these spaces including self-injurious behaviour, pro-starvation or fat-shaming related content (Lavis & Winter, 2020).

Recent research conducted by Samaritans with the University of Bristol, suggested that the involvement of the internet in suicide planning frequently includes viewing pro-suicide materials, searching for information around methods or more generically of what suicide entails, as well as posting messages with suicidal inferences on their personal social media profiles, or groups with others who also support this content (Samaritans, 2019). This produces a spectrum of young people from those who display lower levels of distress (i.e. researching what suicide entails) to those demonstrating higher levels of pain to which they are looking into efficient methods and are potentially formulating a plan (ibid). For example, if a young person was to have a conversation about finding pro-suicide content online it could be difficult as a parent or caregiver to unpick these conversations and a person's emotions towards suicide (Lavis & Winter, 2020). This is if they were aware that these conversations were taking place. The discussion of social harm, and the harms of experiencing incidents such as those above will demonstrate the centrality of zemiology both for understanding harm and contextualising this in terms of social media.

3.5 The Sexualisation of the Body, Online Harms and Acknowledging Feminist Analyses of Image-Based Social Media

There are varying strands of contemporary criminological theories, attempting to discuss the deviant and sexualised elements of social media use, and the potential harms they

could cause (such as those categorised in Chapter 3.6). Feminist scientists have questioned the relationship between gender and science since the 1970s; discussions then led to gender's connection to technology as a science (Wajcman, 2004). Historical literature portrays an alienation of women from technology, reflecting the patriarchal construction of technological culture (ibid). For example, the differentiation in visual spatial skills of men and women is said to explain why science is a male-dominated area (Wajcman, 2004; Gill, 2007). Regardless of the assumed gender roles in technology, feminist scientists would argue that feminist analysis of science has provided great intuition in this area.

The sexualisation of the body has increased substantially alongside social media's growth and the need for online gratification. Despite online validation when bodies meet the 'idealised' beauty standards, users (predominantly young females) are labelled as 'sluts' when they share images on social media when in swimwear, underwear, or minimal clothing (Ashcroft, 2014). Specific characteristics deemed outside of the social ideal become a reason for a person to be body shamed, both online and offline. Awareness of social media literacy and the impact of shaming language is essential; as more than just a formality in terms of a campaign (ibid). Search for pornographic material makes it glamorous rather than awkward and secretive; online pornography eradicated the need to go into a video store to purchase visual pornography. Social media has had a significant impact on constructing identity, sexuality, and gender in the upcoming younger generation (i.e., Generation X) (Davis, 2018). These concerns are held within young girls, although adolescent boys are rising in force to strive towards certain stereotypes and body image (Blower, 2016; Davis, 2018). Besides sexualised images of physique and physical appearance, sexual discourse online influences women's experience with technology and the launch of their online personality (Ashcraft, 2014). This is of particular interest to this thesis as body shaming narratives are led through a lens of stigma that aims to 'other', oppresses and place pressure on individuals who do not meet the idealistic values of beauty standards.

A crucial example of this is the proliferation of 'sexting', for example the sharing of sexually explicit images on Snapchat, with its users falsely believing that their pictures are

available for the recipient to view for 10 seconds and before disappearing (Ashcraft, 2014). The reality of this is that recipients could use third party software to screenshot copies of the images without notifying the sender, and the images would be shared in an online cloud within the wider infrastructure of the application itself (ibid). Recent research and statements by digital technicians for well-established media platforms such as Snapchat have announced that this is not the case and that these images are stored in a Cloud, within an online forum for administrators of the platform to continue to review and understand discourse that is popular on its platform (Daniels, 2016; Davis, 2018). This regular engagement with image-based social media such as Snapchat and Instagram can impact self-objectification, leading the user to engage with celebrity filtered culture (Fardouly *et al.,* 2017). The pressure and comparison to other profiles and the urge to receive further online gratification and grow one's following online feeds into addiction to social media.

In the early 1990s, the term ‘cyberfeminism’ was coined to describe feminist work interested in theorising and critically exploring technology, and more specifically the internet (Gill, 2007). The cyberfeminism approach was put forward by feminist scientists at this time, as means of producing a utopian perspective of the online world, to achieve equality of gender and sexual differences online (Haraway, 1985; Wajcman, 2005). As this theoretical framework developed it was criticised for not empowering women who could not afford the internet, and therefore were not of a white, privileged lifestyle, and therefore not supported the enhancement of feminine identity as having a powerful position in the digital world (Senft, 2018). Thereby, this framework was too simplistic in lacking ability to look at intersecting identity aside from gender (ibid).

The dominance of masculinity in western culture remained a concern for feminist scientists; leaving scope for an enhance, modern version of cyberfeminism. Wajcman (1991; 2004) discusses the purpose of the ‘techno feminist’ approach, to build upon cyberfeminism as a crucial theoretical framework in exploring feminism views of the online world. Techno feminism brings together insights of cyberfeminism and materialist analysis to explore the gender nature of technology, and how to overcome this as technology becomes more prominent in the daily lifestyle of many (Wajcman, 2004; Gill, 2007).

Researchers have voiced concerns that online forums may reproduce gender inequities (Cunningham & Crandall, 2014), that causing a power imbalance in the use of online platforms and the business prospects that the online world may have to offer (ibid).

On the contrary, as this is a new strand of feminist theory, the techno feminist approach has also been used to discuss how digital entrepreneurism may be enhanced because of online platforms. As highlighted earlier, the commercialisation of the internet meant a huge expansion of online sales, as well as networking with groups across the globe whom users may not have had the opportunity to have connected with before the internet (Greenstein, 2001; Weber, 2003). By removing the physical meeting of business owners, it is argued that this creates equality within business opportunities for all backgrounds (McAdam *et al.,* 2020).

Foucauldian analysis of governance and surveillance in society remains heavily associated with constructed knowledge of literature in relation to the surveillance of individualised algorithm's set up to link social media users to online content that they may engage with across multiple platforms and search engines. Foucault (1979) outlines the production of 'docile bodies' as a mechanism of power over the female body. Whereby Foucault's work outlines the docile body to obtain power over 'docile bodies' of both men and women, in the same way, Bartky (1988) regards these experiences to be different. For Bartky, the surveillance that female's bodies are subjected to occurs to serve the patriarchal needs of the male gaze. The female body has become subject to heightened forms of surveillance and judgement as a result of contemporary beauty standards (Barker *et al.,* 2017; Elias & Gill, 2016; Gill, 2007). Therefore, for women to be feminine and attractive in the eyes of society (ibid). The embodiment of a 'feminine' identity feeds into women's engagement with dietary products and programmes. McRobbie (2009) argues that the male gaze and resurgence of patriarchy has taken over the "fashion-beauty complex, creating unliveable pressures that produce… 'postfeminist disorders', including bulimia, anxiety, depression and forms of addiction" (Gill, 2017: 616). This is supported by the mass circulation of magazines that advocate for stringent dieting regimes that promote thinness in women (Bartky, 2015; 1988), predominantly through exercise (Chernin, 1981). Bartky (1988) criticises the advertisement of exercise

programmes that report being able to spot reduce fat (for example, shrinking ‘problem areas’ such as thighs, stomach or ankles), this being a scientifically inaccurate advertisement of how women should look to embody corporeal ‘perfection’. Despite Foucauldian analysis demonstrating knowledge of deeply engrained socially normative constructs to maintain power dynamics using discrimination and binary opposites, the 21st Century has found realist academics adopting Foucauldian discourse and applying it to the abductive reasoning within their research (Elder-Vass, 2019). The latter stages of this thesis will consider the role of algorithms in the engagement with social media of individual users across various platforms, as well as deliberate the effects of women internalising such narrative that set out to surveil and control their engagement with diet culture and the online space.

Techno feminism can be linked to the criminological harms that social media potentially pose to its users. The sexualisation of the female body offline has been an area concerning feminist academics for numerous years in terms of the expectation placed on women to use their body to provide sexual satisfaction to their intimate partner, and for reproductive purposes (Szymanski *et al.,* 2011). Literature in this area discusses the objectification of the female body, projecting a woman’s worth being depicted through their physical appearance and sexual function (ibid). Although it should be noted that, despite minimal research available within the area, young men also experience this. This thesis will explore the change in conditions that pressures regarding body types, and physical appearance, when the pressures are faced in the online space. The sexual objectification of women is an underlying mechanism to the pressures faced by women to send naked pictures of themselves during online conversations, alongside the use of such images in the act of revenge porn. The term revenge porn refers to the distribution of sexually explicit images/videos of individuals without their consent and using with the intent to cause harm or embarrassment (Ministry of Justice & Grayling, 2014). Depending on the case circumstances, instances of distributing sexually explicit imagery where there is no personal, revenge element to it can be labelled as non-consensual pornography (Stroud & Henson, 2016). This would still be dealt with as serious as a revenge porn case in criminal investigations. The Criminal and Courts Act of 2015 was published under the Coalition Government (2010-2015), deeming it illegal to disclose confidential material

without the consent of those involved in the act. As with up-skirting criminal legislation, this refers to the England and Wales criminal justice system.

The establishment of the website *Is Anyone Up?* by Hunter Moore in 2010 is recognised as instrumental in the rise in revenge porn. Profiles were created on this website by former intimate partners who uploaded submissions that included their name, age, city of residence and profession (Stroud & Henson, 2016). Moore justified this as he argued it would allow him to determine the age of those in the uploaded images. It was found that all profiles could then be searched alongside social media accounts when the individuals' names were inputted (ibid). Moore was making a growing monthly income from the views on *Is Anyone Up?,* but following mass pressure placed onto the site and vast levels of complaints and criticism, the decision was made to close the website (Dodero, 2012; Salter, 2013). It is argued by Salter (2013) that Moore started to see the damage he was causing and that legislative changes were under consideration, therefore stepped away before he could be prosecuted further; evidence supporting this is yet to be unveiled.

It is essential to discover whether boundaries have been discussed between victim and perpetrator before posting the image online. The intention of the agent who posted the content online is a fundamental factor when investigating whether a case is revenge porn, non-consensual pornography or neither. For example, there is always a possibility that this image was posted to praise the individual's physique but did not have the response one had anticipated (Stroud, 2014; Hill, 2015). However, the malicious intention tends to clarify whether a case is one of revenge porn, or not (ibid); establishing the perpetrator's intent enables a clearer understanding of how the isolated case should be dealt with. However, something that can be highly damaging to an individual is if the images contain identifiable attributes of the photographed individual (Stroud & Henson, 2016). Face recognition software has been developed at a fast pace in recent years, which will continue to make it easier to identify personal details (Salter, 2013; Stroud & Henson, 2016), also faces and bodies can be edited. Such developments can hurt an individual's career and educational plans; in some cases, they lead to suicide, successful and unsuccessful suicide attempts (Citron & Franks, 2014; Stroud & Henson, 2016).

Following on from the criminalisation of revenge porn came that of ‘up-skirting’ in the U.K. Up-skirting refers to the taking of sexually intrusive photographs up an individual's skirt without their permission. This crime would usually occur in a public place, among crowds of people to ensure it is harder to draw attention to the act itself (Gillespie, 2019; Ministry of Justice & Frazer, 2019). Following an uproar in activist protests across the U.K. – initially headed by Gina Martin, feminist activist, up-skirting was made illegal under the Voyeurism Offences Act 2019, adding two offences to Section 67 of the Sexual Offences Act (2003) (Ministry of Justice & Frazer, 2019). As a result, perpetrators under the England and Wales criminal justice system can now face up to 2 years imprisonment. More severe cases of this, (i.e. the distribution of these images with the intent to cause harm or pleasure purposes) can also be placed on the sex offenders register indefinitely (ibid). The criminalisation of acts such as upskirting and revenge porn follows a significant period of misogynistic hate and hostility towards women (Pina *et al.,* 2017) and the objectification of women’s bodies (Davis, 2018).

The ever-advancing technology and increased access to social media enable the growth of criminal behaviours that encourage the sexualisation of the body to become more prominent (Stroud & Henson, 2016). Dedicated revenge porn websites are said to mimic social media's minimalising values by adding rating and comments sections to their pages (Stroud, 2014). Following a survey conducted in 2014, by supporting charity Revenge Porn, over 3,000 active sites of this nature were founded (ibid). Voyeuristic crimes occur across the world in different forms; for example, an upcoming issue in South Korea is the growth in 'molka' as criminal activity. Molka is another sexually explicit imagery-based crime in which cameras are placed unknowingly into public areas such as a public toilet to gain graphic images, usually of women (Allmark, 2018).

The #MeToo campaign is a social movement against sexual harassment and abuse and the normalised sexualisation of the body in the modern world (Gleeson & Turner, 2019). This campaign was initially launched in 2006 via MySpace by a woman called Tarana Burke. More recently, this became amplified following a string of public allegations of sexual harassment by Harvey Weinstein in 2017 (Gleeson & Turner, 2019). An online activist campaign to spread awareness of the importance of talking about individual

experiences of sexual harassment aims to battle against the normalisation of sexually harassing behaviours (Boyle, 2019). Several high-profile celebrities took to social media to join activists, such as Jennifer Lawrence, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Uma Thurman, to name just a few (ibid).

The Toronto ‘Slut Walk’ took place in 2011. A police officer providing a college talk to raise awareness of sexual assault suggested women should 'avoid dressing like sluts’ in an attempt to prevent becoming a victim of sexual assault. This comment presented as problematic and amplified the idea of victim-blaming in sexual assault of all forms. The trend of 'slut walks' spread across the globe, occurring in North America, Canada, Australia, New Dehli, the UK and many more; these have continued to occur annually across the U.S.A., fronted by public figures such as Kim Kardashian and Amber Rose (Ringrose & Renold, 2012). The 'slut walk' was planned in an attempt to reclaim formerly taboo and unacceptable language, such as calling a woman a ‘slut’ for dressing a certain way or presenting as a sexual being. Within this, it promotes the understanding that appearance does not correspond with consent. The discussion of online sexualisation, and the potential harm that sexualising the body online could cause to social media users is crucial in understanding body image concerns, and behaviours that could lead to disorder eating. Theoretically, although techno feminism traditionally depicts the gendered nature of technology in terms of its development and employability opportunities, the experience of online users depending upon their gender, is something this research wishes to consider. There are a range of harms caused by the internet such as embedded harms (the normalisation of pro-harm content, the objectification of women through molka or revenge porn, prior to criminalisation), the emotional harm or psychological harm as a result of being exposed to being sexualised online, or physical harm (self-injurious behaviours, disordered eating patterns, or sexual harassment) yet despite this very little has been explored to address the harms caused by the online space.

3.6 Online Identity Platform Cultures and Filtered Lifestyles: Existential Threats of Social Media on Diet Culture?

Social media platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram are visual-based social media that are popular among young women (Eshiet, 2020). However, image-based social media profiles can promote interconnectivity and allow a space for users to communicate with one another; the primary source of words that are visual on their 'newsfeeds' come from commentary on photos and direct messages to one another – the key focus being the photos posted by its users, not communication (ibid). Ramphul & Mejias (2018) deliberated concerns in earlier studies around content posted on platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram overspilling into linked Facebook profiles – emphasising further use of visual-based social networking as opposed to verbal online communication. At the time of this study, Instagram had 600 million active users, and Snapchat held 187 million active users (ibid).

A standard mode to achieve optimal gratitude for posting on an online photo for many young men and women is using a beauty filtering application on their phone, or 'filters' to their camera that can be applied through social networking sites such as Instagram and Snapchat (Eshiet, 2020). For photo editing purposes, the application will allow users to smooth out their skin, enhance their lips and eyes, contour their nose, and even alter the shape of their head and body. Young women are now seeking plastic surgery, as discussed earlier in this chapter, to look like the filtered photos that forums such as Instagram, Snapchat and FaceTune allow them to produce (Eshiet, 2020). It is suggested that the same few filters become prominent requests, depending on the popularity of the filter on social media at one time (Myers, 2018). Critiques of filtering applications state that using such filters can warp a person's perception of authentic and realistic body image (Eshiet, 2020). The term 'Snapchat dysmorphia' was coined by a group of plastic surgeons in London in 2018 following an influx of clients wanting specific surgery, relating to celebrities and beauty filters as a point of reference (Purtill, 2020). 'Snapchat dysmorphia' is linked closely to the obsessive behaviours and mindset of Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD). BDD describes obsessive compulsions around striving for perfection in a person's physical appearance and how they view themselves (Perkins, 2019). For individuals diagnosed with BDD, they would be deemed as spending a

significant amount of time fixating on specific physical characteristics they perceive as flaws, as they strive to meet the 'western ideal' body; so much time is spent on this that it can interfere with daily tasks such as work and education (ibid). Existing research and healthcare forums recommend BDD ideals to be widely unrealistic and unattainable, impacting both men and women equally, usually manifesting in their adolescent years (Perkins, 2019). The rising interest in cosmetic surgery, and diagnosis of BDD, can be linked back to discussions within Chapter 2 which addressed the normative narratives that underpin the construction of beauty, and are amplified in advertisement through a shift from offline to online media outlets. The experience of significant body dissatisfaction that leads to undergoing cosmetic surgery, or interaction with medical intervention for BDD demonstrates an effect of the ‘othered’ body whereby an individual has experienced being ‘othered’ based on their physical appearance. The ‘othering’ of the body results in an individual feeling dissatisfied with their physique and wanting to alter their appearance to adhere to the normative narrative of ‘beauty’, for example, the normative narrative that underpins *diet* and *influencer* culture.

Kimmel (1987) identifies three critical influences for changing social trends around the socially desired body type: the decreasing stigmatisation of gay man as 'failed men'; women's increased participation in the public sphere has held some unwelcome repercussions that have left less of an emphasis on the difference between men's and women's lives, and the decrease in the importance of the 'breadwinning' role. For Featherstone (1991), however, the body gradually became seen as a subject that could throw new light on preoccupied socio-issues. This is supported by the later writing on feminist advocate Judith Butler, expressing that her younger years filled with attempts to change her body to fulfil social ideals, therefore losing the purpose of her career and personal goals (1993). Grabe *et al.* (2008) found exposure to models and celebrities' photos, as regularly as we are now through social media, has held detriment to an individual's body dissatisfaction. This amplification of body dissatisfaction is a significant cause for eating disorders (Irvine *et al.,* 2019). As medical research has accumulated, diagnosable eating disorders under the NHS have expanded. For this study, the BEAT

Eating Disorder - registered U.K. charity - definition is used to understand the severity of eating disorders and the various symptoms that can be displayed:

> Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses affecting people of all ages, genders, ethnicities and backgrounds. People with eating disorders used disordered eating behaviour as a way to cope with difficult situations... or [may] make them feel in control. (BEAT Eating Disorder, nd: unpaginated).

Types of eating disorders include anorexia, avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID), binge eating disorder, bulimia and other specified feeding or eating disorder (OSFED) (BEAT Eating Disorder, nd; Santarossa & Woodruff, 2017). Eating disorders can have many physical implications on your body aside from physical appearance. Despite growing volumes of research, anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa remain the most prominent eating disorders across the Western world, with binge eating disorders starting to creep up in numbers of diagnoses over recent years (NHS, 2022). Anorexia nervosa (commonly known as just anorexia) is a medical diagnosis, administered by eating disorder specialists, given to those who use rigorous and restrictive feeding methods to achieve a radical slim physique (Wolf, 1991). Disordered eating habits like this are viewed as highly dangerous and potentially fatal, demonstrating the potential of experiencing emotional, physical, and psychological harm by those engaging with the habits. Concerning a person's self-confidence, it is evident that disordered eating patterns such as anorexia (physical or psychological harm) are linked to profoundly ingrained self-esteem struggles (emotional or psychological harm) (Bordo, 1993; Ringrose & Renold, 2012).

Pro-anorexia ‘pro-ana’ websites that provide positive reinforcement and encouragement to undertake starvation and severe food restriction to achieve minimal body fat (Fox, 2005; Ward, 2007), which people seek out to receive intense, quick ‘solutions’ to their problem: wanting to lose weight. Platforms such as this have been regarded as dangerous by the UK Government and regulatory bodies such as Ofcom and have, therefore, been removed from social networking sites and accessible search engines

(Ward, 2007; Santarossa & Woodruff, 2017). Like all other online networking, not all activity and inappropriate content are surveyed before causing damage (Dias, 2003). Social acceptability is a discussion that heavily influences the idea of appropriate social media use, despite individual platforms holding responsibility for their own applicable conduct/misuse policies. Manuel Castells (2001) discusses concerns around the constant change of the internet, questioning whether online technologies are as culturally informed as their users and the wider public are led to believe.

Young males are deeply invested in obtaining an external 'masculine' image, therefore are less likely to voice their struggles with body image and are more likely to go underground and partake in self-injurious behaviours such as taking anabolic steroids behind closed doors (Bryson, 2003; Kanayama *et al.,* 2020). Previously research into body image issues and disordered eating patterns have focused primarily on young women. More recently, academia has started to acknowledge that young men are also living up to a gendered social ideal and bowing to the pressures of appearing lean and muscular like their male celebrity role models (Pope Jr *et al.,* 2000; McCabe & Riddiardelli, 2005). Pope Jr *et al.* (2000) refer to this health crisis in men of all ages to be The Adonis Complex – placing young men into a state of obsession over building a body with significant muscle mass levels in comparison to their body fat percentage (Bryson, 2003). The Adonis complex is named after Greek God Adonis, whose body for many years has represented this 'perfect' standard of masculinity – influencing the phrase 'he has the body of a God' (ibid). The earlier existing literature discussed has focused on the impact of filtered lifestyles and social media on young women, but it is clear from the work listed above that the ‘idealistic’ body image is not a gendered experience, it is one that can impact anyone.

Shilling (2012) refers to the 'legitimate body' comparing Bordieu's idea of 'body experts' to celebrities making financial gain from health products they may not have tried themselves or have not understood ingredients or side effects of the product. Social media platforms have witnessed a rapid increase in influencers with vast followings promoting health-based supplements (Atherton, 2021), within which the moralisation of

intense dieting or hunger becomes a cultural issue. For Atherton (2021) this is underpinned by fatphobia. Supplements that are sold online tend to be appetite suppressants or products that claim to speed up your metabolism and promote the idea of replacing meals with liquids or tablets. The use of paid advertisements, of this nature, on social media, for health research and sales strategy had the potential to lead intrigued users down the path of intense engagement with diet culture-related content (Ford *et al.,* 2019). Limiting daily calorie intake and resulting in rapid weight loss is neither sustainable nor healthy (Achilles *et al.*, 2022). The selling or advertising of these products has become increasingly criticized by online nutrition and sports coaches, emphasising the importance of staying away from what is known as diets. According to The Association of U.K. Dietitians, a FAD diet is defined as:

> …the kind of plan where you eat a very restrictive diet with few foods or an unusual combination of foods for a short time and often lose weight very quickly… most people then get fed-up with the restrictions, start eating more, choose less healthy food and pile the pounds back on (BDA, nd: unpaginated).

Although this type of diet and the quick fix may be tempting, they are heavily advised against as they can cause harm to your long-term health (Foreyt *et al.,* 2009). Such critiques emphasise the need for healthier lifestyle choices that are realistic and adaptable to your day-to-day life by eating a nutritionally balanced diet and physical exercise that you enjoy (Ebbeling *et al.,* 2012). Feminist academia around dieting and nutrition suggests dieting to be an engrained social constraint placed on women. Society has become liberal about women's opportunities and working towards equality of the genders (Orbach, 1978). The gender narrative that underpins dieting and the idealised body has been dominated by the expectations of women's bodies and physical appearance since the 1960s (Gagliardi, 2018) and remains relevant to this day. This has led to an array of feminist-led activist movements that attempt to battle against the suppression of women whose bodies and physical appearances do not meet the threshold of the idealised body (O'Shea, 2020; Jovanovski & Jaeger, 2022). These movements include pushing against the 'thin ideal' through fat scholarship, the Body Positivity Movement, and the Body

Neutrality Movement (ibid), as well as promoting intuitive eating as an alternative to calorie counting, weight-loss supplements or FAD diets (Harrison, 2019). This has also, however, led to the rise of 'fitspiration' and 'thinspiration' trends online, as well as 'meanspo' (Atherton, 2021; Achilles *et al.,* 2022). Social media trends, such as these demonstrate a comparative element to diet culture, whereby social media consumers will use images posted by the influencer(s) they aspire to look like and use that as inspiration to lose weight (Atherton, 2021).

The potential harms of engaging with these trends are heightened when consumers engage with the 'meanspo' trend, whereby consumers will post an image of themselves and details of their weight and measurements online to welcome 'mean' comments that will motivate them to engage in starvation, or dieting (McGrego & Clancy, 2019; Achilles *et al.*, 2022). An area of concern for fat activists and those in the Body Positivity Movement is the growing use of filtered imagery, that young people may base their dietary and physical appearance goals upon. Lavrence & Cambre (2020) term this the *digital forensic gaze* in filtered imagery whereby there is a presumption of authenticity in images, which leads to trends and beauty ideals. The *digital forensic gaze* allows researchers to question the impact of unauthentic images (Lavrence & Cambre, 2020). Cambre & Lavrence (2023) discuss the science and behaviours that underpin aesthetic trends in images posted across social media, as well as the reasoning as to why an individual may choose not to post an image without filtering in accordance with timely beauty standards. This work builds on their earlier concept of the *digital forensic gaze* by exploring lived experiences of young people and their engagement with consumption and production of social media content (Lavrence & Cambre, 2020; Cambre & Lavrence, 2023), which can be aligned to earlier discussions of identity within the online space involving a shift to the *prosumer*. This will be explored further through the data analysis stages of this research, in line with lived experiences of building dietary and physical goals based on filtered imagery.

Online social media influencers are online celebrities who exhibit their personal lives to many followers via various social media platforms, predominantly Instagram (Freberg *et*

al., 2011; Chae, 2018; Department for Digital, Media, Culture and Sport, 2022a). Recent literature suggests that such social media influencers are negatively impacting the growth of the FAD diet culture (Clodfelter-Mason, 2019). Diet culture can be found online and offline in supermarkets, social media, healthcare, the workplace, advertising across mass media outlets or in restaurants. Alongside the increase in social media influencers emerging across online forums has subsequently coincided with qualified dietitians and nutritionists using these platforms to battle back against FAD diet culture and promote what they describe as a scientifically backed, healthy routes to losing body fat and adhering to a more beneficial relationship with food and the self (O'Shea, 2020). The regulation of influencers (mis)selling dietary products without the appropriate qualifications should be taken into consideration when investigating potentially negative experiences of young men and women when using social media for prolonged amounts of time. This thesis will make a connection between online 'influencers' diet culture and experiences of mental wellbeing in the UK by exploring the need to regulate the selling of products and branding of influencers to align to alternative marketing regulations such as the Unfair Trading Regulations (2008), and the Business Protection from Misleading Marketing Regulations (2008).

3.7 Conclusion

The understanding of social media from a sociological standpoint is a newly developing area of academia, opening doors to explore the risk factors and potential harms the new social age of technology may have on its users' lives. Although work by the likes of Atherton (2021) and Achilles *et al.* (2022) is positioned within sociocultural context, this thesis aims to explore the underlying harms posed and perpetuated by social media, both online and offline. For example, the social harms within diet culture online as a mechanism of socially constructed notions of beauty, while aiming to explore the experiences of body dissatisfaction, body-related anxiety and disordered eating in social media, as demonstrated in Figure 3.1. It is clear from existing research that groups are more susceptible to the vulnerabilities of the online world than others, i.e., young people (Ramphul & Mejias, 2018; Purtill, 2020; Eshiet, 2020). Regardless of young women being

the focal point to a vast number of existing studies, Pope Jr *et al.* (2000) have published crucial foundations to the impact social media and filtered lifestyles also hold over young men, and the lifestyle choices make the real world.

Throughout this chapter, we discussed the breadth of Government publications that tried to readdress the Malicious Communications Act 1988 and Communications Act 2003 in tackling and regulating the online space more effectively. Where the Online Safety Act 2023 has attempted to address concerns of risks posed by the online space (Coe, 2022), there remains to be minimal acknowledgement of the actual experiences of harms that sit outside of the legal categories of harm: physical, psychological and emotional. Academics work in the disciplines of zemiology and critical hate studies have been referred to in this chapter to consider the harms of experiences of hate, with behaviours ranging for serious incidents of hate crime that have resulted in death (Chakraborti & Garland, 2015; Williams, 2021) to microaggressions or microinsults that are not underpinned by malice, but may be an intentional act of aggression (Sue *et al.,* 2007). This has been positioned alongside considerations of trolling, microaggressions and unkind comments on social media experienced by ‘content creators’ and other social media users due to not meeting the physical ideal of timely beauty trends (Wolf, 1991; Edmonds, 2011; Eshiet, 2020).

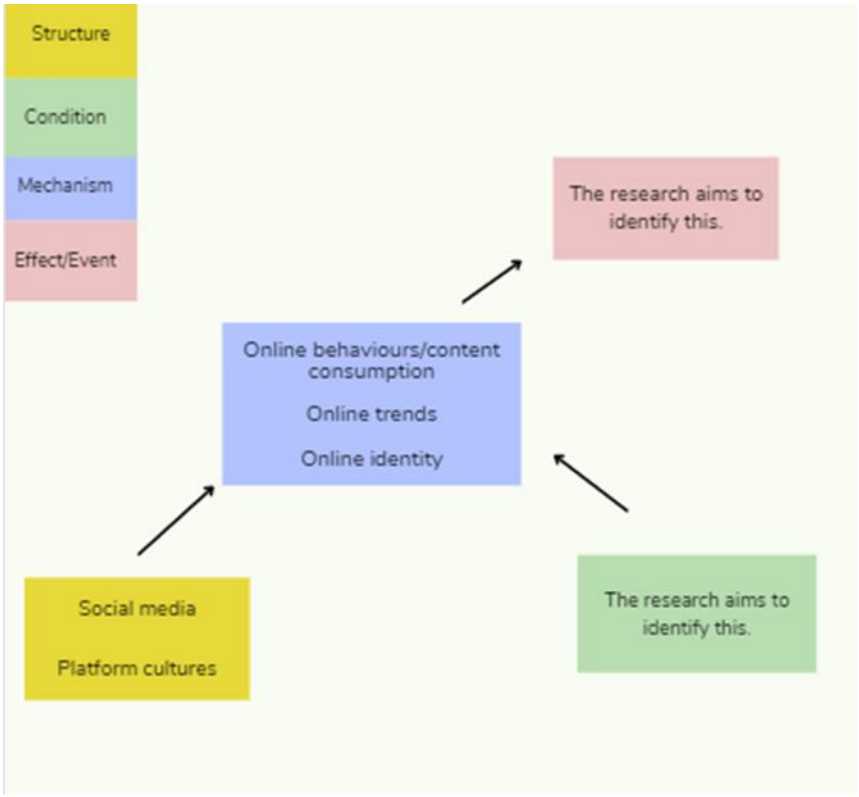

Figure 3.1: Adapted from Sayer's (2000) model diagram to demonstrate aim of this research following review of literature

Figure 3.1 above demonstrates a CR understanding of the aims of the research following a review of the literature surrounding the 'harms' posed by social media through the construction of platform cultures, and the changing nature of online engagement as a consumer, producer, or 'prosumer' of content. The diagram positions social media and platform cultures as structures in contemporary society, with online behaviours, content consumption, online trends and identity within the social media space acting as underlying generative mechanisms that influence the actions, behaviours, perceptions and experiences of social media and platform cultures such as diet culture and influencer culture. Following the identification of social media and platform cultures as structures within the literature, and the mechanisms within this, the thesis will go on to identify the conditions under which online behaviours, trends, and identity in the online take place and how they may change under different conditions. It will also identify the effects and events that follow the activation of identity in the online space through platform culture

narratives such as potential exposure to embedded, psychological, physical, and emotional harms like those highlighted in the literature. The role of Sayer's (2000) CR model in achieving the aims of this research will be detailed in Chapter 4.

4. Research Strategy and Design

4.1 Introduction

This research ties together two theoretical frameworks - critical realism (CR) and zemiology - to fulfil the ontological and epistemological commitments of this thesis. Such accounts will include raw, lived experiences of social media's impact on participants' relationships with their bodies and online diet culture. This research will use Mad Studies as a methodological tool to support the researcher's positionality as an 'insider' in her research (see LeFrancios *et al.,* 2013; Castrodale, 2015; Ingram, 2016; Ballantyne, 2019), whilst centralising the lived experiences shared by participants at both phases of data collection. The methodological framework that underpins this research will bring together dialogue that uses a CR analysis to identify generative mechanisms within its findings (see Sayer, 1992; 2000; Danermark *et al.,* 2002; Bhaskar, 2008; Beresford, 2019; Brunner, 2019), and zemiology (see Hillyard, 2007; Boukli & Kotze, 2018; Canning & Tombs, 2021) to critically evaluate identifiable 'harms' that emerge from the data, and effectively position the findings of this research within existing UK legislation. This chapter will start by introducing the purpose of the innovative theoretical approach that this research has employed.

There has been a growth in research interest in the potential impact of social media on mental health, wellbeing and negative perceptions of the dangers of the online world. At the time of writing, there remain vast concerns around the influence that certain usage of social media, and the content posted on its platforms, can hold over an individual's self-image, and relationship with both their body and food. The concern raised around social media continues to refer to platform cultures such as influencer culture and diet culture as spaces that perpetuate the vulnerability of their users. To understand this further, qualitative data are needed to explore experiences, meanings, and details of the suspected impact of social media. A qualitative two-step approach was used in this research. This consisted of a 6-month digital ethnographic observation alongside a series

of semi-structured interviews. This chapter will discuss this further to explore the philosophy and values behind the choice to gather two qualitative datasets and why this methodological route is imperative to enhancing the understanding of these social phenomena.

This project aimed to explore the retrospective and current experiences of individuals, regarding their relationship with their bodies, as well as their relationship with social media. From here the research developed a critical, cross-dialectic understanding of mental health and wellbeing, both directly and indirectly impacted by social media use. The research aimed to examine the prominence of issues relating to body image and disordered eating patterns, by exploring perceptions of the influence of social media over this.

Following on from these aims, the research objectives are as follows:

- To investigate the impact of the ‘online’ diet culture on ‘offline’ behaviours in social media users.
- To explore experiential perceptions of social media, the ‘cultural’ spaces that are formed within social media, and experiences of content consumed online.
- To produce knowledge that will contribute to future research and policy in the improvement of people’s relationship with their bodies.
- To develop a multi-faceted model approach that will contribute to improving the education concerning social media, and its safe use.

This chapter describes the research design, and the methods used to collate and analyse the data alongside the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis. The chapter also reinforces the need for participant-led research around mental health and the ontological reasoning of social harms in this area, to ensure that the recommendations produced from this thesis reflect ‘real’ experiences of these social phenomena and are inclusive of the voice of those with lived experience.

4.2 Theoretical Underpinnings: Mad Studies, Critical Realism and Zemiology

There is a wide array of studies that discuss the biological causes of mental distress (Barondes, 1990; Bilton *et al*., 1998; Bruckl *et al*, 2020), as well as research that delves into the relationship between social media and mental health diagnoses such as depression and anxiety (Pantic, 2014; Andreassen *et al*., 2016; Seabrook *et al*., 2016; Bettmann *et al*., 2021). A significant proportion of research exploring mental health and how it can be impacted by digital technology is heavily led by professionals and academics, predominantly in the discipline of psychology drawing on little lived experience outside of the qualitative accounts provided by participants (Andreassen & Pallensen, 2014; Andreassen et al., 2016; 2017; D'Arienzo et al., 2019; Tullet-Prado et al., 2023). Thus, there are few publications that consider survivor-led data to explore ways that social media consumption may impact self-image and/or, disordered eating patterns (Goodyear *et al.,* 2018; Lavrence & Cambre, 2020; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020; Cambre & Lavrence, 2023). More specifically, recommendations for future outputs into education surrounding the way social media can influence the relationship between a social media user, their body, and food, to ensure the datasets are evidenced and user led.

Mad Studies has been used as a methodological tool at the early stages of designing this research to support a process of reflexive subjectivity for the researcher as an 'insider' at all stages of conducting this doctoral work. This thesis adopts Andrew Sayer's (1992) visual interpretation of a CR analysis alongside Bhaskar's (1978) understanding of the levels of empirical reality to conceptualise individual experiential accounts shared as part of this two-phase research design. Zemiology will be applied to a critical evaluation of the identified harms that have emerged from the research findings within existing UK legislation to produce recommendations for future research. This chapter will address the different stages that Mad Studies informed the design of this research, and how CR and zemiology were then used to craft and analyse the project.

4.2.1 Mad Studies and Positionality

Although Mad Studies does not form part of the core theoretical framework that underpins this research, it has been used as a methodological tool to understand the most

appropriate and effective ways to position lived experiences of participants at the heart of the research process and the dissemination of research findings. The Mad Studies framework has had an invaluable contribution to the recruitment and data collection process of this thesis, as it emphasises the utmost importance in the core value of lived experience in research that aims to produce a political, pragmatic and educative output. I believe there is a need for understanding impairment alongside the lived experience of mental distress to be able to reach past the surface-level discussion of experiencing mental distress, this is where CR analysis comes into this methodological discussion. CR, as discussed in section 4.2.2 allows the researcher to bring the perception of the body back into discussions whereby the actuality of experiences can be analysed more holistically (Williams, 1999). By not acknowledging physical difference, the requirement for potential medical intervention, or the diversification of characteristics that remain to be socially constructed such as beauty, diagnostic cultures and success (as discussed in Chapter 2), the actuality of experiences remain unnoticed.

Where I have not always been open about my own position as an individual with lived experience of (undiagnosed) bulimia and body dysmorphic disorder in my teenage years (and a few years beyond), I see transparency of this experience as paramount to a core value of this research process: lived experience and empowering the voices of those who have not have had another outlet to have their experience heard. Before moving into academia, I have also undertaken a range of roles as a mental health and wellbeing practitioner, which supports my 'insider' knowledge of this project in a professional and a personal capacity. In research like this, first person epistemology was explored through a Mad Studies lens by Jasna Russo in her doctoral thesis in 2018, following publications around Mad Studies, criticising the lack of first person epistemologically led research that underpins traditional psychiatry (Russo & Sweeney, 2016; Russo, 2018). The criticism posed by Russo (2018) was that survivor experiences are necessary to produce psychiatric intervention and support services that truly reflect the needs of individuals who have experienced mental distress. This was followed by work published by Kidd *et al.* (2023) that discusses the epistemic injustice faced by individuals with lived experiences, regarding psychiatric research that underpins contemporary psychiatric practice, following prior research exploring epistemological positioning in health-based research

(Christy, 2018; Choifer, 2018; Quintero Johnson *et al*., 2021). Transparency around my own experiences of some elements to this research was upheld throughout the entire research process, with all interview participants involved. The Mad Studies framework has allowed me to present my position as an insider within the research, with confidence, to potential participants, to audiences in the dissemination of findings and throughout my writing. The intersubjectivity that is considered when positioning the researcher as an insider or an outsider within their work will be discussed further in Chapter 4.6. My positionality in this research was carried forward into the interview schedule design in that participants were made aware of my lived experience of diet culture, disordered eating and as a former wellbeing practitioner. This transparency encourages trust and openness in building a rapport between the researcher and participant while breaking down a potential power imbalance between these two positions (Collins & McNulty, 2020; Zou, 2023; Yip, 2024).

Mad Studies can be described as a movement of creativity and activism that liberates and celebrates the experiences of those labelled as 'mentally ill'; while bringing members of an oppressed group to a conscious place within sociological discussion (Ballantyne, 2019). A crucial driving force for the unique feature of Mad Studies in the recruitment and research stages of this project is the radical co-production element to the framework. Alongside the urge to consume high volumes of experiential knowledge as opposed to building on top of historical and potentially inaccurate foundations (LeFrancios *et al*., 2013; LeFrancios & Coppock, 2014; Russo & Sweeney, 2016). Mad Studies is thereby praised for avoiding psychiatric reductionism by "developing dramatic and feasible alternatives to support our understandings of and responses to madness and distress at both individual and societal levels" (Beresford, in LeFrancios *et al*., 2013: 9).

Cresswell & Poth (2017) suggest qualitative modes of research to be one that we, as researchers, adopt to empower individuals to share their stories and hear their voices, by enabling individuals to lead the narrative of what the level of detail they wish to go into, particularly through qualitative interviewing. Thus, minimising the power relationship that often exists between researcher and participant in a study (Edwards, 2010; Cresswell & Poth, 2017). This is supported by the work of Sweeney & Morgan (2009) who emphasises

that service user/survivor research should employ critical methodologies, and, that critical research resonates with the value of empowering oppressed voices and minority groups. This is a core principle within the Mad Studies movement and was carried forward into this doctoral research.

Co-produced qualitative datasets are referred to by a variety of names such as survivor-led, user-led, peer research, ‘user involvement’, survivor-controlled, or user-controlled (Faulkner, 2004). All of which fall under the remit of service user/survivor research, the use of each of these terms defines the level of involvement service users/survivors have in the research project. For this project, the researcher worked collaboratively throughout the course of data collection with the service user/survivor to conduct a piece of work defined under the term ‘user involvement’ (Sweeney & Morgan, 2009). User-involvement in research places lived experience at the heart of its’ research. As participants, service users/survivors were able to openly engage in conversation of lived experience, as well as provide ideas regarding future outputs and recommendations that then informed the analytical stages of this project, identifying generative mechanisms within the findings.

Although the values that underpin Mad Studies as a theoretical framework resonated with the researchers’ passion to empower individuals with lived experience of engaging with diet culture through social media to tell their story through their own lens, Mad Studies was not carried forward into the framework that was designed to analyse the findings of this research. It has been important to the researcher, however, to acknowledge the influence that Mad Studies had on the design of this research, specifically during the interview phase of data collection due to her own lived experience of diet culture, disordered eating and harms of the online space. As a former mental health practitioner, and someone with lived experience of these areas, Mad Studies has supported the researcher in justifying a methodological design that has empowered individuals to tell their story, without attempting to undertake a specific intersectional analysis of the phenomena in question. Where Mad Studies supported the researcher’s positionality throughout the research design and data collection process, the design of a CR framework allows the researcher to move from ‘insider’ to ‘observer’ during the analytical phase of the research to demonstrate a deeper criticality of the findings.

4.2.2 Critical Realism

CR aims to understand the relationship between observable knowledge and reality (Brunner, 2019). It is a multi-layered framework that aims to unearth levels of empirical reality that are completely independent of existing observable knowledge, providing a greater understanding of causality in social phenomena (Bhaskar, 2008). Realism views the social world to be open and complex in which multiple entities exist, and should be able to co-exist alongside one another, despite a difference in function and purpose (ibid). The adoption of a CR ontology has enabled the research to explore the actuality of experiences, that go beyond the observable, constructed pre-existing knowledge (Williams, 1999), whereby a CR ontological position supports realism but the 'real' in at times unobservable and researchers need to delve beyond socially constructed knowledge to identify. The critical form of realism critiques the empiricism within natural sciences by arguing that empirical research, reduces the reality of social phenomenon (Bhaskar, 2008). Thus, producing actual knowledge. By producing such knowledge, generative mechanisms are unveiled; otherwise known as explanatory themes in research, or pieces of information that explain why observable events occur (Mingers & Standing, 2017). CR scholars believe there is room for improvement in society in terms of understanding social phenomena that academics should concern themselves with. Thereby highlighting the need to move away from the traditional 'what to do' approach to research and move towards understanding concerns posed deeper than those found at the initial stages of an investigation and connecting it to certain elements of Mad Studies.

When CR emerged in the 1970s it was posed as an opportunity for academics to move away from the traditional orthodoxies of positivism and constructivism in research design (Maxwell, 2012). This could have been used as an alternative to either paradigm, or to bring together characteristics from different research paradigms that would meet the needs of the research. Roy Bhasker (1975) developed CR as a philosophical paradigm that demanded a shift towards examining the fundamental nature of social phenomena as opposed to mainstream explanations. CR epistemologically distinguishes its place between the traditional paradigms of research: positivism and interpretivism, whereby it rejects relativism in social and scientific discourses and to aims to re-orientate social

sciences back to emancipatory goals (Bhaskar, 1979; Danermark *et al.,* 2002). Therefore, accepting that natural sciences can be used to study the social world alongside hermeneutics to a certain degree. However, Bhaskar emphasises how crucial it is to consider the usefulness of positivist datasets when exploring natural science compared to social science (Bhaskar, 2008). The ontological positioning of CR looks to celebrate the existence of reality external to human consciousness, thus exploring unobservable depths of knowledge (Mingers & Standing, 2017). Justifying this claim, Bhaskar's work seeks to understand deeper than existing social constructs, and surface-level reality and look at more complex views of the world that may not be obvious and explainable at face value (Bhaskar, 2008; Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2016). CR is distinct from alternative philosophical approaches as it attempts to challenge established research philosophies rather than rejecting their use in research (McEvoy & Richards, 2006; Brunner, 2019). Danermark *et al*. (2002) advocates on an intensive approach to data collection, especially when exploring new ground and previously untheorized or minimally theorised social phenomena.

Karadzhov (2021) describes CR as an underused approach in researching experiences of mental distress. CR methodology harnesses abstract modes of theorising the deeper layers of the social world. This structural analysis rejects the notion that causal explanations can be reduced to the properties of 'lower level' entities. Therefore, CR can support in overcoming the explanatory inadequacies of traditional empiricism used to complete mental health and inequalities research. CR has three core principles: (1) ontological realism – being is real and the world exists and acts independently of our knowledge of it; (2) epistemological relativism – knowledge is socially produced under specific social and linguistic conditions and is therefore changeable and fallible; (3) judgemental rationality – it is possible to arrive at decisions between relative and competing beliefs or theories because not all interpretations are epistemologically or morally equal and there can be rational grounds for preferring one to another (Haigh *et al*., 2019). Maxwell (2012: 7) states that:

> Critical realism combines: A realist ontology (the belief that there is a real world that exists independently of our beliefs and constructions) with a constructivist epistemology (the belief that our knowledge of this world is inevitably our own construction, created from a specific vantage point, and that there is no possibility of our achieving a purely "objective" account that is independent of all particular perspectives). All knowledge is thus "theory-laden," but this does not contradict the existence of a real world to which this knowledge refers.

For Bhaskar (1979) CR placed its focus on the importance of ontological philosophy to generate theory that allow researchers to delve into the human sciences effectively. These ideas of 'depth ontology' recentre ontology in the pursuit of explaining complex social phenomena by referring to the three-fold laminated domain of CR – the real, the actual and the empirical. To define this, the 'real' refers to the intransitive domain of things that exist, objects, their structures, and their causal power (McEvoy & Richards, 2006). The 'actual' is made up of events that occur, whether people are aware of them or not. And finally, the 'empirical' is made up of events that people have knowingly experienced (ibid). CR starts with experienced results and then works backward to explain why this is the case and what must have caused this (Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2016). This is referred to as abductive research; open to considering and/or building new theoretical frameworks if necessary to recontextualise social phenomena (McEvoy & Richards, 2006; Hoddy, 2019). The reason for this being, that "we must at least know what agents think they are doing and why they are doing it" (Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2016: 105). This is important to this thesis due to its' design of a two-phase methodological framework which allows the researcher to observe behaviours and narratives used by social media users in the online space, while discussing with other social media users their motivation for using social media, their perceived relationship with social media (retrospective and current), and their experience with using social media.

Bhaskar (1979; 2008) emphasises the importance of determining the separation of epistemology (the philosophy of knowledge and what we know) and ontology (the philosophy of how we have that knowledge). To counter the fallacy of epistemology in social research, he takes his theory of knowledge one step further by discussing the distinction between transitive knowledge (our knowledge that changes) and intransitive

knowledge (the relatively unchanging knowledge which we attempt to know) (Bhaskar, 1979). A key distinction that runs throughout all CR discussions is the recognition of such ontological transactions. By arguing for ontology and against the 'epistemic fallacy', which considers being as knowledge of being, CR argues that it supports academics to successfully place the natural world into reality (Bourn, 2014). Rather than establishing certainties and just understanding the meaning of events, CR aims to develop casual explanations for such events. As a framework, CR has accepted interdisciplinarity as an approach to research when recognising the complexity of ontology. Bourn (2014) argues that there are a multitude of causal structures and mechanisms needed, across disciplines, to explain the reality of social phenomena, different from that that we currently understand. CR aims to offer a set of ontological mechanisms, that recognise the independent, causal effects of macro-level (social structures) and micro-level (individual agency) entities (Bourn, 2014). CR argues for a new interconnected and structured ontology; reality is both multi-faceted and differentiated to form a more complex, higher-order level of thinking (Bhaskar, 1979). According to Sayer (1992) when conducting social science empirical research, we as researchers must be able to distinguish between 'thought objects' (theory) and 'real objects' (fact). To achieve this, we must treat 'thought objects' and 'real objects' as knowledge that can inform one another. But acknowledge that one does not hold prestige over the other. To contextualise, this research investigates lived experience of online hate and experiences of harmful social media consumption through two qualitative datasets: ethnographic observation and conversational interviewing.

Sayer's (2000) model of CR was used to map the position of social media, growing accessibility to smartphones, online content consumption/behaviours and impact/harm into a CR framework. The use of a CR analysis allowed the research to explore the actuality of experiences (Williams, 1999) of social media, mental health (specifically self-esteem, eating disorders and body-related anxiety, and harms caused by the mechanisms of self-esteem and diagnostic cultures (Brinkmann, 2016). CR has enabled disability studies scholars to reconsider the position of the body in disability research, by moving away from constructed notions of body studies termed the 'contested body' (see Williams, 1999), fore fronting experiential knowledge to feed into future policy and

educative development within the area. CR focuses on objectivity in analysing data, when focusing on the levels of empirical reality within data, to explore the underlying generative mechanisms that may not be identified by an individual within their own experiences of a phenomena. Where Mad Studies advocates the strength of researchers with lived experience, researching the area that they have lived experience within an 'insider', the use of a CR epistemology emphasises the need for objectivity by the researcher. This being a fundamental justification for the move to CR from Mad Studies in the analytical framing of the findings of this research. As will be discussed in Chapter 4.6, during data collection and analysis the researcher completed an emotionality diary, which allowed her to address any potential subjectivity that may have entered the design, completion or analysis of the data. CR enables researchers to explore flexibility in their analysis of data by allowing the researcher to be transitive in theorising their data. Thus, not attempting to understand empirical data based on formally constructed ideals of the empirical knowledge, and understand the actual knowledge being presented at the time of researching (Bhaskar, 2008; Isaksen, 2022). This has supported the use of Mad Studies, CR and zemiology throughout this research. The application of a CR analytical design of this research will be outlined in Chapter 4.5.

4.2.3 Zemiology

Zemiology is a pertinent critique of traditional criminology that is applied within the analysis of this research. Whereby criminology focuses on crime, criminality and victimisation, zemiology focuses on the concept of social harms that are not confined to the boundaries of the social construct of 'crime' (Hillyard & Tombs, 2007; 2017; Boukli & Kotze, 2018; Canning & Tombs, 2021). Zemiologists focus on assessing harm perpetuated by non-criminal behaviours and processes as it recognises the power dynamics that are reproduced through the social construction of legally defined crimes (Hillyard & Tombs, 2007). Areas of concern for zemiologists may include non-criminalised behaviours and processes that are not criminalised because "those who have the power to criminalise do not find it within their interests to do so" (Wright, 2023: 129). By employing a zemiological understanding to the construction of social media consumption, and the regulation (or lack of) online hate, the research was able to move past existing

constructs of criminality and consider the somewhat unobservable reality of harms perpetuated by the digital world. Thus, zemiology informed the research design, data collection and analyses of 'hate' elements of the research findings. Zemiology calls for the revisiting of 'harm' in late modern society allowing for broader social structures and issues (Hillyard & Tombs, 2017) – in the case of this research, social media - to be recognised as causal factors in the generation of identifiable social harms and the ways these are conceptualised and responded to. As such, the use of zemiology in the analysis of this research advocates for the identification and prevention of harm, alongside the regulation of potentially harmful behaviours/structures through a lens of social justice.

Although zemiology is useful in supporting social scientists in understanding how and why certain harms may occur in postmodern society (Hillyard & Tombs, 2007; 2017; Boukli & Kotze, 2018; Canning & Tombs, 2021), acting as "... an alternative lens that captures the vicissitudes of contemporary life" (Pemberton, 2015: 7), zemiology has been criticised for its' blindness to colonialism (Wright, 2023), and therefore it's lack of reflexivity when investigating phenomena that struggle with a history of discrimination. Further criticisms of zemiology recognise a lack of consensus surrounding how social harm can be defined under different circumstances, to different individuals who may experience it (Canning & Tombs, 2021). Such concerns surrounding the lack of standardised "essence of social harm" (Canning & Tombs, 2021: 107) have been acknowledged in the analytical phase of this research. Where the interview schedule was carefully crafted as to not lead participants by not asking explicitly asking about experiences of 'harm' (see Appendix A), a review of existing literature surrounding the areas of social media use and online cultural spaces presented 'harms' as a potential mechanism that could emerge throughout data collection. Therefore, the researcher deemed it to be important that typologies of harm could be applied to any harms that were identified by participants in both phases of the research. Any 'identifiable harms' that would emerge from the data would be conceptualised by participants using their own language for what these 'harms' were and how they affected the participant. The researcher would then use the methodological framework designed for this research to categorise these harms concerning physical harms, psychological harms, emotional harms, cultural harms (Canning & Tombs, 2021), embedded harms (Hall, 2019) and iatrogenic harms (Corteen *et al*., 2016). Emerging

literature within the discipline of zemiology continues to recommend a need for change in the way that scholars approach their understanding of crime, deviance, and desistance (Canning & Tombs, 2021), emphasising the cruciality of pursuing research into broader structural barriers, and types of harm, in contemporary society. Thereby upholding a commonality to the purpose of CR analyses: moving beyond conventional means of knowledge. An analysis of the potential harms posed by social media would be limited if confined by the boundaries of traditional criminological analysis (please see Chapter 3.3 for earlier discussions of legislative restrictions in this research).

According to Hopici (2016) zemiology enables academics to unpick the notion of 'responsibilisation' (initially posed by Garland (1996) in his deliberations of the individual responsibilisation in justice and policing practice): something that, in the context of online behaviours and regulation, does not exist at the time of writing. This allows researchers to "address 'responsibility' [or irresponsibility] in the failure to deal adequately with social problems" (Hillyard & Tombs, 2007: 19 cited in Hopici, 2016). Zemiology will be used in this project to support the researcher in positioning the findings within existing harms-based UK Government frameworks, aligning with the Online Safety Act 2023 and supporting the evaluation of the efficacy of the political definition of harm relating to the digital world, diagnostic cultures and body image in late modernity The evaluation of the Online Safety Act 2023 will also consider the responsibilisation of online harms and safety under existing legislative guidance. Alongside this, funded research led and supported by the UK Government between 2014 and 2023 such as the Government Equalities Office (2014), the Women & Equalities Committee (2021), the Digitally Altered Images Bill (2021) and the Department for Health and Social Care (2023) – discussed in Chapter 2 – have also attempted to address harms amongst young people who engage with online materials relating to diet culture, body image and the advocation to engage in what would medically be referred to as 'disordered' eating patterns, without further action being taken as a review to recommendations from these publications. These Government publications justify the need for further research that incorporates zemiology as a theoretical foundation, especially in the early stages of deciphering legislation regarding future crimes and regulation of behaviours in the digital space.

Bhaskar's (1978) levels of empirical reality has been used to develop Figure 4.1, below, to demonstrate how zemiology can be mapped alongside CR, to fulfil the needs of research surrounding experiences of platform cultures, harms and social media more generally. Figure 4.1 demonstrates the ontological depth of empirical reality, discussed earlier in this chapter, whereby Bhaskar positions 'real' knowledge to be the deepest level of empirical reality, and 'empirical' knowledge as surface level knowledge. The theoretical framework that underpins this thesis can be positioned throughout this diagram, to demonstrate how experiential knowledge can be the 'empirical' actor within the framework through the sharing of experiences observed by the researcher and zemiology was applied in ordered to analyse and identity the harms that occur as an event of generative mechanisms and conditions of platform cultures and social media. Therefore, zemiology will support the 'actual' level of knowledge in the theoretical framework for this study. The latter stages of Chapters 5 and 6 will demonstrate how the themes that emerged from both phases of the data can be positioned into the levels of empirical reality using CR.

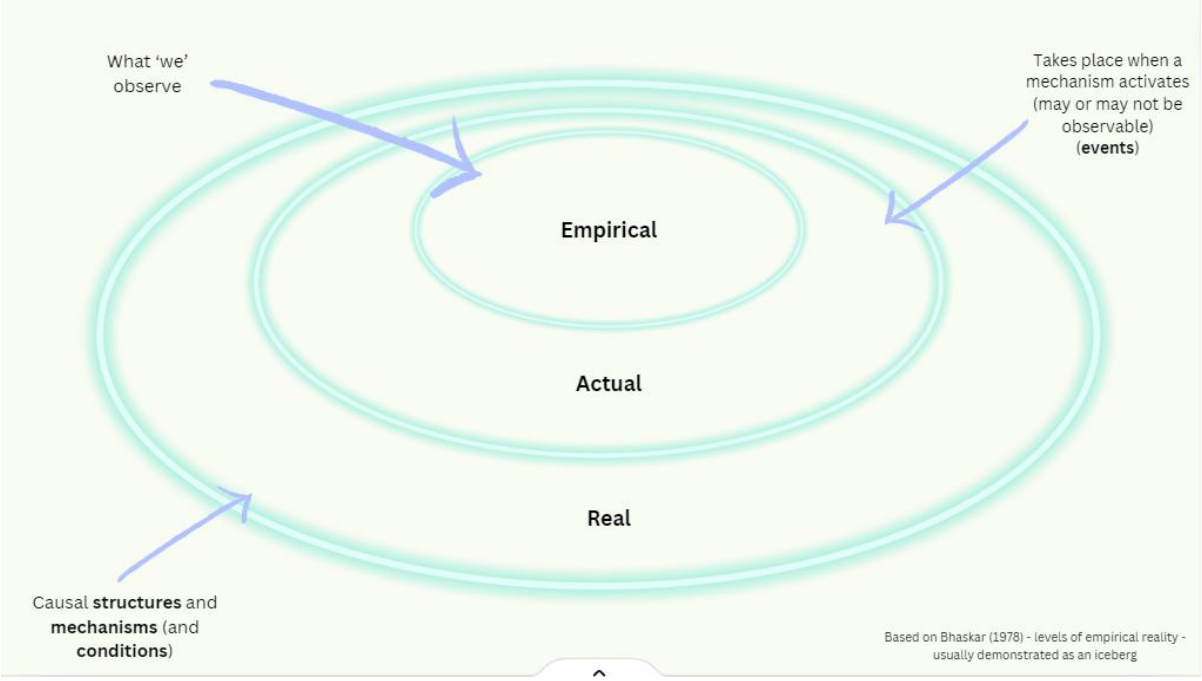

Figure 4.1 diagram to demonstrate Bhaskar's (1978) levels of empirical reality

4.3 Research Design and Sampling

A two-step approach was implemented as means of collating a holistic dataset with differing uses of language and communication by collecting 'online' and 'offline' data. This two-phase approach was initiated using a non-reactive digital ethnography followed by a series of semi-structured interviews. During both phases of the research, the researcher maintained an emotionality diary that was used as both a reflexivity tool to address any potential issues with subjectivity, and a data source during the analysis of the data. The early stages of the digital ethnography were conducted to gain an understanding of certain attitudes towards body image of public figures, and their use and/or advertisement of their lifestyle on active social media platform. This allowed for the identification of existing language used towards certain bodies, perceptions of diet culture and the 'influencers' that were creating the most noise, and gaining the largest following online, outside of my own experience. Primitive data from the digital ethnography then formed prompts and tones of conversation for the second stage of the research: semi-structured interviewing. It was decided, two months into the 6-month digital ethnography that it would continue to run alongside the interview schedule to continue informing the emerging understanding of the underlying generative mechanisms throughout the entire data collection process, due to the researcher recognising a high level of engagement with the platform cultures that were being observed, and its' users. The reasoning for collecting two qualitative datasets, was to acknowledge the language used by social media users whilst engaging with diet culture and deliberating physical appearance of online 'influencers' as opposed to conversation within an interviewing space. This subsection of the chapter will aim to outline the justifications for this methodological route and the ways in which this was approached by considering the need for using two research methodologies in the exploration of applying a harms-framework to diet culture online.

4.3.1 Digital Ethnography

Digital ethnography is an appreciative form of research in the digital world, allowing communication between individuals from broader living spaces. As well as providing researchers with the opportunity to gather a more diverse population sample, while observing behaviour and reactions in a person's natural habitat, from afar (Underberg &

Zorn, 2013). As a qualitative method of research, digital ethnography can support in making sense of lived experiences and the meaning/emotions associated to such experiences (Postill & Pink, 2012); a quality that both the Mad Studies and CR frameworks would require. As detailed in Chapter 4.2.1, Mad Studies (and at times, CR) attempt to identify lived experiences, with CR focusing on the potentially unobservable and diagnostic cultures. Therefore, a qualitative exploration of behaviours and narratives are central to a CR ontology, supported by Mad Studies as a methodological tool used to forefront experiential accounts shared as part of this research.

The digital ethnography was conducted over a 6-month period in this research and collated publicly available data from selected gossip/chat forums. Reddit and Tattle.Life were selected as the two forums that would be used as part of the ethnographic phase of this research due to their visual communication style predominantly being based around written discussions between users, as well as the occasional use of images to support conversation. The addition of an image to conversation threads would steer conversation whether this be the topic of 'trolling' or a self-portrait being posted by users to initiate discussions around what 'diet' they should be following Also, at the time of this research, there was no published research that explored the use of Tattle.Life as a mode of social networking relating to diet culture and body image. As a result, the researcher felt it would be appropriate to explore Tattle.Life as a 'new' gossip forum alongside Reddit which had a more established breadth of research underpinning its use and experiences of its use. Reddit is a social networking platform that was founded in 2005, since which it has been commonly associated with the video gaming world. Tattle.Life, at the time of writing, has not yet been used the context of social science research. Both Reddit and Tattle.Life encourage discussion between users through discourse and images; the commonalities in the platform's designs enabled the researcher to utilise the same non-reactive observational method whilst immersed in each forum. The two forums were identified by the researcher as under researched forums, especially in research surrounding platforms cultures, harms and potential experiences of disordered eating, therefore were identified as the two most useful platforms for this research.

Due to the distance between the researcher, and the subject whose behaviour is being observed, digital ethnography is recognised as a less intrusive method of data collection making it less likely for the behaviour and responses of participants to alter during observation (Hsu, 2014). Underberg & Zorn (2013: 10) define digital ethnography as a method of "representing real-life cultures through combining the characteristic features of digital media with the elements of story". Digital ethnography can occur in two phases: non-reactive and reactive (Janetzko, 2008), whereby the ethnographer can position themself as an active participant or a passive observer in their research (Gibbs & Hall, 2021). The 'phase' of digital ethnography that the researcher wishes to enter, whether it be one phase (or both) within their research has the potential to alter the way in which data is generated. Enghoff & Aldridge (2019) regard the non-reactive phase of digital ethnography to be a phase of collecting data that is organic, and entirely user-generated through which social media users will act and communicate as they usually would. The types of behaviours, and reactions, that are usually analysed through digital ethnography tends to be forms of text, images, online spaces, and videos, which can include screenshots of interactions between online users (Gibbs & Hall, 2021). This thesis will refer to participatory accounts from the digital ethnography as 'subjects' or 'subject accounts' to align with the language used by the Association for Internet Researchers (AOIR) guidance, published in 2019, surrounding the ethical considerations to be made when conducting internet-mediated research (AOIR, 2019).

Examples of studies that have successfully used digital ethnography to develop academic understanding behaviours online, and their relationship with new technology and social media are Lavis & Winter (2020) *#Online Harms or Benefits? An Ethnographic Analysis of the Positives and Negatives of Peer-Support Around Self-Harm on Social Media,* and Peek *et al*., (2015). *Blogging and Social Media for Mental Health Education and Advocacy: a Review for Psychiatrists.* Caliandro (2018) deliberated the increasing suitability of using digital ethnography in early stages of research due to the heavy involvement of new technologies in our day-to-day lives. A key critique of digital ethnographic research in the social science sphere is that researchers cannot be separated from the context of the dataset, as the data is collected only through their interpretation (Gibbs & Hall, 2021). In the case of this research digital ethnography is not

being used as a lone method of research, thus, the data collected can be explored through conversation with participants during the qualitative interviewing phase of the research, to ensure that there is less likelihood of the data interpretation being skewed, or biased.

Over a period of 6 months, both forums were explored using various search terms, as well as the top 10 trending discussion threads/forums being followed. Each week throughout the 6-month period, Reddit and Tattle.Life were observed for 2 hours per week, per forum, usually in 30-minute blocks. The ethnographic dataset was formulated using quotes, frequently used terminology and screenshots of user engagement, alongside a record of the 'top 10' trending threads of both forums. In total, 47 screenshots of user engagement with Tattle.Life as well as 13 pages (comprising of 6357 words) of Reddit quotes, discussion themes, and 'advice requests' were collected. The digital ethnographic dataset in this research comprised of data that was collective through a non-reactive digital ethnography, with the researcher immersed in Reddit and Tattle.Life, to explore discussion threads and online communities on these forums. Non-reactive digital ethnography involves 'lurking' in forums, as a passive observer of the interactions ongoing within forums (Gibbs & Hall, 2021). This allowed the researcher to immerse herself fully into the conversations that were ongoing between users around platform cultures such as diet culture (health and fitness) and influencer culture, without engaging directly with other users.

Reddit identifies as a social news platform that allows users to follow certain '*subreddits'* - all of which are known to be smaller communities within the wider digital forum. Within these '*subreddits'*, users can search for areas on the site that they are interested in engaging with. Each '*subreddit'* upholds a set of rules that should be adhered to when communicating with other users. Tattle.Life advertises itself to be a commentary website which bases its' commentary threads on public social media sites such as online influencers/public personalities. Such commentary threads are restricted to 1,000 comments, however there is scope for further threads to be created to continue conversation with other users based on a chosen public personality. Like the *'subreddits'* of Reddit, Tattle.Life has a disclosure of ground rules that it's users should adhere to if they wish to use the gossip forum. The same rules appeared to apply across all areas of

the forum, as users are only asked to agree to terms during sign-up. However, the way that this is regulated, and the level of surveillance placed upon the thousands of conversation threads that are fed into daily is of concern to users, and the public personalities who are talked about on Tattle.Life. Tattle.Life admits to being a place for people to engage in critical conversations about those who choose to publicly live and monetise their daily lifestyle.

Reddit

The exploration of Reddit started with the use of search terms that had emerged from a review of existing literature such as 'diet' 'diet culture' 'calories' 'eating disorders' 'training' 'exercise' 'body image' 'lose weight' 'gain weight' to find *subreddit* threads that held appropriate links to the generative mechanisms highlighted in existing literature. The search outcomes using the terms above generated a regular pattern of trending threats; these threads fell under the category of 'health and fitness'. Each of the names listed below represents a *'subreddit':* each *'subreddit'* has its own moderator(s) and set of rules that users were expected to adhere to. A rule that appeared regularly in the terms of being accepted into a '*subreddit'* was to make a request to moderators if a user was conducting research that they wanted to engage the group in. On signing up to Reddit '*subreddits'* the researcher had to declare that their use of the forum was for research purposes, but that the researcher did not wish to ask research questions, or act as an active participant in their work, disclosing their position as a 'lurker', or non-reactive researcher (see Gibbs & Hall, 2021). Moderators for these pages were contacted to request this access, to remain overt in my purpose of being a member of the '*subreddit'.* The moderators were provided the same 2 example questions 'what does diet culture mean to you?' or 'what has your experience of online diet culture been? A moderator for 'bodyweight fitness' responded denying the request to pose research questions to the group. But they did accept my request to join the '*subreddit'* and explore conversations that had already taken place. Threads that were most often found in the 'top 10' trending 'health and fitness' threads on Reddit are listed below:

- Intermittent fasting

- Brazillian Jui Jitsu
- Bodyweight fitness
- Backpacking
- Nutrition
- Running
- Healthy food
- Bodybuilding
- Vegan
- Fasting

As well as these, top 10 trending '*subreddits*', 'fatlogic', 'gymsnark' and 'antidiet' were commonly advertised to me as a Reddit user who had identified when signing up to a Reddit account that I was interested in exploring diet culture and body image support-related content.

Tattle.Life

The exploration of Tattle.Life as a gossip forum held a different shape, due to the way in which it was set up as less of a community, and more of a place for users to negatively discuss online activity of individuals with vast online followings. This tended to be popular online users of forums such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and, sometimes, X. One of the rules when signing up to Tattle.Life is to not bring a non-public figure into discussion threads. Tattle.Life terms and conditions on sign-up specify that only public profiles should be discussed. The important analysis of this ruleset is its construction, and where the boundary of being a public figure, or a non-public figure, starts and ends as it could be argued that despite the numerical size of a person's online following if they have minimal privacy settings placed over their social media account, then they are opting to live their life, online and publicly. This is something that will be unpicked and shaped further in later discussions of this thesis.

Identifying a 'top 5' or 'top 10' trending threads on Tattle.Life is not as straightforward as Reddit to the nature of how discussion threads are set up. Each discussion thread can

hold up to 1,000 comments, meaning that if user's wish to continue to discuss a public figure, or topic, they must move on to a new thread. The names of threads used below as provided to give context of the language used towards public figures, titling these discussion threads, as opposed to just using their name and a number. The 5 named threads used below were chosen from the dataset to be initially highlighted as they were the most found names in the 'trending threads' – Jack Monroe being a public who's name regularly showed on more than one occasion in the 'trending threads':

1. Katie Price #156 Kate spaffs her cash on a car that's pink, Cole spaffs yellow jelly in the kitchen sink.
2. Mrs Hinch #534 Edible paint and Poundland tat, filtering hennerz so he doesn't look fat.
3. Jack Monroe #283 Tax Jack, tax jack, needs to start paying back.
4. Jack Monroe #284 Jack "doesn't turn up to every Twitter fight" Monroe.
5. The Ingham Family #225 How Much Delonger Can They Drag This Out.

Something that will be unpicked in this area of discussion is the '#' number placed after the figures name, prior to the title of the discussion thread. This number stands for the number thread that has been created due to a previous thread being 'locked' by Tattle.Life as means of regulating how many comments can be posted about one person. As we can see this is a contradictory measure of regulation as the two highest trending gossip threads are regarding the same individual, Jack Monroe. Further patterns in public figures discussed on Tattle.Life threads, regularities in language used towards these public figures, and concerns around the responsibility in regulating this forum will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 6.4.

Findings from the early stages of the digital ethnography were used to inform prompts and potential discussion points during participant interviews. Although interview participants and digital ethnography 'subjects' were separate cohorts, the themes emerging from the digital ethnography supported the broadening of the researcher's knowledge of platform cultures, outside of her own personal experience. As already noted, the digital ethnography continued over a further 4-month periods whilst interviews took place, this approach was agreed between the researcher and their supervisor

because of the continued visible interaction with platform cultures across of Reddit and Tattle.Life. The continuation of the digital ethnography was also agreed to allow the researcher to continue with short, 30-minute periods of immersion into the platforms due to visible discussions of self-injurious behaviours, promotion of eating disorders and the use of derogatory, hateful language that was used between users, and directed towards 'influencers' that was witnessed by the researcher. Researcher wellbeing and a consideration for emotionality within research, given that this research has been conducted by an individual with lived experience of disordered eating, and low self-esteem, was considered throughout the course of data collection and analysis, this will be discussed further in Chapter 2.6. The digital ethnography ended after 6-months, 1-month prior to the final interview taking place, as the researcher had observed trending language, 'influencers', and behaviours had begun to stabilise, whereby similar discussions and engagement with 'diets' and 'trends' remained similar over the final 4-weeks of observation. At this stage, the researcher had a breadth of data, alongside a range of interview transcripts and forthcoming interviews that provided an extensive dataset.

4.3.2 Qualitative Interviewing and Recruitment

Qualitative interviewing provides a space in social research to explore in-depth datasets through the mode of planned and prompted conversations between participant and researcher, thus allowing the researcher access to subjective knowledge put forward by the interviewee and their experience of the social world (Edwards & Holland, 2013). The use of semi-structured interviews allows a less formal and potentially more relaxed environment between interviewer and interviewee (Bryman, 2001). This creates an interactional space where experiences can be exchanged and themes can be extracted, and built upon (Bryman, 2001). A core value in Mad Studies research is to place lived experience at the heart of data collection, as well as allowing flexibility in the recruitment of participants, whereby the sampling process does not intend for sample populations to be intersectional and representative of an array of identities, but for the sample population to be led by individuals who feel empowered to tell their story (Ingram, 2016). Mad Studies and CR methodologies allow the opportunity to use participants' lived experience as

expert knowledge. This was clearly evidenced in the social media advertisement, when recruiting participants. The advertisement also provided a brief overview of the aim of this study, emphasizing its aim to explore the impact of social media over an individual's relationship with their body and experience of online diet culture.

A sample of 22 participants was recruited to take part in the interview process of this research. The researcher had originally aimed for 15-20 interview participants, alongside the data generated from the digital ethnography. The decision was made for the interview phase of the research to come to an end after 22 interviews due to a saturation in expressions of interest to participate following the initial recruitment drive, as well as the extensive dataset that had been generated through both phases of the research. Recruitment for the interview phase of the project was achieved by using a snowball sampling process via social media platforms: specifically, Facebook (5 participants), X (8 participants), Instagram (7 participants), and LinkedIn (2 participants). The interview participant sample consisted of 22 individuals who identified as female, and 2 who identified as male, 1 female participant identified as disabled with a further 4 participants disclosing medical diagnoses of eating disorders or mental health illnesses. This project did not aim for a specific demographic representation; as highlighted in earlier in the chapter the purpose of this research was not to undertake an intentionally intersectional analysis of social media experience, but to collate the stories of individuals from any backgrounds, between the ages of 18 and 30, to tell their story. The decision was made for a specific age group to be targeted for the sampling of interview participants to ensure that participants were able to discuss retrospective experiences of going through adolescence using social media. At the time of writing, U.K. Government initiatives surrounding online safety focus on the safety of young people online in terms of protecting young people from pro-harm content such as the incitement of suicide, self-injurious behaviours or content that advocates for engaging with disordered eating habits. Therefore, the researcher believed it was appropriate to align the focus of this research project with the current political agenda. Capping the age of participants at 30-years old allowed the research to specifically focus on individuals at the latter end of Generation Z and the millennial age categories. Although Mad Studies research traditionally does not target specific demographics in recruitment for research purposes, it was important for

participants of this research to be from a targeted age group as this increased the potential likelihood of longevity in participants experiences of social media, through a variety of smart device, between their teenage years through to their adult years. Individual experiences were considered as *individual experiences* whilst acknowledging characteristics that participants share that may have influenced their experiences of social media, disordered eating or self-esteem issues.

A snowball recruitment process, also known as snowball sampling, is a recruitment technique that allows participants, researcher's contacts, or contacts on social media platforms to advertise or recommend participant in a research project (Parker *et al.,* 2019; Leighton *et al.,* 2021). By recruiting a sample using the online space, this allowed scope to open opportunity to engage in this study to a wider audience with a variety of backgrounds, experiences, cultures, and geographical locations without forcing a diverse dynamic (Leighton *et al.,* 2021). It is argued that snowball sampling can lead to selection bias in research recruitment with the researcher acting as a gatekeeper to potential participants, and the researcher therefore becomes reliant on their own resources and contacts, and secondary contacts through their initial connections online (Parker *et al.* 2019). A further limitation of using a snowball sampling strategy is that it can also introduce people to a research project who share the same view and lack diverse ranges of experience due to sharing a friendship group, following or similar interest online (ibid). This doctoral research used a range of social media platforms in the recruitment of participants to address the potential for selection bias, by drawing upon wider pools of social media connections, including X (Twitter at the time of data collection), Instagram, LinkedIn, and Facebook. Another limitation to using a snowball sample is recognised to be the lack of certainty that the researcher is recruiting individual's appropriate to their sampling requirements (Leighton *et al.* 2021).

In this thesis, the sampling requirement advertised for partaking in this study was that an individual was between the ages of 18-30-year-old (of which, participants signed a consent form to agree that they were within this age bracket), and to have had experience of social media (all participants were recruited using social media, which provided certainty of this sampling requirement). It was important for this research to engage in

conversational interviews with participants to gather raw, in-depth accounts of knowledge through the lens of lived experience and individual emotion, as the use of qualitative interviewing aims to hear stories led by the individual, their experience and what they wish to share. Using social media as an advertising tool maximised into the recruitment criteria of participant's experience of using social media platforms. This also empowered prospective participants to contact the researcher as opposed to being approached by a researcher, and potentially feeling pressured to partake in the study. Throughout the recruitment process a further 3 participants expressed interest in taking part in the study. However, when they were informed that the research would involve committing approximately 1-hour of their time to discuss their experiences of social media, no further contact was maintained to secure a time to complete the interview.

A virtual meeting was scheduled with the prospective participant to discuss the purpose of the research and to highlight what the research hoped to contribute towards; the use of Microsoft Teams, Zoom or Microsoft for a pre-interview discussion was used to support the facilitation of the meeting in a convenient and comfortable space for the prospective participant such as their home or workspace. From the outset of data collection, it was important that the prospective participants were made aware of how this data would be used, analysed and the purpose of the research once again. From here the prospective participants confirmed their informed consent, and interviews were scheduled over a 3-month period: 9 of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, in a venue of the participant's choice, 12 interviews were conducted via a Microsoft Teams call and 1 interview was conducted via Google Meet. The use of online interviews minimised potential physical risk for the researcher due to there being no direct face-to-face contact between the researcher and the participant (Graham *et al.*, 2012). The location of the interview was dependent on participant choice and comfort; however, this did make interviews with participants outside the region easier the facilitate. Each interview followed an interview schedule (see Appendix A) but allowed for flexibility in the narrative that was led by participants. The interview schedule was organised four sections: 'background', 'understanding/experience of body image' and 'self-esteem, perception of online self and diet culture', and 'where are we now?'. For example, if a participant had experienced disordered eating, or body-related anxiety the interviewer provided a space for the

interviewee to discuss this in as much or little detail as they wanted to. The interview schedule was also inclusive, and relevant for participants who did not have an experience of these areas but had alternative experiences of social media.

During qualitative interviews the researcher was able to gauge an understanding of 'what' social media is perceived to be, and which platforms were more frequently used by participants. The number of interview participants using specific social media platforms was as follows:

- 100% of participants used Facebook [n=22],
- 95.45% of participants used Instagram [n=21],
- 86.36% of participants used X (Twitter at the time of data collection) [n=19],
- 77.27% of participants used TikTok [n=17],
- 72.73% of participants used Snapchat [n=16],
- 63.63% of participants used YouTube [n=14],
- 18.18% of participants used LinkedIn [n=4],
- 9.09% of participants used Reddit [n=2],
- 9.09% of participants had previously (in their teens) used Bebo [n=2]
- And 4.55% of participants used Twitch [n=1].

The outline of participants' social media led the first part of the conversation in the qualitative interviews where participants were asked if they could detail their recollection of when they had started using social media, what social media platforms they use/have used previously, and the purpose of this social media use. What participants recognised as being 'social media use' fluctuated across interviews. With participants such as *Sara* asking if forums like YouTube and LinkedIn would contribute towards social media consumption in this study. *Katie* also questioned whether her use of LinkedIn would be relevant to the discussion, as she 'only' used this for professional reasons. Thus, their social media consumption and experience of social media was reflected in the use of a range of social media platforms. The profiling of social media use will be carried forward into the analysis of this research, more specifically relating to participants' social media engagement, consumption and the 'actual' experiences had by participants on different social media platforms.

4.4 Ethical Considerations and Dilemmas in Online Data Collection

Although digital ethnographic data collection does not require direct communication with online users, and information being publicly available on both forms – Reddit and Tattle.Life - ethical clearance and considerations of potential ethical dilemmas in this research area were to be considered from the outset of the research design (Murthy, 2008; Thompson *et al*., 2021). An attractive attribute to collecting online data is that the information is, for the most part, publicly available and ready to collect imminently. However, there were two potential ethical dilemmas that needed to be addressed before data collection could commence. Firstly, when exploring social phenomena such as so-called 'disordered' eating patterns and behaviours linked to struggles with mental wellbeing, the potential vulnerability of individuals engaging in this content, and discussing their own experiences of mental distress. This comes alongside potential disclosure of struggles with food and their body. When taking into consideration the ethical implication of discussing potentially active experiences of harmful experiences of social media, it was decided that this study would look at lived experience retrospectively

According to Gordon (2020) when considering vulnerability in the broader sense of ethics in social research, vulnerability should be constructed through the lived experience and interpretation of participants that shape the data: based upon individualised assessment of risk in a sample population. Online vulnerability is a complex topic and could be recognised as a sensitive topic to research due to potential conversations (Renzetti & Lee, 2013), with participants of this research, surrounding body image-related anxiety, disordered eating and experiences of mental health due to their engagement with social media. This needed to be considered when amalgamating data from a range of online sources, in this case, collecting data from more than one social media platform (Reddit & Tattle.Life). The nature of discourse and narratives-led within the online discussion threads and communities in Reddit (Proferes *et al.,* 2021), and Tattle.Life (Doyle, 2023; O'Meara *et al.,* 2024) must be considered in the collection of data from these forums. The AOIR recognise the need for social media research to be designed, and ethically considered, on a case-by-case basis due to the individuation of potential risks to social media users as 'subjects' in internet-mediated research (AOIR, 2019), within which they refer to *ethical pluralism* to address the complexities of ethical relativism in internet-

mediated research design. Adherence to *ethical pluralism* acknowledges the individuation of privacy policies across social media platforms themselves, but also recognises that research in different global contexts may have alternative privacy policies, legislation or guidance to take into consideration when designing research (ibid).

Markham (2006) recognises the importance of ensuring that the collection of data using online sources, or social media platforms, adhere to the privacy policy as well as the terms and conditions outlined by the specific forums, as the use of 'public' data for research purposes differs across platforms, and over time. This becomes complicated when there are blurred perceptions of what is public data and what is private data, and this can depend on individual users of social media (Williams *et al*., 2017; Fiesler & Proferes, 2018). In Fiesler & Proferes (2018) study of participant's perceptions of Twitter (X) research, there was a varying understanding between participants of whether Twitter's (X) terms and conditions covered the public use of data, outside of the opt in or out process of having their data sold to third party organisation. The selling of data is not the same as using data for research purposes (ibid). 79% of participants in this research reported wanting to be made aware if their social media contributions were going to be used for research purposes (Fiesler & Proferes, 2018). This raises ethical dilemmas surrounding researcher and participatory account safety by approaching specific social media users for research purposes; this can potentially cause distress for the prospective participant (Beninger *et al*., 2014; Suguira *et al.,* 2017, as well as place the researcher in a precarious position as being seen as taking a targeted approach to research recruitment. Many users, approximately 80% of participants in their sample were unaware that that their Twitter data could be used for wider research purposes (Fiesler & Proferes, 2018).

Although we refer to 'public' information, readily available to suit the researcher's need, in social media digital ethnography, that is too simplistic of an analysis (see Boyd & Crawford, 2012). As with all participants' contributions to researcher, social media contributions to datasets are eligible for the same level of anonymity and adherence to the confidentiality binding of this study. The contention surrounding the public/private debate of social media data is supported by the outcome of Postell & Press (2012)'s

analyses of social media ethnography recommending that the online and offline world communities are more entangled than a social researcher may initially recognise. Therefore, it is important to recognise the complexities that come with the potential ethical dilemmas the collation of a digital ethnography may pose. As alluded to above, confidentiality is paramount within this. When addressing a digital ethnographic dataset, the researcher must not use direct quotations, in the same way that that they may choose to, when analysing other forms of qualitative datasets: for example, interview transcripts. In the case of interview transcripts, the researcher was able to uphold anonymity of participants through the 'alias name' process detailed above. It is not possible to achieve full anonymity if a direct quote were to be taken from a digital ethnographic source as a digital imprint could potentially follow the participant out of the research project and identify their social media account directly back to their page and breach anonymity of ethnographic subjects (see Nevin *et al*. 2022 in Quan-Haase & Sloan, 2022). And, whether they have privacy settings placed within their social media profiles, they can be identified by anyone who wishes to lift the direct quote from the reported findings, and into a search engine online.

The position of this research in the debate of 'public' versus 'private' information in the use of social media data in this digital ethnography was supported by the framework proposed by Townsend & Wallace (2016); a guide to addressing ethical dilemmas in social media research. Townsend & Wallace (2016) distinguish means as to how a researcher can determine whether they should ethically treat their data as 'public' – there being no need to attempt to anonymise social media contributions to the findings of a study – or 'private' – needing to anonymise social media contributions to the findings of a study. The blurring of boundaries between public and private data can be caused due to the dynamic nature of social media, whereby what is perceived as private data is on public display on public social media pages (Markham *et al.,* 2018; Sugiura *et al.,* 2017; Gliniecka, 2023). Building an ethical defence surrounding the implicit collection of informed consent by social media users can be justified through the implicit collection of consent through the agreement of the privacy policy and terms of the social media platform, on signing up to the site (Gliniecka, 2023; Sugiura *et al.,* 2017). As outlined earlier, on signing up to Reddit '*subreddits'* the researcher had to declare that their use of

the forum was for research purposes, but that the researcher did not wish to ask research questions, or act as an active participant in their work. Moderators were not available to discuss the use of Tattle.Life as a 'passive' researcher with, nor do the forum provide information regarding the use of user data within their privacy policy or requirements for other 'users' to not use interactions of/with other users for research purposes. Throughout the data collection process for this research, no usernames or identifiable information was collected as part of the screenshots, or data generation in the format of quotes. Although direct quotes and screenshots were taken as part of the non-reactive digital ethnography, no direct quotes or screenshots will be used as part of the write-up of this project, nor future publications. Direct quotes and screenshots were collected by the researcher to ensure contextual information was available to the researcher when analysing the full dataset, to ensure that the likelihood of misinterpretation or skewed data being presented in this thesis.

There are psychological and social benefits to using social media (see Burke & Kraut, 2016), especially during exceptional circumstances such as the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 where individuals across the world may have felt more socially isolated and confined than they had previously. Engaging with the digital world can increase social groups and promotes confidence in a person's ability to network both professionally and socially, if one does not feel comfortable doing so offline (Thompson *et al*., 2021). However, the promotion of self-regulation on social media may encourage vulnerable situations in that a person may turn to social media platforms for advice around health, or support with mental distress, as opposed to family, friends or qualified professionals. Perceptions of self-regulation and management of social media consumption will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 6, as this was recognised in both stages of data collection in this study.

As the digital ethnography in this research aimed to explore experiences of online diet culture in terms of body image, nutritional guidance and exposing potential harms in these online spaces, the researcher deemed it essential to anonymise the ethnographic data included into the dataset. This was not only due to the mechanisms that were explored on Reddit and Tattle.Life, but the conditions of which they resided: in Chapter 5 we will discuss in further detail Reddit users accessing 'health and fitness' *subreddits* for health

guidance and advise around potentially self-injurious behaviours such as intentional starvation, and disordered eating habits.

During the interview phase of the research, as outlined earlier in the chapter, prospective participants were offered the opportunity to discuss the purpose of the research and what involvement would include, prior to agreeing to be interviewed. Participants were provided with a participant information sheet (Appendix B) and a consent form (Appendix C) following an initial, non-obligatory conversation with the researcher. These documents were revisited at the start of the interview to emphasise the purpose of the research, the ability for the participant to withdraw from the study or stop interviews at any stage, as well as providing participants with support services that are available to them should they feel necessary to access support following their involvement in the study. By revisiting the information sheet and consent form, the researcher is ensuring that comfortability and understanding that research involvement is entirely voluntary is reassured and is not a one-off transactional conversation to 'tick' the ethical box (Bhattacharya, 2014; Fujii, 2017) It is the responsibility of the researcher, particularly in qualitative research, to ensure participants remain fully 'informed' throughout the entirety of a project, including how and where the data will be used and disseminated (Sanjari *et al.,* 2014), therefore this was ensured throughout the research. It was emphasised that their participation was entirely voluntary, and that they were able to withdraw from the study at any stage. This ensured that the participant understood that their personal details would remain anonymised and that the researcher would be the only person who would have access to the data, and would be aware of the identity of each participant.

Each participant was asked to provide an alias name at the start of their interview so that only they would be able to identify their contribution to their research. The use of alias names, as opposed to participant numbers, provided a level of personability to the dataset whilst protecting the identity of the participants, and maintain confidentiality. The use of safeguards such as these is supported by publications exploring the effective ways of managing qualitative data and maintain strict confidentiality such as Sanjari *et al.* (2014) and Kostovicova & Knott (2022). Each participant completed a consent form that outlined the terms of agreement that participants had spoken with the researcher about, including

the purpose of the research and confirmed that they had fully read and understood the participant information sheet that was distributed prior to interviews taking place. The consent form also asked for participants to confirm that they were over the age of 18-years-old and therefore were able to consent to partaking in the research (see Appendix C). A list of support services, nation-wide, were made available to all participants prior to and following the interview, there were no participants who identified a need for a break during interviews or required support with accessing support agencies following interview.

The sensitivity of discussions surrounding the use of social media including potentially gathering experiential accounts that include online harms, disordered eating or addiction to social media added a further layer to the ethical considerations of this research when moving in the qualitative interviewing phase of data collection. The researcher recognised that it can be challenging for people to talk about private life experiences, especially those that they conceptualise as 'harmful'. Researching areas of life experience, particularly relating to physical and mental health, can lead to conversations that are emotionally triggering for both the researcher and the interviewee (Sanjari *et al.,* 2014). This means that to support participants in feeling comfortable enough to partake, it is crucial to establish a rapport from the outset of participant recruitment. At times, this included being ready to deviate from the plan if the discussion takes a different turn. Researchers can aim to prepare for collecting experiential data by collating information and gateways to a multitude of support services and mechanisms, but the unpredictability of qualitative researching can lead to unforeseen circumstances (Kostovicova & Knott, 2022). This is something that should not be assumed to be 'harmful' to participants, but something that must be addressed by social researchers (ibid). To accommodate this, a flexible interview schedule was drafted as part of the approved ethics application which noted that the drafted questions should be able to shift to align with the lived experience of each individual participant. This strategy allowed interviews to encourage a collaborative relationship between 'interviewer' and 'interviewee' (Fujii, 2017; Kostovicova & Knott, 2022). Participants were actively encouraged to lead the conversation, to tell their story once the session begins, as per earlier discussions of Mad Studies as a methodological tool that helped to design the theoretical framework underpinning the design of this research. It was important to the researcher that participants led their own interview, as

far as possible, to ensure that they were sharing their narrative at their own pace and through language that they felt comfortable with doing. Where qualitative research will always be at risk of leading into sensitive conversations that may be emotionally triggering for the participant (Renzetti & Lee, 1993; Holloway & Jefferson, 2012; Kostovicova & Knott, 2022), by allowing a participant to lead the conversation this attempts to alleviate the pressure that participants may feel to share 'uncomfortable' information.

4.5 Data Analysis: Mapping Codes with Critical Realism

The two datasets in this research were initially coded NVivo for the first layer of analysis, this included all anonymised interview transcripts, as well as the data scraped from the digital ethnographic phase of the research. Although both documents were stored in the same NVivo project, where mechanisms were identified within either dataset, separate nodes were created for findings within either dataset. This thesis recognises that within a CR analysis mechanisms and conditions can be interchangeable depending on the context surrounding the experience of them; for example, whether an emergent property is a mechanism, or a condition may alter depending on a demi-regularity that is found in the data. This is supported by Ton *et al.* (2021: 188-189) who state that "a mechanism at one level may be a condition for other mechanisms to emerge at another level", allowing flexibility in the individuation of 'real' knowledge throughout a CR analysis. Therefore 'real' knowledge is created and may be intransitive (i.e., mechanisms may be fixed in place, but remain unobservable), but the context surrounding a mechanism may shift its position to become a condition under which another mechanism may activate (Bhaskar, 1978; Danermark, 2002).

Computer assisted qualitative data analysis, using software such as NVivo, has recognised as beneficial to research underpinned by a realist epistemology (see Dalkin *et al.,* 2021). The reason for this, is that 'nodes' and 'child nodes' can be created for separate datasets, within the same project, but can allow the researcher to observe the data within each node concurrently to recognise the commonalities or differences in

mechanisms or events identified within either dataset (ibid). This is important in a research project that adopts a mixed online and offline research design as it allows the researcher to understand the context behind the mechanisms (i.e., the different conditions under which social media engagement and diet culture, for example, are being discussed) (McEvoy & Richards, 2006). For example, the NVivo data consisted of a node that was labelled 'diet culture – digital ethnography', and a separate node labelled 'diet culture – interviews'. A thorough realist analysis of multiple datasets can be said to be time consuming, due to its' iterative requirement to understand the reality of experiences, and the underlying – at times, unobservable – generative mechanisms that are presented in social science research (Punton *et al.,* 2016). The use of NVivo aided the initial stages of this research, however, as it supported the researcher at the early stages of the analytical process by acting as a tool to corroborate and cross-reference the two vast datasets. The use of NVivo at the early stages of data analysis was beneficial due to the breadth of data that had been collected, NVivo is recognised as a supportive tool for researchers when handling large, qualitative datasets (Zamawe, 2015). For example, it can support the accuracy of qualitative data analysis as it can support the researcher to find the number of instances that a 'theme' has emerged from the data, as well as supporting the researcher to identify commonalities in language used which can formulate the initial stages of coding (ibid). Dalkin *et al.* (2021) identified these primitive stages of data analysis to be like the 'brainstorming' stages of data analysis. The NVivo analysis identified 8 themes of which emerged from data collection as well as existing literature, and a further 23 sub-themes (6 of these themes were sub-divided in 12 due to being identified in the digital ethnographic phase of the research, and the interview phase of the research), as per Figure 4.2:

Theme (node)	Sub-theme (child node)
Diet culture	Diet culture - ethnography Diet culture – interviews Influence 'offline' behaviours Intersectional experiences of diet culture
Internalised misogyny	Not hostile but not kind

	Self-loathing (internalised hatred)
Life event trigger	
Online hate	Criminalising online behaviours Regulating online behaviours Normalisation of online hate – ethnography Normalisation of online - interviews Online hostility – ethnography Online hostility - interviews Return of victim blaming Trolling – hate incidents
Online support	Relationship with food – ethnography Relationship with food – interviews Relationship with self – ethnography Relationship with self - interviews
Pathologising the body	Trends in appearance Body enhancement Weight stigma – digital ethnography Weight stigma - interviews
Perceptions of parenthood	
Perceptions of self	Filtered lifestyles (images)

Figure 4.2 Table of NVivo themes and sub-themes: early findings

Throughout the early stages of coding, the researcher identified that NVivo was restricting the data analysis as the researcher struggled to a record of the tone in which an account was being provided, breaks or emotions demonstrated by the participant or the context surrounding a quote contributing to a theme. In his evaluation of qualitative data analysis using NVivo, Zamawe (2015) discusses how many researchers initially ‘force’ their study to use NVivo as opposed to considering the most appropriate means of data analysis, following data collection. At this stage a manual data analysis, as a second layer of analysis supported the production of a more thorough analytical account, as it would allow the researcher to recognise tone, breaks, potential emotions, frequency of key words, and to produce a manual map of quotes and key discussion points from both datasets to acknowledge the broader mechanisms that were presented by the findings. The manual data analysis aimed to delve deeper into the understanding of the experiences of

participants, this involved going through each interview transcript and highlighting wording that demonstrated emotionality, experiences that were common to or opposing of other participants, as well as considering the nature of participant's self-reported relationship with social media. The second phase of analysis allowed the researcher to attempt to initially position findings within a CR framework of structures, mechanisms, conditions and effects, starting with the mind map below that was last updated in January 2023 (see Figure 4.3):

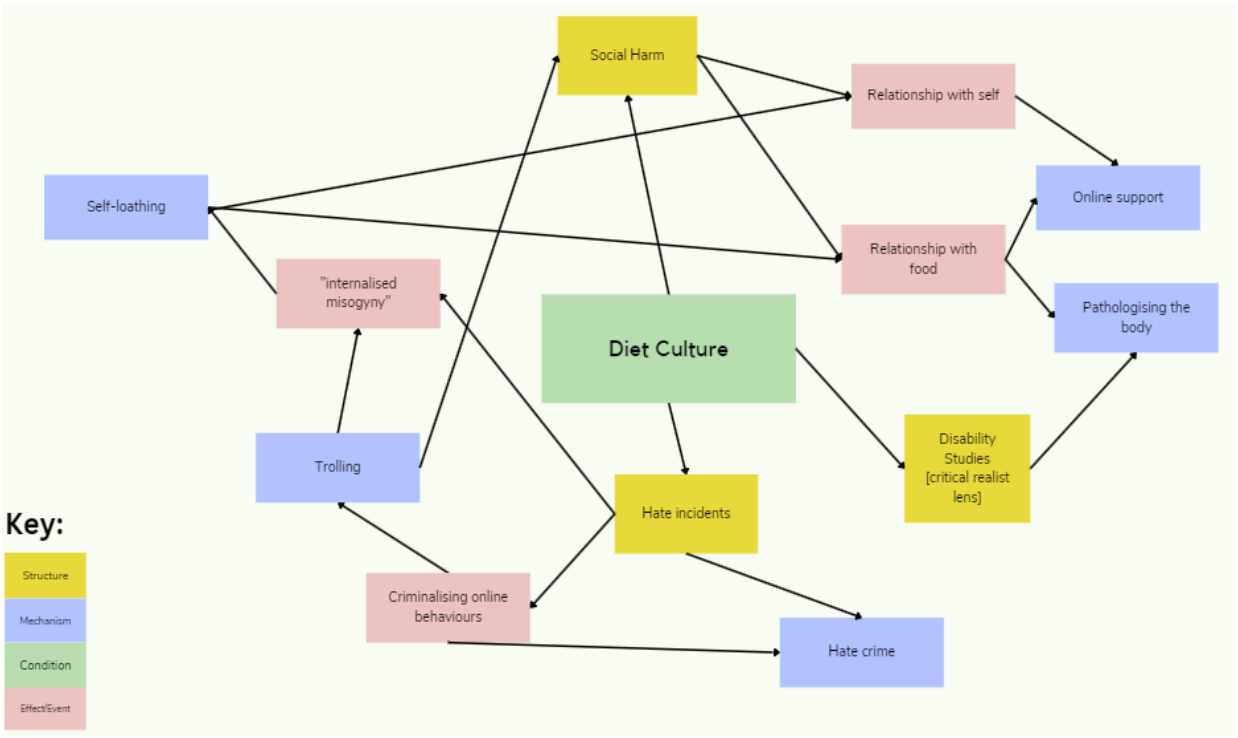

Figure 4.3 Mind map demonstrating core themes from manual data analysis, aligned to CR framework

As per Figure 4.3, 12 core themes emerged from the two datasets following an in-depth manual data analysis, some of which aligned to the themes found during the NVivo analysis, and others that had emerged as the data was analysed in more depth. Further sub-themes were identified as emergent properties following the manual dataset including: *the highlight reel, filtered lifestyles, identity, education, stigma, normalised*

online hate, idealism, 'aiming to be perfect', falsehoods, self-branding, harm, harms online, addictive platforms, self-esteem, and *cosmetic procedures.* The interview schedule was carefully formed to ensure that the researcher did not prompt the interviewee into discussing 'harms' within the online space (see Appendix A). It was important to the researcher that, despite her own experience of online harms, that interview schedule was neutral to ensure objectivity whilst being transparent, where appropriate, of her own lived experience during interviews. Harm became an emergent property of the research that was discussed in all interviews (n=22), as a topic or experience initiated by the participant.

The adoption of this intensive analysis also allowed the researcher to explore the datasets in different formats, to identify whether further experiences could be identified when not explored through software (Bors, 2018). The manual data analysis was also supportive in the identification of demi-regularities across the datasets. This is a term coined by Tony Lawson (1998) to demonstrate the commonalities in lived experience that may be shared by participants of CR research. Demi-regularities allow CR scholars to acknowledge unobservable mechanisms that underpin lived experience that may not be shared by all participants in a study but is relevant to the framing of attaining 'real' knowledge (ibid). Lawson (1998) argues that the recognition of demi-regularities in a dataset strengthens research analysis and application of knowledge to the real-world as it allows researchers to explain the relations between different generative mechanisms that may be missed if the partial, or less common, experiences are not included in datasets due to their lack of prevalence. This is not to say that NVivo was a barrier to conducting a realist analysis (Punton *et al.,* 2016) but that it was preferable to the researcher for a manual data analysis to be carried out at the later stages of the project for the reasons outlined above.

The thematic realist analysis completed manually and via NVivo was built using Sayer's (2000) model of CR, whereby Sayer identifies a visual map for how structures, generative mechanisms and events/effects interact with one another, as well as acknowledging the way that differing conditions can impact the presentation of generative mechanisms (see Figure 4.4).

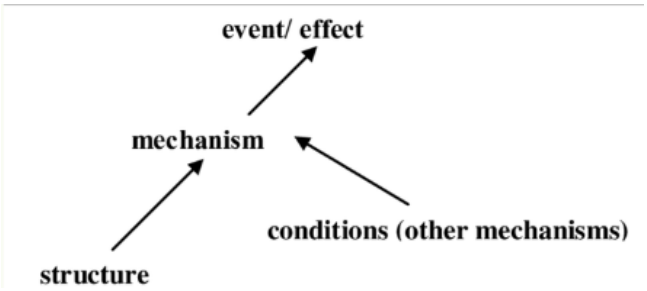

Figure 4.4: Sayer's (2000) model of CR

Sayer's (2000) mapping of CR develops earlier ideas of Bhaskar (1975; 2008) whereby reality can be understood on in multiple levels. For research that aims to collect and analyse experiential accounts of social phenomena – in this research, the lived experiences of social media, diet culture and the potential harms faced in the online and offline worlds – understanding 'real' knowledge that underpins lived experience is paramount to truly understanding the area of interest (Sayer, 2000). To achieve this, structures and mechanisms surrounding social phenomena must be identified, or events should be identified, and researchers can then work back to understand the conditions that cause or perpetuate the effects of generative mechanisms. The NVivo analysis for this research supported the production of a generic CR mapping of the key components of this research, visual mapping with be provided in the analyses sections of this thesis. More in-detail mapping will be discussed throughout Chapters 5 and 6 in the analysis of the research findings.

The use of Sayer's (2000) model of CR has supported this thesis to identify the ordering of general rules of social media engagement through a CR lens with social media acting as the structure, online behaviours or online content consumption acting as generative mechanisms, and the individual impact or potential harm perceived by a social media acting as the event or effect of social media interaction. The history of technology and social media produced in Chapter 3 evidence the continually evolving nature of the digital space and therefore justifies the requirement for social media interaction to be considered under different conditions of use: the use of social media via smartphones more generally,

as well as the growing accessibility and use of social media through various portable or smart devices.

Sayer's (2000) model of CR also supported the identification of mechanisms and conditions, interchangeably, throughout the manual data analysis. Where the analytical process of this project is very much interested in creating a space for researchers to evaluate support mechanisms and preventative measures in the lived experiences of body-related anxiety, low self-esteem or disordered eating, undertaking a realist analysis allowed the researcher to acknowledge the impact of cultural spaces on experiences of these areas, and to acknowledge the reality of harms perpetuated by the digital space that are not addressed by the Online Safety Act 2023, or other relevant legislation in the UK. In Chapter 5, the detailed analysis of concepts such as *diet culture, trolling, the normalisation of online hate, the 'idealised' body,* and *internalised misogyny,* will be contextualised through lived experiences shared in both phases of the research to demonstrate their position as a generative mechanism, a condition of change, or an effect of alternative underlying mechanisms within cultural spaces online. Concepts such as diet culture as not new social phenomena but have significantly changed in presentation and effect during the evolution of digital technologies, this was a key component to be considered in the analysis of this research.

As there was no direct contact made between the researchers and subject accounts throughout the digital ethnographic phase of data collection, the interaction (and therefore, the conditions) between researcher and data was different to the interview phase of the research. For example, no data could be collected from participatory accounts throughout the digital ethnography as to which other social media forums they engage with outside of Reddit and Tattle.Life. Nor could they, intentionally for the purpose of this research, contextualise their perception of their relationship with social media. This is reflected in the presentation of the findings and data analysis in Chapter 5 and 6, as the digital ethnographic phase of the research aimed to observe the participants' engagement with social media, diet culture and forums specific to health and fitness, as opposed to questioning participants around such observations.

4.6 Intersubjectivity in Lived Experience Research

In lived experience research, emotionality and the position of the researcher is complex and something that should be considered as part of the ethical design and undertaking of a project (Gupta *et al.*, 2023). When a researcher positions themselves as an insider within the research they are undertaking, there should be recognition from the outset of a project of reflexive processes that the researcher will adhere to to ensure they address any potential triggers throughout the research journey (Bakamal, 2022). Mehler & Rudman (2022) align the role of an 'insider' when focusing on maintaining a safe research environment to the requirement for lived experience researchers to *unlearn* their experiential understanding of social phenomena to support subjectivity in research. When acknowledging your position as an 'insider' in a research project, such as this doctoral work, the researcher must consider their personal and professional identities (Gupta *et al.,* 2023); for example, it is useful at this time to consider the openness you will have with participants in your research with your own experiences. For Harding (2004) the process of intersubjectivity enables lived experience researchers to recognise elements of their own identity, or experiences, in others that may share commonalities. This does not mean that the research cannot obtain subjectivity in the conducting of research, but that the meaning of said experiences can be shared between two individuals who share something in common (Harding, 2004; Bae, 2017). The sharing of common experiences, and transparency in lived experience research, is recognised as a methodological approach that can support in the building of trust between researcher and participant, as well as eliminating or reducing the power dynamic between the two positions in the research (Harrison & Tronick, 2022). Intersubjectivity is therefore considered in the transparency of the researcher in disclosing that this is a lived experience piece of research, and for this to be mapped throughout the recruitment process and sampling of a research project (Bae, 2017; Zampini *et al.,* 2021).

For this doctoral research, I chose to disclose my lived experience of disordered eating through the lens of social media from the outset of the project, as well as my employment background in mental health and wellbeing spaces. This was justified through the theoretical approach within the recruitment process, as highlighted in the Mad Studies and CR sections of this chapter. The transparency of experiential knowledge was fed into

the qualitative interviews, where I drew upon my own experience in the introductory stages of the interview that outlined the parameters of the interview, reiterating the purpose of the research and with this interview drawing upon lived experiences the participants were able to take a break or step away from the interview at any time. I found that the disclosure of lived experience also supported the understanding of how forums were set out, how communications took place in diet culture communities as well as any insider terminology that was used by participants. This also supported the digital ethnographic phase of the research when Reddit and Tattle.Life users used acronyms or terminology that was common within diet culture communities online. 'Insider' background understanding to social phenomena or experiences shared by participants can support the research journey and analysis as it can provide context to the stories shared by those with lived experience, in a way 'outside' researchers may be unable to recognise (Easterby-Smith & Malina, 1999). Zampini *et al.,* (2021) also recognise how 'inside' researchers' transparency during the research process, when exploring sensitive topic areas, can empower participants to tell their story including issues that may usually be stigmatised, or take place behind closed doors, as opposed to be shared for research purposes.

Reflexivity is a core element of lived experience researchers navigating their personal and professional identities throughout a research project (Gupta *et al.,* 2023). This can support the researcher in identifying potential triggers prior to entering the data collection, or analysis, phase of research, as well as supporting them to address triggers they may have been unable to pre-empt prior to entering the research (Renzetti & Lee, 2013; Bukamal, 2022). For Bukamal (2022) reflexivity raises an awareness of how a researcher's lived experience can shape all stages of the research process. Mason-Bish (2018) acknowledges that lived experience does not always come into the research process in the same way, the impact of lived experience and its role in research is context-dependent, meaning that despite lived experience there can be projects whereby a researcher shifts from an 'insider' to an 'outsider'. By adhering to reflexive strategies throughout the research process, this can support the researcher to understand where transparency of experience is appropriate (Bukamal, 2022), as well as where they feel safe to share their own story (Mohler & Rudman, 2022). For this doctoral research, an

‘emotionality diary’ was created as a reflexive strategy throughout the project, the diary was started during early methodological considerations of the project until the data analysis phase of the research was completed. As recommended by Bukamal (2022) a reflexive diary can enable researchers to continually review their position within the research, their feelings of safety and wellbeing throughout the research process.

The emotionality diary was completed at any stage of the research that I felt a particular emotion, this did not have to be perceived as a negative, or triggering emotion, but if any thoughts came to my mind regarding my own experiences or how data collection or analysis had made me feel. As a safety mechanism, I referred myself into a local Improving Access to Psychological Therapy (IAPT) NHS service prior to the data collection. This referral was made to provide me with a space to access NHS Talking Therapies, if required, as a consideration that with this being a lived experience piece of research, there may be triggering conversations or experiences that I need to de-brief in a confidential space. Although my supervisory team offered me a regular space for de-briefs, if necessary, I felt it was appropriate for support services to be available to me to maintain researcher safety, if required. This service was not required during any phase of the research, but the emotionality diary was a supportive measure in reflecting on the research journey, without the need for further supportive intervention. Where relevant, entries that were written within the emotionality diary throughout data collection will be reflected upon throughout the analysis of this thesis, as this will allow the research to resolve the discrepancy between Mad Studies and CR as ontologies where Mad Studies usually focuses on ‘insider’ positionality, and CR traditionally focuses on ‘outsider’ positionality.

4.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the rationale for this doctoral research has been provided and justified through its’ epistemological and ontological framework. This research utilises a theoretical framework that positions the voice of those with lived experience at the forefront whilst using CR as a reflexive analytical framework to contextualise experiences and findings in the ‘real’ world. CR allows researchers to use judgemental rationality to step outside of traditional paradigms, as there is no theoretical hierarchy of importance when it comes to

theorising lived experience – we should simply be focusing on accessing 'real' knowledge as opposed to building on social constructions of understanding that have been framed historically, in research as the 'best fit' (Karlsson, 2002; Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2016; Brunner, 2019). Zemiology then supports the researcher to position the findings of this thesis within existing and forthcoming UK policy, and education frameworks, as well as identifying harms that emerged from the data as effects or events that follow the activation of underlying generative mechanisms. This thesis recognises that within a CR analysis mechanisms and conditions can be interchangeable depending on the context surrounding the experience of them; for example, whether an emergent property is a mechanism, or a condition may alter depending on a demi-regularity that is found in the data. The use of two phases of qualitative methodologies – digital ethnography and qualitative interviewing – has enabled the researcher to produce a vast, enriched dataset that will acknowledge different angles of social media engagement. As highlighted earlier, observed social media interaction with the platforms Reddit and Tattle.Life are likely to differ from the accounts provided in 1-1 interviews with social media users due to conditions of which they have engaged with the aims of this research (directly and indirectly). This has been reflected throughout the analysis of this research as it is important to consider the different conditions that the data has been collected, as well as the different conditions under which behaviour has been observed (see Dalkin *et al.,* 2021). The analyses chapters, Chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis will outline the mapping of experiential knowledge to Sayer's (2000) model of CR, building on structures and mechanisms identified in Chapters 2 and 3. This will also acknowledge demi-regularities within the dataset to understand the relations between some mechanisms and conditions that could be labelled as either mechanisms, effects or changing conditions of behaviours depending on individuation of experience.

5. Broadening the Definition of Diet Culture: "I am always preparing myself to be perfect."

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will consider perceptions of diet culture and lived experience of the influence that diet culture had had on participant's offline lifestyles. Using experiential knowledge, this chapter will define 'diet culture' through a holistic lens, moving outside the parameters of 'nutrition', 'dieting', and 'exercise' as diet culture had previously been restricted to. To achieve this, findings in this chapter recognise that diet culture is not a new phenomenon and is not a product of social media and its content creators (influencers). Rather there has been a shift in the conditions under which diet culture is marketed, its visibility, and its influence over social media users, their self-esteem, and their idealistic perception of health, beauty, and self-worth. This chapter will conceptualise self-esteem through accounts of lived experience and position these findings alongside the effect that online diet culture has over people's self-esteem offline. The chapter will revisit the work of Sandford & Quarmby (2018) to understand the 'new pressures' of the online space. This will be discussed in relation to the broader harms perpetuated by online platform cultures (diet and influencer cultures); these harms relate to low self-esteem, disordered eating, and body dissatisfaction. Later, the chapter will introduce terms provided by participants to describe 'harms' that are presented as emergent properties from both datasets, such as those experienced through their engagement with online platform cultures in their teenage years that will be termed (un)realistic goals and internalised misogyny.

When exploring participant experiences of social media and the types of content they consume, the conversation returned to the overarching theme of 'diet culture'. As outlined in Chapter 1, diet culture remains a loosely defined concept in academia, albeit a growing phenomenon for interdisciplinary studies to investigate and critique (see Gagliardi, 2018; Atherton, 2021; Jovanovski & Jaeger, 2022). Within this research, participants divulged experiences of diet culture that could not be categorised within previous attempts to define diet culture as a set of values that coincide with thinness and idealistic beauty standards to social status and self-esteem (Harrison, 2019). Experiences of diet culture were conceptualised in broader terms that included state-level intervention around obesity, increased nutritionally focused social media cross-platform content, increased exercise-focused social media cross-platform content, increased visibility of diet or holistic

health-focused online communities alongside the rise of filtered imagery distributed throughout – but not restricted to - 'influencer culture' across image-based social media platforms. This chapter will consider participant perceptions of diet culture and lived experience of the influence that diet culture has had on participants' offline lifestyles. Throughout, the chapter will use a critical realist (CR) framework to theorise experiences shared by participants, to understand the underlying mechanisms that may explain a person's perception of social media, and platform cultures such as diet culture.

The findings relevant to this chapter have been positioned according to Bhaskar's (1978) demonstration of the levels of empirical reality when conducting a CR analysis (see Figure 5.1). Thus, into categories of what 'we' as researchers observe (empirical knowledge), the events/effects that take place when a mechanism is activates, of which may or may not be observable (actual knowledge) and, the causal structures and mechanisms (and at times, conditions) that are unobservable but have the ability to constrain actions within the social world (real knowledge).

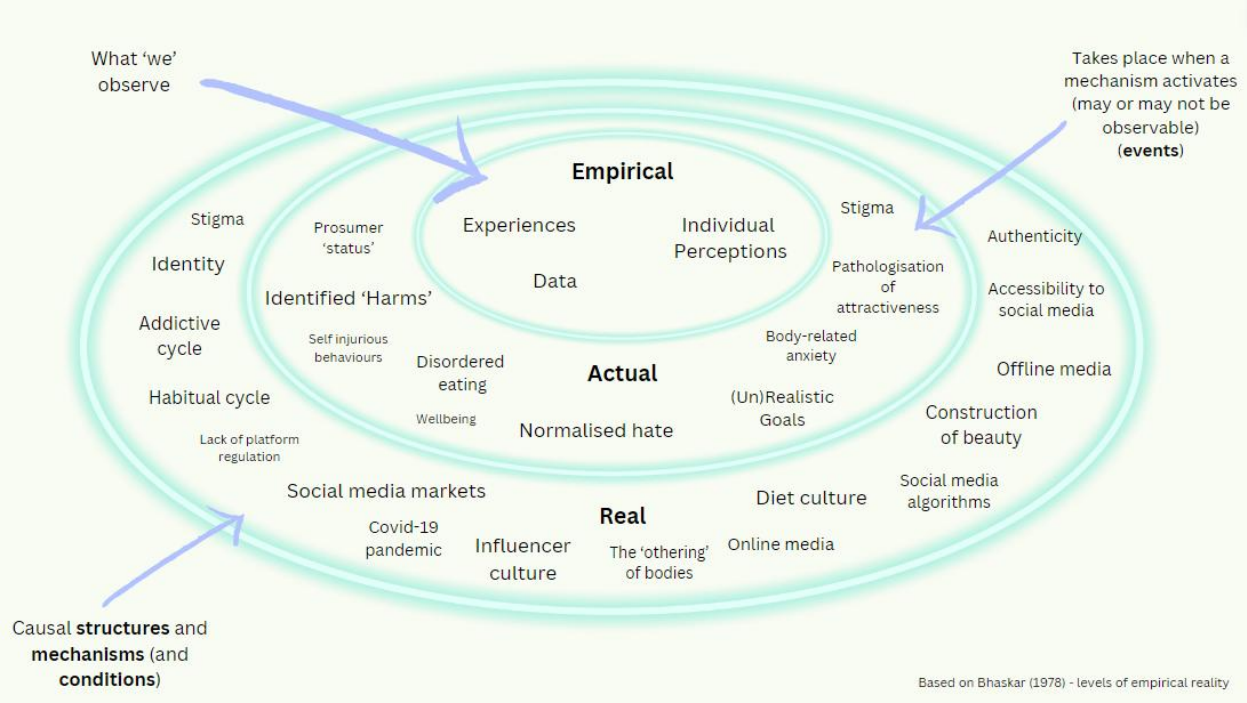

Figure 5.1 CR mapping of thesis findings using Bhaskar (1978) levels of empirical reality analogy

5.2 What is Diet Culture?

The visibility of diet culture dominated conversations with participants regarding their perceptions of self-esteem and social media consumption. Self-esteem is personal and can be commonly simplified to fit the narrative that to have high self-esteem is to exude confidence. The findings in this research have found that that is not the case. Commonly, self-esteem is linked to the perception of oneself. However, this should not be limited to being confident in our appearance but to appreciating our abilities, strengths, and weaknesses and being happy with who we are (see James, 2020; O'Shea, 2020; Jovanovski & Jaeger, 2022). *Zara* stated that self-esteem is "how you view yourself and the kind of value you have for yourself". *Bekki,* self-esteem should not be "surface-level – it shouldn't be someone thinking that they have to look slim, and great all of the time, it should be being over the moon with how your day at work or being confident in the partner you are and knowing what you bring to the table". However, when positioned against *Zara*'s perspective, *Zara* believed her self-esteem to be closely linked to her physical appearance, the way she feels in her skin and the way others view her, and her worth:

> I'd say I don't have high self-esteem. I, especially in the last few years... I was very up and down. I was probably the lowest, one of the lowest mental places I'd ever been…I think I turned to food a lot... So now especially, I've like, I put a lot of weight on in that short period of time and like, it has led to me now, not kind of liking how I look. So, I'll only wear certain types of things because I don't like how I look in tighter stuff because it showed all the, the lumps and bumps and I know I shouldn't care. But my brain also just, you know, it likes to dislike you.

As can be recognised in *Zara*'s account above, *Zara*'s low confidence over her physical appearance directly led her to engage with diet culture, and to turn to social media for 'diet' advice. This is not an isolated experience. 95.45% of participants (n=21) disclosed having used social media at some stage of their lives to find dieting advice (nutritional or exercise-focused), and 100% of participants knew someone who had used social media to find dieting advice. Experiencing low confidence due to online diet culture consumption was also reflected throughout the data gathered during the digital ethnographic phase of this research, mainly in Reddit discussions (anti-diet subreddit). The broader question of 'can diet culture help with self-esteem?' is a response to one anonymous user who stated that "things are getting better, at least you have influencers on IG [Instagram] trying to

debunk the way that people filter themselves and make us all feel shit", another user responded with "feel[ing] sooo self-conscious" about their body despite being "thin... what I saw in the mirror was very different to what I saw in media". This resonated with the experience described by *Annie* in this interview phase of this research whereby she stated that she felt "Instagram versus Reality posts, when posted for the 'right' reasons are helpful" in supporting young people online understanding that what they may see "plastered" across diet culture pages may not be authentic, or attainable in "normal life".

Two thirds of participants (n=14) found diet culture and online communities to have been detrimental to their self-esteem; specifically, when the key theme of said community was centred around diet culture. The visibility of diet culture trends across image-based social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, identified by participants were named as: 'what I eat in a day', 'train like me for the week (or day)', 'exercises for a snatched waist', 'spend a day with me', '5 exercises to build your glutes', 'train like a professional bodybuilder'. *Zak* acknowledged that although he used different social media platforms for different purposes when it came to image-based social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube), he followed similar online figures, all of which linked to inspiration for building his daily routine and influencing his exercise and nutrition regime. *Zak* described similar features to the content posted to multiple platforms by 'influencers' that he followed online – such as James Smith and Diren Kartel – the critical difference was how it was delivered. Each platform used by *Zak* (and other participants in this study) builds their business models around delivering visual social media content differently. For example, *Zak* described YouTube as "longer videos with more information, like they have more opportunity to give you information about food and like, their online apps and stuff, in more detail". TikTok delivered shorter 20-second snippets of content, as deliberated earlier in this chapter when discussing the addictive cycle of social media use. For participants such as *Zara* and *Kayla*, this resonated with their experience of 'influencers' content that they followed on YouTube and Instagram, in that the message that a video was delivering remained the same, but the way it was delivered differed (i.e., in shorter video clips, or using still imagery followed by a caption).

The growing visibility of diet culture on social media was a unanimous voice reflected in all lived experience accounts collected as a part of this research. However, how diet culture was defined and perceived by participants varied depending on individual experiences, demonstrating demi-regularities in the way that individuals perceive diet culture, but all held similar values relating to 'topics' covered by diet culture content. For an anonymous Reddit profile diet culture creates a "false hierarchy" that aimed to pin women against one another. *Anya's* perspective aligned with this, whereby she stated that the definition of diet culture was like that of existing feminist explorations of diet culture that fall in line with 'anti-diet culture' values (see Harrison, 2019; Clodfelter-Mason, 2019; Dodier, 2020; James, 2020), describing diet culture as:

> ... mainly towards women, this kind of message that you should always be striving to be on a diet or concerned with how you look to fit, you know, whatever images in the present moment, the attainable, whether that is the ultra slim or ultra-curvy, and then it kind of just generates all this kind of, like social media or it used to be magazines to say 'this is how you could look' like this, and 'this is why you look like you do', and then it feeds up. It's just consumerism, isn't it? … But I think diet culture pushes this image that you can't be happy until this or until you look like that.

Diet culture does not only impact women. There are elements of diet culture created, posted, and consumed by individuals of all identities, where they have access to social media and the broader digital space, as evidenced by *Zak*, who relayed his consumption of content produced by male bodybuilders whom he had followed from his mid-late teenage years through to his early 20s. Participants identified harm posed to all social media users through the representation of 'idealistic' bodies in the online space that meet the beauty and health standards set by diet culture. More specifically for *Anya*, diet culture and "the fitness industry has always been like transformations and weight loss journeys, especially for women, and it's all just that thing of like how small can we get and why, like almost pitting women against each other". 95% (n=21) of participants in these conversations highlighted the competitive nature of social media, which has been compounded by diet culture, steering competition towards physical appearance and attractive bodies. *Alice* believed that there remains an element of addiction within the competitive nature of the diet culture space online that supports Chapter 6's examination

of the fear of missing out (FOMO). *Alice* questioned: “Why am I bothered though; it’s that self-competition isn’t it? And I just think why am I bothered about what other people think I’m doing? Why am I bothered about what other people are doing? It’s a culture”. The acknowledgement of diet culture being “a culture” identifies the embedded nature of platform cultures within day-to-day life which take us back to Chapter 3’s discussion of what culture is through the sets of norms, values and beliefs that underpin spaces to create cultural narratives and behaviours as part of that space.

The competitive nature created between users by online diet culture is not just in the female body but in all bodies. For *Zak*, it is problematic that influencers and bodybuilders online build fitness regimes and ‘communities’ based on the misrepresentation of how they built their bodies: by not declaring that they have used steroids to support their muscle building at a faster rate than they may have been able to, should they have not used steroids. *Zak* stated, “everyone applauds all these people, people I used to follow. like influencers or people who were on YouTube; they are the epitome of eating disorders like that’s where it’s come from... Most of us wouldn’t have that if it weren’t for them”. *Alice* emphasised the problematic nature of ‘what I eat in a day’ style content as a misrepresentation of how influencer, or public figures’ bodies are built, as she believes this to have a similar influence over disordered eating patterns in young social media users:

> I do see a lot of that ‘what I eat in a day’ and it drives me nuts because everybody is different, and I’m sometimes I’m like why are you posting that, because then I’m questioning what I’m putting in my mouth. I’m thinking what am I doing, this whole like I do think there is a ‘diet culture’ on Instagram, I really do think there is this very much this, if you’re not eating in a calorie deficit… like it’s honestly driving me insane.

For participants such as *Grace, Christie,* and *Sara*, it was not video-related content that they could liken to altering their offline behaviours rather it was the filtered images they had witnessed online and the increased visibility of discussion around food and exercise online. By seeing the launch of more fitness communities by their favourite reality television stars, by the ‘influencers’ that they followed on Instagram, they reported feeling the pressure of what they perceived to, once again, be beauty standards set by the online

space. All 3 participants identified these beauty standards to being central to online diet culture.

Bringing together all the above experiences allows this these to holistically define diet culture not as a culture that identifies an “ideal” body shape (Clodfester-Mason, 2019) or but one that extends on existing understanding that the “ideal” body should be aspired to, through a diet and fitness regime (Jovanovski & Jaeger, 2022).

The findings of this thesis have supported the research in coining the following definition of diet culture, as:

> **A set of beliefs, norms, and values that promote an idealistic aesthetic that has been socially constructed to set out expectations of beauty, health, success, and productivity in online and offline spaces.**

Culture, in diet culture, aligns to previously explained understandings of culture as a set of beliefs, values, norms and values shared by a group of individuals to bring them together as a community (Hall, 1997). Aesthetics within diet culture can relate to physical appearance (face shape, body shape, body weight, fashion sense, hairstyle, makeup), lifestyle (wealth, investments, employment, education, house décor, cars, travel), as well as engagement with health and fitness (nutrition, exercise, influencer-led communities, producing social media relating to your engagement with health and fitness offline). This definition of diet culture will be applied throughout this thesis.

5.3 Lack of Moderation: Regulating Spaces Created to Facilitate Harm

What is problematic, according to participants’ experiences shared in the interview phase of this research, is the lack of regulation of fitness pages, online communities, and discussion forums providing specific weight-loss advice to individuals. This was reflected across the *‘health and fitness*’ subreddits that were included in the digital ethnographic phase of this study. Due to there being no legal obligations placed on social media companies to verify the identification of those who sign up to use their platforms, hosts of

health and fitness forums on platforms such as Reddit are unaware of who is accessing the information that they are moderating and approving to be shared with their community (subreddit). In the 6-month exploration of using the term 'diet culture' to identify appropriate *'health and fitness'* subreddits for this research, the subreddit *'EDanonymous'* remained in the top 10 most popular subreddits during each search (89 searches) on 47 occasions '*EDanonymous*' appeared in top 10 twice. This was followed by the subreddit *'fatlogic'* that appeared in the top 10 most popular subreddits on 72 occasions.

Firstly, '*EDanonymous*' was self-identified as a forum that provided an anonymous space for Reddit users to ask questions about eating disorders. Questions included Reddit users seeking help recovering from an eating disorder, with posts asking for strategies that survivors of eating disorders had used to boost their self-esteem and be kind to their minds and bodies while gaining weight. Other questions were the opposite: requests for the quickest and most effective ways to lose weight and to hide their disordered eating habits from loved ones or medical professionals. In both circumstances, answers and strategies were provided by other members of the subreddit with specific strategies of positive self-talk concerning boosting one's self-esteem and specific strategies around purging, weight-loss medications, and 500-calorie daily diets to follow concerning enhancing disordered eating habits.

Secondly, 'f*atlogic*' was a forum that advertised itself as a space for Reddit users to access if they were 'sick of being fat' and wanted to understand why they were 'fat'. This forum had less balance between what could be considered a supportive environment and a harmful one. It was filled with Reddit users providing their body measurements and weights to the forum, followed by hateful comments about the best ways to lose fat, including direct comments of users being considered 'undesirable', that users should be 'ashamed' to be fat, starvation strategies that were reported as ways to 'curb hunger cues', and studies around the harmful effects of specific food groups that were viewed to 'cause you to be fat'. Observing the enquiries being made by Reddit users for 'the most effective strategies to lose weight' and the advice being provided within these subreddits took me back to the Google searches I would go through as a teenager, when Reddit (or

anonymised forums alike) were not conversational or personalised, but would be in the form of blogs through MySpace, Tumblr and X whereby general pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia (pro-harm) content would be shared that would encourage starvation, bingeing and purging or alternative self-injurious behaviours. This was noted as an entry in my emotionality diary along with "how the space [diet culture] has evolved where platforms now enable individualised, conversational pro-harm spaces" to support disordered eating (Researcher Emotionality Diary, April 2022).

When deconstructing the harms posed to Reddit users within subreddits such as *'EDanonymous'* and *'fatlogic'* we should not only be paying attention to the lack of regulation of those using these platforms as consumers (those requesting 'advice' directly or following the 'advice' provided to others on the forum), we should concern ourselves closely with the lack of regulation of those who are using these forums as contributors (those providing the 'advice'). When exploring disordered eating habits and eating disorders, advice and treatment must be provided by registered practitioners qualified to provide specialist support to individuals in need. This is not requested by the 'moderators' of such forums for contributors to provide identification or proof of qualifications to provide advice and support to those requesting it. This becomes a further concern in the current climate, at the time of writing when children and young people's eating disorder services across the UK are excessively understaffed and waiting lists for specialist support continue to sit at approximately 12 weeks, or longer (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2022; NHS, 2022). Suppose the NHS cannot meet the growing demand for support for children and adolescents' routine and urgent referrals for suspected eating disorders following the backlog of the Covid-19 pandemic (see NHS, 2022). In that case, it ponders whether the struggle to access potentially life-saving treatment under specialist practitioners may influence the likelihood of these young people turning to social media platforms, such as Reddit, or influencers for advice. Moreover, the responses they receive may influence their ongoing (and future) relationship with their body and with their disordered eating habits.

The spilling over of diet culture online into the offline space was not just conceptualised for participants in terms of 'recognisable behaviour changes' but in the rise of calorie disclosure of menus in UK hospitality spaces. From April 2022, businesses in England that employed 250 or more staff and had a food and beverage outlet were required to clearly label products with calorie-based nutritional information (Department of Health and Social Care, 2022). The UK Government presented this as a refreshing strategy to tackle obesity, emphasised as a broader health issue during the Covid-19 pandemic. This has been highly contested by third-sector organisations who support individuals with eating disorders and advocates with lived experience of disordered eating as a problematic mechanism of 'support' against the UK obesity crisis (Beat Eating Disorders, no date). Calorie counting, in both elements of this dataset, is an increasingly popular mechanism of weight management for both losing and gaining weight due to what is viewed as the 'simple' way of understanding the science of 'calories in and calories out' (*Zak*). For *Bekki*, if a person is 'calorie counting, or they are trying to be healthier,' she could understand why seeing calories when eating out or going out for a coffee with friends could be beneficial to a person, 'but it's forcing you to think about it which I just don't think is nice'. This was a similar experience to *Zak,* who expressed that he "wouldn't want to see it (calories) on beer but it'd be handy say, if I was putting on weight but could still eat out and you don't cut yourself off". *Bekki* went on to provide an account of a disrupted social occasion with one of her closest friends due to her friend 'dieting' due to struggling with her self-esteem, and thus, altering her behaviours in a social space to adhere to her calorie goals:

> We went for food… she said 'aw I wish they didn't have the calories on the menu because it has X amount of calories so I can't', and I said well that doesn't matter you would have gotten it anyway if it wasn't placed with calories. But I think it's a terrible thing, especially for people who struggle with food and people who eating disorders... The information should be somewhere for people who want the information, but why should it be there right in front of you if you don't want it?

For some participants, counting calories or having visible calories on food and beverage menus can be a distressing experience. As *Bekki* emphasised above, the embedding of calories on the menus of food and drink vendors forces the knowledge of calorie intake onto all diners without the choice to opt out of this. This strategy is based on the state's

presumption that all individuals should be aware of what they are putting into their bodies following including what *Chloe* called a "rise in attractiveness of calorie counting"*;* believing there to be a direct correlation between the rise in "what I eat in a day" influencer content or calorie-counting based fitness communities and the implementation of UK government ruling around the disclosure of calories on menus*.* According to *Alice* this strategy is not a mechanism of advice for understanding what we are putting in our bodies but an "ineffective" mechanism of "social control in an attempt to regulate the wrong [diet culture] narrative online". *Alice* relayed a time that she intentionally changed her food order at a chain restaurant to have tender stem broccoli as an accompaniment to her chicken dish, instead of her usual choice of mashed potatoes. *Katie* likened her experience of engaging with diet culture and restrictive eating habits as 'manipulative' before implementing calorie displays on menus. She argued that this strategy could heighten the manipulative element of disordered eating and restrictive behaviours.

Alice and *Charlotte* also recalled consuming food products that they disliked, or restricting their food consumption according to daily routines or 'what I eat in a day' YouTube content that they had witnessed, with hopes they would end up with the same physique as the influencer(s) they aspired to look like. *Chloe* shared "caving" to similar pressures of influencer culture but finding that it was not a cost-efficient way of living for a young couple like her and her partner as it "cost me like 200 quid to eat the way Instagram was telling me to". *Alice* recalled such behaviours leading to undiagnosed 'bingeing' and 'purging' habits as a direct result of the pressures of online diet culture:

> Yeah, that is what happens if you put yourself in starvation mode and then you go from starvation mode to fuck it mode, then to binge, then to guilt, then binge, then the guilt, and it's just a vicious cycle that I don't think, until they last maybe 5 to 10 years we have even recognized as an eating disorder because you aren't diagnosed with one. But it is, because it is, you've got a bad relationship with food so even if it's not a medicalised diagnosis, it's still disordered and unhealthy.

Alice believed this was a narrative that should be tackled online through UK Government regulation, as opposed to an "attempt to tackle obesity, or the Government's phobia of heavier people". This can be likened to the findings of Atherton (2021) whereby contemporary diet culture is infiltrated by fatphobia and weight stigma but is framed as

being evidence-led and underpinned by health-based statistics surrounding the efficacy of calorie counting for weight loss. *Emily* had experienced weight stigma through health services she encountered, from a young age for her physical disabilities, where she remembered her disabilities being framed as justification to comment on her weight, and risks of obesity, which fed directly into her anorexia and disordered eating:

> I remember being told you can't be this way, you can't look that way, you can't be this big... the health advice wasn't useful at all. I wasn't even fat but from that, I thought I was, and the eating disorder came from there; how I was spoken to because of my physical disabilities.

For *Zara*, the pressure she felt from adhering to the values of calorie counting became too much for her, and she recognised restrictive behaviours towards food that she had started to use to achieve the weight-loss goals set through the idealistic beauty standards of diet culture. *Zara* shared that she had tried calorie counting, but felt it was "too much"; she would forget to scan food into her calorie counting app and then feel guilty for not knowing how much she had or had not eaten. This led to *Zara* feeling that she had to "try to limit... how much snacking" she was doing. Like *Zara, Chloe* did not feel calorie counting, or "clean eating" were sustainable in the longer-term. Despite her shorter interaction with dieting, *Chloe* outlined many health implications she faced from engaging with FAD diet advertised on social media. *Chloe* faced many intolerances that she believed stemmed from intensive periods of restricting her food to meet the narrative put to her by social media. This resonated with *Ivy* who expressed her concern that "we do not hear about the wider implications [of diet culture], we just hear about getting fat, and that puts more worry in us than our broader health".

As a gym owner *Anya* stated we should be utilising broader, more accessible approaches to leading a healthy lifestyle that situate themselves outside of the usual 'obesity' strategies implemented by the UK Government, such as the recent introduction of a sugar tax and visibility of calories of menus in large businesses. This can involve understanding what young people and people across the life course are interested in by asking questions such as, what movement/exercise do they enjoy? Do they understand the difference between health and the ideal aesthetic of health? What do they know about the foods that

they eat? Furthermore, moving away from the demonisation of certain food groups, such as carbohydrates and fats, to better understand what fuels the human body to run optimally. For *Katie*, the demonisation of food groups can become hugely problematic in young people with self-esteem issues when consuming diet culture-related content online:

> I think when they start championing eating disorder recoveries and actually not acknowledging the fact that you are relying, you're almost swapping, well it's more complex than that. But in my view in a simpler form, swapping one for another. I was like, this isn't that healthy because at the end of the day everyone's looking for external gratification, which isn't wrong, that's just human nature but on the extreme of it.

The demonisation of foods was not created by online diet culture; that should be made clear. Participants did not claim that online diet culture saw the emergence of the demonisation of food groups but that it has compounded the spread of misinformation about 'good' and 'bad' foods. For *Sam,* "diet advice needs to be reviewed, conventional advice is dated and problematic; it's the advice itself and the people giving it that is the problem". *Sam's* perception of outdated dietary advice suggested the embedded harm within current dietary advice; this advice normalises the demonisation of specific food groups that leads to the physical implications of disordered eating, as described by *Alice* and *Zak*. Studies such as Lui *et al*. (2017) and Sadler *et al.* (2022) are two of those highlighted in Chapter 2 that have investigated the confusion caused by health-based education and advice provided by healthcare professionals in line with calorie density, healthy foods, unhealthy foods, and calorie consumption; reaffirming that this is an institutional issue that is impeding iatrogenic harms surrounding diet culture narratives online. The demonisation of food groups is not *caused by* diet culture but rather is *embedded* into its' culture. *Alice* recalled her experience of family members engaging with FAD diets such as the Atkins diet, WeightWatchers, and Slimming World in her younger years, all of which emphasised the 'good' foods to eat and demonised the food that should be avoided to lose weight:

> Whether it has been the Atkins diet, Slimming World, Weight Watchers, changing up when something stopped working for them, they would go on with a different diet and just eat minimal amounts and it's not until I said that while she was I never

> would have thought that would have rubbed off on you and our brother, but she said well of course it did.

Alice was not alone in having memories of family members dieting throughout their younger years. 86.36% of participants (n=19) recalled some form of memory relating to family dieting. This varied from parents attending "fat club" (*Caitlin)* each week to be a part of a "community that spur you on to lose weight and hold you accountable" to parents having disordered eating habits that were not hidden from younger members of the family (*Annabelle). Ivy* believed that the changing conditions of diet culture (a movement of diet culture from weekly meetings in a local community centre to online) had increased the public urge whereby "we always want to look our best"; we are no longer presenting our achievements to other members of our local weight loss group but sharing our transformation photos on social media to a far grander audience. The public display of weight loss or gain can normalise fat-shaming, and fatphobic language in the facilitation of weight loss community groups, such as those described above. Individuals who have not lost weight numerically on the scales one week leads to a public discussion of "what has gone wrong" as opposed to exploring the broader health implications of an individual, or the way in which exercise or lifestyle can impact "the number on the scales" (*Ivy*). The public discussion of weight loss or gain is underpinned by a stigmatised understanding of the "idealistic body" and that rapid rates of weight loss should be the goal for those who are overweight or unhappy with their body, demonstrating the normalisation of 'othering' bodies in offline diet culture. This further demonstrates the need for a more extensive definition of what diet culture encompasses and aims to address.

5.4 Regulating Social Media Narratives: Whose is Responsible?

The next section of this chapter will investigate who is responsible for managing and addressing self-esteem. This will align to analytical discussions in Chapter 6 of self-regulatory measures for social media consumption whilst acknowledging participants' perceptions of self-esteem. Within this, the chapter will begin to consider the role of forums such as Tattle.Life in the perpetration of hate speech and hostile forms of "gossiping" within its' moderated forum. This will introduce the concept of platforms

designed to facilitate hatred and hostility online, and consider the role that hatred, hostility or self-deprecation online holds in the management of self-esteem.

Not all perceptions of diet culture were situated within beauty standards and physical aesthetics, as highlighted in the researcher's definition of diet culture in Chapter 5.1. Where there were many examples of the nature of experiences that diet culture encompass, and the impact they have had over an individual's behaviour or intentional self-management of social media consumption throughout this research, there was a common effect that was identified (in)directly by participants in both phases of the research: self-esteem. Within this research, participants in both phases of the research addressed various incidents of low self-esteem, high self-esteem, and attempts to define what self-esteem is (in the interview phase of the research, specifically). What was a consistent discussion point, however, was the debate of whose responsibility it was to improve a person's self-esteem or to tackle the issues damaging a person's self-esteem.

In both phases of the research, family and the opinions they held on to participants were a key component in the building of one's self-esteem. In an *anti-diet culture* subreddit one user stated that their family's opinion meant "everything" to them especially when combined with being on a "weight-loss journey", whereby "the number on the scale reducing gave me validation" and confirmed they were doing "the right thing" by losing weight. This was further evidenced in other *anti-diet culture* and *EDanonymous* subreddits with users using their family in their "rationale" for being a part of the online community (subreddit). In some cases (17 incidents) this rationale was accompanied by a picture of the individual in their "before" picture (the picture they planned to use at the start of their weight loss), their height, current weight, and the weight that they aspired to be. From here, other members of the subreddit would provide advice on the best approaches to self-starvation, rapid weight loss, and the "best" weight loss supplements in the form of tablets, powders, and injections. The comments on posts such as this were not exclusive to pieces of advice, the owner of this image would invite "meanspo" through captions such as "tell me I'm fat, I need help"; i.e., hate-fueled comments that are posted

with the intention of demoralising an individual to encourage them to lose weight. Thus, relying on other people's commentary to influence them changing their behaviours with food, and on occasions exercise – "motivation to go for a run", "motivation to eat healthier", "motivation to not eat at all". Research around experiences of meanspo dominate their focus on image-centric social media platforms such as Tumblr and Instagram (see Gerrard, 2018; McGregor & Clancy, 2019; Achilles *et al.*, 2022), but have now spilled across to platforms that do not explicitly rely on image-based content such as Reddit. The welcoming of meanspo feeds into later analyses of this chapter that recognises the online spaces' contribution to the normalisation of hate speech and hate incidents, but not all hate-fueled comments observed in the digital ethnographic of this research could be considered welcomed. Incidents were observed in *anti-diet culture* subreddits whereby members of the community were reaching out to co-members for advice around in building their self-esteem and were met with comments such as "dramatic", "just stop eating", "sew your mouth up", or "girl, you're curvy... nah, you're morbidly obese". Both approaches to requesting support with dieting and weight loss demonstrate the ongoing adapting nature of access to diet culture (see Gagliardi, 2018). This would, in some instances, initiate debates within the subreddits discussion feed as to what the purpose of the community was: were they here to encourage each other to lose weight, to encourage each other not "cave to the pressure" of diet culture, and finally were they "responsible" for their self being "released from the power of diet culture". An anonymous user in this *anti-diet culture* discussion thread stated that they would have Reddit open "for 5 minutes and I can see fatphobic comments" and stressing that "fat shaming leads to mental health" therefore urging participants in hostile conversations to stop. The work of James (2020) supports the rise in resistance against modern diet culture through virtual communications or activist movements, online and offline.

The varying experiences of *anti-diet culture* subreddits demonstrates the need for further moderation of forums such as Reddit. Despite each member agreeing to terms and conditions of subreddits before accepting their place in the community, is conflict in provision of advice, and support, in the *anti-diet culture* community suggests different motivations and needs across different Reddit members. The expectation of Reddit is that

if commentary is shared in a *subreddit* that makes a person feel uncomfortable or has a detrimental effect on a person's self-esteem they should look to remove themselves from that forum. Christy Harrison (2019) highlights that individuals are responsible for building their own self-esteem and empowering themselves to do so; this can occur through methods of personal development such as management of our own time, social media consumption and the peer's we surround ourselves with. The Online Safety Act 2023 looks to address lack of regulation of hate crime and trolling on social media through the responsibilisation of social media platforms (and in cases, Ofcom) to manage and address hate crimes, or incidents of trolling or harassment on their platform, however, will not look to oppress the exercise of freedom of speech online. In incidents such as those above, Reddit or Ofcom would not look to intervene as the comments have not crossed the boundary of a "hate crime", or "trolling". Further to this, the attention that hate-fueled comments or controversial content on social media attracts demonstrates a rise in 'traffic' relating to such content (i.e., more people engaging with the content, reading the content, or searching for the posts using in-app search functions). The higher the levels of engagement with content, the more that social media platforms will profiteer regardless of the potential impact on individual users. The lack of organisational intervention in hostile incidents such as those above demonstrates the problematic nature of defining hate crime, hate incidents and trolling within a legal framework that fails to consider the harm inflicted on individuals whereby their experiences are not eligible for inclusion in such definitions (see Chakraborti, 2010; Williams, 2020; Schweppe & Tong, 2021). The reality being that such commercial forces help to shape the normalisation of online hate across social media spaces.

From the two forums explored as part of the digital ethnography in this research Tattle.Life was the forum that demonstrated a clear-cut approach to responsibilisation in the self to manage one's input, consumption and engagement with the forum. The concern is that Tattle.Life was clear from the terms and conditions outlined to the researcher on registering for access to the forum, with the first listed stating that there should be "no moderating and telling people what they can or can't post. If there's a post you don't like... keep scrolling", followed by "don't attempt to shut down the conversation". However, later

conditions stated there were to be “no abusive or hateful messages” posted as “we are not here to fight each other and turn it into a mess”. Where the above rules all place the responsibility of the individual to manage their own engagement with the forum a contradiction of these expectations was clear from the findings of this study. Where members of the gossip forum did not wish to troll a public figure, or influencer, they were met with comments such as “fuck off outta here if you don’t want to slate”, “your moral compass is fucked”, “they shouldn’t be online if they don’t want this”, or, “ugh, what are you doing here then?!”. There were a significant number of abusive and hateful comments directed at other users, or at influencers that infiltrated the forum, that were not filtered or removed from the forum despite their violent nature. Tattle.Life has a “report” function as per other mainstream social media platforms. However, the comment “declare me a troll or a bully... I’m a normal person seeing through your bullshit, what will they do?” suggests that this function is perceived as not fit for purpose or is not effectively utilised by members of the online community. The demonstration and acceptance of online hate on this forum will be addressed in further detail in Chapter 5.7. What must be acknowledged at this stage, however, is that methods of self-management to take responsibility for one’s own self-esteem following incidents of online abuse are not effective without mechanisms of reporting to support feelings of safety and empowerment online. Self-regulation in the consumption of image-based social media platforms in which their algorithmic models recommend potentially harmful and unwanted content, without the user searching for such content (Goodyear *et al.*, 2018).

Zak and *Charlotte* identified specific changes they had made to their routine based on routines they had witnessed ‘influencers’ following online, or tips they had read/listened to online. *Zak* had built a routine over recent years based upon advice he had heard in a podcast by Canadian psychologist and author Jordan Peterson:

> … getting things done in your day that you know you should do and obviously that’s a matter of perspective because what should you be doing in your life, definitely go to the gym, not because I’m a gym rat but because it makes you feel good, I like to look after myself, so train as much as possible. Get your steps in, I know that sounds so weird, I’m not one of those people who wanders around my room to get my steps in, but you know what I mean. Actually, I am one of those people,

> but I've learned to chill out with it. I'll make my bed when I get up, it started because I watched the Jordan Peterson video on YouTube or TikTok or something, and he was saying it's gonna start your day off well.

For *Zak*, unlike *Charlotte*, he could recognise a positive change in his mood after implementing changes to his routine. However, he identified that this positive change was influenced by spending less time on his phone and focusing on finding strategies that support his lifestyle. More specifically, around his work shift patterns:

> Yeah, get up, don't go on your phone, make your bed, open your window, open your curtains you just like, it makes everything feel better. You've started your day, you've got up and done something. You haven't gone on your phone or gone onto YouTube and watch half an hour video or whatever you just started. Then you go downstairs, you don't fester in your bedroom all morning and from there you just do things that make you feel good on a morning, so for me I go to the gym in the morning... If I'm on nights, I'll go later in the day to keep me buzzed and awake for my shift.

Charlotte discussed in depth how she had found strategies, away from advice administered on social media, that worked for her to enhance her well-being and improve her self-esteem. This came in the form of journalling, making physical notes in written notebooks instead of using online software. *Charlotte* acknowledged that in her late teens through to her early 20s, she had noticed a significant improvement in self-esteem and her productivity when spending more time on social media. Strategies implemented into daily routines align with the values of self-regulation alluded to in the social media consumption section of this chapter; it is the responsibility of the individual to manage, regulate, and control their social media consumption. This means being responsible for finding strategies that alter their use of social media, the diet culture-related content they may consume, and how they believe this influences their offline behaviours and their relationship with their body, self-esteem, and nutrition. *Millie* recognised that if she were struggling with her self-image on a day that she read information about the next FAD diet or a weight-loss journey that someone she followed on Instagram had endured, this would influence the food choices she made throughout the coming day:

> I just try and be more resilient to it now or like more and critical to it and try and tune in to myself a little bit more so that if I do feel myself like going down a bit of

> a rabbit hole in like, ooh what's that, that's a lovely detox tea. I love herbal tea... Yeah. And then I end up clicking on it and kind of about weight loss or whatever.

This was a similar experience to *Katie,* who divulged the justification that she and her friends had made over the years to consume food that had been demonised in her world of athletics in her teenage years:

> … Some of the women that I still speak to like one of my really good friends she still has a bit of that... if she's having pizza tonight, she feels like she has to exercise during the day to then, justify eating the pizza. I don't have that anymore... I think it's just that mindset you get into, it becomes almost like a not a game, but it becomes almost a goal of, well, next week I can be even better because I cannot eat, you know, I don't know rice or you know... it starts off very innocently you know you swap - so I never ate white pasta like I swapped to brown pasta and then it just in the end just didn't eat pasta.

Katie discussed how diet culture embedded into professional (and semi-professional) sports has trickled outside the sports arena and into the social world, into social media and the content we consume online. *Alice* believed the embedding of diet culture, online and offline, into the arena of sports to be a far broader issue than one that affects semi-professional and professional athletes. For *Alice,* however, the "cut-off point" for diet culture consumption for her was what she regarded to be the more "extreme" side of diet culture: 'bodybuilding culture'. For *Alice,* the lack of disclosure around steroid use by bodybuilders on Instagram presents the risk of harming young people whom it draws in when struggling with their self-esteem and wanting to alter their body, by not disclosing that they [bodybuilder] have acquired their physique using performance-enhancing drugs, alongside a strict exercise and dieting regime:

> I've had to unfollow all of the bodybuilders because I do find it really triggering because they're like "if you don't put the work, in you are useless" very much that attitude, like there's a girl that I follow on Instagram, I have had to unfollow her 'cause she said "like if you really want it, you'll do it and, if you don't then you are just lazy" it's very much that attitude, so if you're going to do bodybuilding you have to be all in but it's such a, I find it really triggering sport like they are judging you based on what you look...They look amazing but the feedback that they get back is like "oh you've got too much fat here"… There's literally nothing on them and I'm like it's just so triggering like and then post like what they eat in a day, for one it looks like shite, it looks like rabbit food, like no thanks.

Similar to *Alice, w*hen exploring what are the 'best' foods to consume when dieting and what is the 'best' route to take to become the healthiest, most successful version of yourself, as alluded to by participants such as *Zak,* and *Charlotte* earlier, not only are young people being told how to live their lives to meet the idealistic standards of the 'attractive' aesthetic, but they are being told how best to lead their professional lives in the way a professional should behave, look, and the actions they should carry out daily to be the most successful version of one's self. As per the findings of Sandford & Quarmby (2018) social media consumption is reflected in people's behaviours offline. As has been demonstrated in the findings of this research; if social media provides us with an idealised "better" way of life, it seems like a legitimate and realistic prospect, so we take a chance of building the side business, leaving a relationship, going into new relationships, travelling, or changing career for example. However, attaining the "better" lifestyle and busy schedule is not realistic and becomes what you wrap your daily routine around. For some, such as *Katie,* it becomes a lifestyle that is unsustainable and unrealistic. The (un)realistic goals set out by and through social media will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter.

The change to daily routine, levels of social media consumption, and the conditions of which social media was engaged with during the UK Covid-19 pandemic and resulting lockdown(s) (see the *addictive and habitual cycles* produced in Chapter 6.2) was identified by *Charlotte* as a trigger point for reductions in self-esteem. Within this, *Charlotte* specifically stated that this was when she had witnessed a rise in diet culture-related content appearing on her social media feeds. This was not an isolated experience for *Charlotte* but a trigger point for many participants. The Covid-19 pandemic (March 2020-February 2021) created unprecedented changes to lives across the globe, forcing people to adapt ways of working, communicating, and socialising. An adverse circumstance, therefore, acknowledged by 19 participants (86.36%) in this research is a heightened reliance on digital technology to support these three areas, specifically social media. Similarly, for *Lucy*, "there was this massive culture change in anything online during like lockdowns". *Lucy* acknowledged that this cultural change that she recognised was in the amount that she, her family, and her friends used social media; this was evident

in both her screen time and the number of posts/stories she was exposed to across platforms. The same patterns were identified by participants such as *Alice*, who discussed feeling pressure during her heightened time online throughout the UK lockdown periods to share her workouts with her followers and to join in online trends such as baking banana bread to tag your favourite 'influencers' into, or completing Joe Wicks/Courtney Black workouts live online, and sharing the nutrition plans that she was following as a way to 'inspire' other people to maintain a routine and look after their well-being. The transition of engaging with this, to moving out of lockdown restrictions, and concentrating time back into the offline space was a triggering time for *Alice,* as she had become so heavily involved in online diet culture, following a new routine, and sharing this online with minimal external distractions, that her feelings of social anxiety and self-esteem were affected:

> But then that caused me stress because I was like I can't go on celebrating I've got, I've got to do my exercise I've got a new diet plan to follow, because I've got a new routine that I've been doing for so long [during lockdowns], but on the other hand the closure of the gyms also caused more stress because I was like, so when we had that little circuit breaker in November, I had a full-on breakdown because the gyms were closing for 4-weeks.

For *Alice,* the engagement with diet culture did not stop when UK lockdown regulations were lifted, nor did they stop being a consumer of diet culture. *Alice* discussed the continuing feelings of pressure to share her training regime to ensure others do not perceive her as 'lazy', demonstrating diet culture's influence over 'offline identity' as well as its influence over aspired body types. The urge to no longer be a consumer of diet culture and to contribute to diet culture content online was shared in an array of different ways by participants in this study. This was recognised by those such as *Ivy* and *Kayla,* who reported recognising how time-consuming their relationship with diet culture had become when they had lacked daily routine during the first UK lockdown period, compared to when they had returned to work post-lockdown. For *Kayla,* social media took over time with her partner and family, something she did not want to feel she was contributing to. Linking back to the *addictive* and *habitual cycles of social media*, the conditions that a participant was engaging with social media during the Covid-19 lockdown(s) impacted how smooth of a transition a move away from immersive social media consumption was. Like the experience of *Alice* in sharing her gym workouts during

the Covid-19 lockdown(s), *Katie* shared her own experience of starting an Instagram fitness page during her time at university as a mode of accountability for herself at a time when she saw her fitness and label as the 'sporty friend' as a part of her identity:

> ... I had a fitness Instagram about eight years ago under I don't if you ever had a Kayla Esteims. I don't know if you've heard of her, she has a Sweat App and when she first started, she just did these PDFs and it's HIIT... I never posted my face. But like I think I had something like 700 followers on that Instagram... I just remember one day just getting the point I was like what am I doing? Like what? What am I actually doing? You know everything was on there on social media and like I was a size 4 to 6 because at one point and I just remember thinking what am I doing like I was like sitting in the gym. I was like it's sucked all the fun out of it.

The pressure of wanting to share their own 'transformation' and journey with their followers, as well as obtaining a level of accountability through making nutrition and workout-related content on a social media page, fed into the *addictive cycle* of social media for both *Alice* and *Katie.* For both participants, they were so immersed in the diet culture content that they were consuming on their social media accounts – in both cases, this predominantly took place on Instagram – that neither could identify when the boundary of 'pressure' had blurred between feeling pressure to engage with diet culture caused by social media and the feeling of pressure that they felt to uphold a standard to their followers (Goodyear *et al.*, 2018). *Alice* and *Katie* described "accepting defeat" to this 'pressure' because they did not want to be viewed as 'lazy' by their followers, thus taking on an identity as the sporty, gym-going friend or family member as previously discussed. *Lizzie* had experienced feelings of similar pressure using Instagram, which had also previously influenced her relationship with her body and exercise in the offline world where she would "force [herself] to workout more" when she "doesn't actually like working out, it was just to look the way diet culture online was telling me to look".

The growing accessibility of diet-related content on social media for *Lizzie*'s social media experience coincided with the rise of 'influencer culture' and the increasing popularity of reality television and those starring in the shows. Although 'influencers' have been known to create communities to promote wellness, support, and healthy lifestyles in the format of their websites, applications, as well as health/fitness-specific pages on social media,

participants such as *Chloe* shared experience of accessing fitness pages on social media during a time in her life that she was struggling with her mental health, and retrospectively, believes she was utilising these pages to maintain an 'unhealthy' mode of weight loss:

> In 2014 I was quite I was a bit depressed; I was going through a lot in that sense, and I lost quite a lot of weight. So, I think at that stage I followed a lot of these pages because I was like, I've lost a lot of weight, and I've got really skinny, I mean in an unhealthy way... and then I was like I don't wanna like get fat when I started gaining weight again because I knew I would gain it and maybe more back and I mean I think that sort of, when I went to follow these pages, maybe I shouldn't have but I was thinking, well if it's gonna come back I'd rather come back in the muscle format than get fat again.

Identity was a crux in the transition to prosumer status on social media for *Alice* and *Katie* and the remaining position of the low-engagement consumer (Fergie *et al.*, 2016) for *Lizzie* and *Chloe.* It was important to *Katie* that she lived up to her identity of being the "sporty" friend through sharing her running with friends, joining a CrossFit community, and posting about her sports events on her personal social media feeds. Whereas, for *Alice* her identity as a gym-goer and a "productive" young woman came from her own labels and therefore, her own expectations (pressures). Within this, *Alice* reported feelings of anxiety if she had not shared her gym workout, or what she had "achieved" at work daily due to the label she had placed on herself. The changing construction of "productivity" and self-worth will be analysed further in Chapter 5.6. However, *Alice* and *Katie* reported feeling that taking on this identity and adhering to the pressures of Instagram diet culture had negatively impacted their relationship with food and exercise offline. This being a consequence of both women fully immersing themselves in the identity(ies) they had formed. Neither *Katie* nor *Alice* saw their identity as an 'online-only' presence; their identity formulation was different to that created by *Zara,* as per later discussions in Chapter 6.4, where *Zara* recognise herself as having an "online personality" and an "offline personality", both *Alice* and *Katie* recognised a blurring of this boundary whereby the "need" to post about a workout, or a meal they had eaten, or more broadly in the case of *Alice* an achievement she had made at work that day, would encourage behaviours such as multiple workouts per day, the recording of workout routines in the gym to post on social media, the skipping of a meal or restriction of food in an attempt to "lose more

weight" or "lose weight quicker" (*Katie).* Thus, influencing their shift to being a prosumer of diet culture.

The harms relating to social media platforms, influencer culture, and diet culture narratives represent the effects and events that following interaction with these areas including emotional harms (body dissatisfaction, body-related anxiety), disordered eating, body-related anxiety), physical harms (self-injurious behaviours), cultural harms (narratives of diet culture, pathologised attractiveness) and embedded harms (pathologised attractiveness). The harms that emerged from the data demonstrate the effects of social media engagement that are influenced by causal mechanisms such as the 'othering' of bodies through normative diet culture narratives, of which influences the construction of beauty. The failure to regulate cultural spaces such as diet and influencer culture(s) impacts an individual's experience of 'othering' and stigmatisation based on not meeting the 'trending' or 'idealistic' beauty standards that are set through diet culture narratives.

5.5 (Un)Realistic Goals, Internalised Misogyny and Falsehoods

To appreciate the experience of diet culture, it is not just the type of content consumed and produced that should be considered but the influence of these cultural spaces on offline behaviours. It was highlighted in both phases of data collection that goals set by social media users, of how to look, how to eat, how to train, where to holiday, or what is considered as productive (as well as what we should 'not' do) may not be based on accurate representations of a person's life. This creates the premise of (un)realistic goals that leave a person feeling unfulfilled and potentially like a failure if they cannot reach them. The term *(un)realistic goals* has been coined as a contribution to knowledge within this thesis to demonstrate a goal that is set by an individual, or a group of people based on what they perceive to be realistic, but that is, in fact, based on misinformation, false advertising or filtered imagery. The underpinning of what makes these goals (un)realistic is the illusion that all content consumed on social media is authentic because it does not tell us otherwise. A subject account from the Reddit element of the digital ethnographic dataset relayed an experience of social media 'helping' them to engage in harmful dieting

techniques from the age of 9 years old, referring to the accessibility of information rather than the filtering of images being an effect on her eating habits, as well being “beaten up in the street [for being] fat” at the age of 13 *(Anon User, Reddit).* The level of restriction snowballed for this individual from following FAD diets such as Slimming World, to eating 500-calories per day, to taking “laxatives for dessert” after extensive restriction with their diet throughout their day of “oxo cubes” and “plain vegetables” at certain times of day. Intermittent fasting as a strategy for weight loss was discussed at length, with dietary advice being provided for users to not eat anything all day and have “one HEALTHY meal” at 5pm, which should consist of protein and vegetables only (*Anon User, Reddit*). This is a cause for concern for a person’s engagement in disordered eating from a young age but also, being a young person who has accessed social media earlier than the age for access; for most platforms, you are expected to be a minimum of 13-years-old when signing up. There is a lack of regulatory power towards the verification of identity when signing up to social media at the time of writing, thus making it difficult to verify whether a user is of age or has altered their date of birth as a means of setting up an account on social media. Regulatory bodies argue that it is the responsibility of the parent/guardian to keep their young person safe online or, to keep them away from the online space in more extreme circumstances (Ofcom, 2023), but that is a simplistic attempt to tackle under 13s using social media.

As will be later discussed in Chapter 6.1**,** *Rachel* shared the impact of hiding her social media use from her parents and the lengths that she would go to to use social media without the knowledge of her parents. If a young person hides their social media use from their parents/guardians, a barrier will automatically be presented if a young person is affected by diet advice they have witnessed online as they may not wish to disclose that they are both struggling with their self-esteem and are secretly using social media. The Online Safety Act 2023 has initiated UK parliamentary debates surrounding the verification of identity when signing up to social media for all prospective users. However, *Ivy* highlighted that the verification of identity has the potential to impede the digital literacy divide in the UK as opposed to tackling the issue of under 13s on social media. *Ivy* has said that this divide will occur due to how expensive photographic ID such as a

[provisional] driving license, or a passport is in the UK; this is not accessible in all cases, meaning if a person does not have the funds to buy a state verified form of ID, you may not be able to use social media. This not only has the potential to increase the digital literacy divide in the UK but to ostracise potentially vulnerable populations from connecting to wider cohorts and online communities in ways they may not feel that they can in the offline world. For example, *Emily* emphasised the importance of online mental health groups in her life as a young woman with cerebral palsy and anorexia. It is important to note that the online spaces that *Emily* was referring to were not influencer-led communities, or pages online, but social support groups led by established local and national organisations such as Mind, Beat Eating Disorders and Action for Children. For *Emily,* as a Disabled woman, it can be difficult to create and maintain relationships outside of the family unit in the offline space. Online, *Emily* stated that she felt less judgment from her peers and to feel empowered to share her story with people like her; her presence online and the visibility of disabled influencers and public figures across mass media were paramount to her sense of belonging and her journey to recovery from hospitalisation with anorexia over the years. *Emily,* however, had concerns of the authenticity of images and information shared on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. She used it less frequently due to having reservations over the impact that consuming image-based social media, outside of her Facebook and Twitter (X) support groups would have on her eating disorder recovery, and her self-esteem.

At the time of writing, there are no legislated regulations that require social media producers to disclose if they have adjusted (filtered) an image before posting it onto their profile(s). Therefore, no regulatory body is responsible for monitoring the authenticity of images shared online in the way that social media platforms are responsible for monitoring the spreading of misinformation in the form of ‘fake news’ on their sites. Chapter 6.4 will outline how the branding of the self in influencer culture – and throughout diet culture – is regulated differently to that of other businesses and advertisements. The harm of the misrepresentation (or false advertisement) of a dietary product is addressed by the ASA in the UK. However, misrepresenting a filtered image advertising an influencer’s weight-loss journey, using a filtering app to alter their appearance further,

does not meet the threshold of false advertisement of a brand by the ASA. Yet, influencers are self-employed entities and therefore are their own brand. If they are falsely advertising their brand (themselves) and this inflicts harm by the setting of (un)realistic goals by consumers based on “falsehoods” (false narratives portrayed by social media and producers of content), this should be addressed by the ASA as a regulatory body for advertising standards in the UK.

Discussions observed in Tattle.Life threads found users to be describing Instagram ‘influencers’ to have privilege in their experience of diet culture that could lead to them directly using diet culture-related narratives (for example advertising their own dietary product, fitness communities/applications, or posing in ways that would alter the appearance of their body), with one Tattle.Life user stating that an influencer’s body appears as the influencer wants it to appear – they are in control of their own aesthetic. Therefore, what you see on [her – the influencer] social media is “not real life” (*Anon User, Tattle.Life).* As will be drawn upon in more depth in Chapter 5.6, the perceived filtering of lifestyles where inauthenticity was visible to social media users led to the facilitation of trolling on Tattle.Life with subjects stating specific influencers had “no fucking clue” or were experiencing “fakeups” as an opposed to “glow ups”. Inauthenticity in shared information or images across social media is not always visible and can be supported through artificial intelligence software, or filtering applications, with claims in both phases of the research stating influencers will only share the parts of their life that they want to online – their ‘highlight’ reel. (Un)realistic goals can be set through the misrepresentation of lifestyle, the ‘highlight reel’ of social media, the filtering of imagery, and the increasing ability to spread inauthentic images or information subtly. This subtlety is supported by the continuing complexity of digital technology and applications that support the filtering of imagery (e.g., Facetune, Faceapp, Airbrush), or artificial intelligence (AI) software (e.g., ChatGPT, Photoleap, Luminar Neo). As per the ‘highlight reel’, *Bekki* stated that:

> People only want to put good things out there online. They don’t want to put out there when their lives are shit or when bad things are happening, that they’re feeling down or having a bad mental health day or whatever... it [posting your reality] encourages everyone to realise that everyone is in the same boat... - it’s a natural part of life.

The ‘highlight reel’ or ‘filtering of lifestyles’ can be recognised as the curation of data sharing online by social media users through diet and influencer cultures. But what is the attraction to filtering our appearances and the aesthetic of our lifestyles? For *Caitlin* she believed this stemmed “...from how the media has portrayed idealness” over the years with mass sharing of societal expectations over ‘health’, ‘attractiveness’, ‘work ethic’ and ‘wealth’ - thus, mass sharing of normative content. It was identified by 90.91% (n=20) participants that they had witnessed content that had been filtered online, or in 70% (n=14) of these 20 cases, had altered their offline behaviours based on (un)realistic social media content: using weight-loss supplements advertised by an influencer as a successful diet product that they later found out the influencer had never used themselves, invested in cosmetic surgery to alter their body shape to feel more ‘attractive’ based on what they had consumed online, entered large calorie deficits to drop body fat based on a bodybuilder’s diet who had not disclosed their use of performance-enhancing drugs, invested in face filler to look like their favourite influencer(s), purchased online workout/diet programmes from their favourite reality TV star who dropped a significant amount of weight and had been praised for their ‘new look’. 18.18% (n=4) of participants admitted to filtering their images for social media in their teenage years or currently. One participant who did disclose this was *Sara*. In conversation*, Sara* was initially reluctant to admit she had used filtering applications herself. This was evident from pauses in conversations around filtering applications, followed by *Sara* stating, “well, actually, yeah OK, I have used them before, I won’t lie”. She went on to explain that:

> I think I did [like using filtering apps] when I was younger, but I think it was more commonly used when I was younger like it was. Like a lot of people are called out for it now, because the way society is moving is being more natural and being more open and honest and healthy.

Discussing this further, *Sara* could identify a direct link between the use of filtering applications and low self-esteem that she felt was perpetuated by the ‘beauty’ she could see in the influencers she followed online, which has since led to *Sara* stopping posting images on her social media pages that are not filtered:

> I just like taking photos with filters on because you can't do it on a normal camera Instagram. I follow quite a lot of celebrities on Instagram and to keep up with like podcasts themes and stuff like that and Facebook pretty much the same. I'd rather watch what people are doing, but I don't really have at the confidence to post as much as what other people do and but yeah, I'm more of a sit back and watch people- type of person.

Grace held similar feelings towards filtering her photos to *Sara* in her justification for using specific social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat. For *Grace*, Snapchat was a 'perfect' way to disguise her insecurities within the group and 'selfie' photos that she would take of herself and post on her social media. For a "very long time," *Grace* stated that, until recently, she would not post a picture if it was not altered "ever so slightly". She based this upon the "idealistic beauty standards" that she believed were set by society and further perpetuated through social media filters named 'beautiful', 'golden and gorgeous' and 'beauty' to name a few. When addressing this, we must not assume that filters used online that feed into the foundation of potentially (un)realistic goals must be 'significant' and 'noticeable' to be harmful. When a consumer is engaging with diet culture-related content online, they should be able to assume that the content they are consuming is authentic. Therefore, no matter how substantial a filtering process an image has gone through, the consumer should be made aware rather than having to look out for the warping of backgrounds in images online, for example. This aligns with the work of Cambre & Lavrence (2023) of the 'digital-forensic gaze' whereby social media users actively observe whether images are filtered or not.

The lack of authenticity in the production of social media consumption must refer to more than just the non-disclosure of filtered imagery but also the non-disclosure of physique-enhancing treatments or procedures. *Alice* discussed this specifically in relation to Love Island contestants who came away from the reality television show and sold weight-loss supplements or training programmes. Although *Alice* recognised former Love Island contestants who had entered the show with the confessed intention of promoting their gyms, online communities, or personal training services, such as Adam Collard and Gabby Allan, she positioned her argument towards contestants who did not have the qualifications to provide such services. Participants such as *Zara* believe that the

adjustments to information or imagery do not need to be severe to be significant in impact:

> I think a lot of the time it; it just does just create unhealthy kind of expectations because even I've seen posts where people have. They've, you know, being a diet influencer of stuff and it just shows how even would like a slight adjustment of your body, how you can look completely different. So I have to admit, a lot of the time with like these beauty influencers and stuff, I don't even know if I should believe them because you know, it's just it's so easy to kind of manipulate.

Lizzie disclosed a similar experience in the blurring of the boundaries between authentic information and imagery and non-authentic information and imagery in like she would, still now, scroll through social media and think, "oh god yeah, I need to work on this and that, then I remember that actually I don't know what's real and what's not". Whether filtered imagery can be detected or not, and whether the goals we set ourselves in the offline space are realistic, it does not make us want to achieve these goals anymore; as per Lavrence & Cambre (2020) the filtering of images to appear 'natural'. Participants such as *Christie, Alice*, and *Katie* could recall occasions when they had based their weight-loss or dietary goals on aesthetics that they knew were not authentic or filtered. This did not change the end goal; it did not make them feel 'not good enough' when they could not achieve their desired body type. *Christie* relayed her experience in the following words:

> When I set a goal, I will go for what I actually want... Mostly I set myself that goal and I went with it, previously, and it was because I was seeing these models, at 22-years-old, from Victoria Secrets, to models from the North East... because you know they were slim... and they'll have all the likes and all the comments. And I thought, 'this is why nobody fancies me' because I'm fat.

The feeling of not being good enough was not the end of the cycle of emotions linked to attaining (un)realistic goals. 12 participants disclosed having experienced disordered eating habits (54.55%): This was, in most of these cases (91.67%, n=11), undiagnosed due to not discussing this with their GP or not being referred for further diagnostic testing by their GP when they had attempted to reach out for support around their changes in eating habits. In this study, participants discussed different ways of managing this cycle of emotions and modes of self-regulation. From *Millie's* experience of 'not feeling good

enough', the term 'internalised misogyny' was likened to emotions experienced as a result of the aesthetics of her social media newsfeed(s):

> I just felt like I was slagging of loads of women. And I've just became like, a little bit misogynistic, if you know what I mean because, like, yeah, just becoming really resentful of the type of women that that I still did wanna look at online because I was kind of like, they do look mint and I am kind of jealous. But then at the same time I'd be like, ohh, you know that they're just, I don't know what, what I would say but like just turning misogynistic again, this sort of internalised misogyny kind of thing... So yeah, just kind of cut some of them out.

The term *internalised misogyny* can be used here to express an internalised emotion of hatred towards oneself, or others, as a young woman who does not feel they are able to attain the goals they are setting for themselves, within the realm of diet culture. This could be a new "low weight goal" (*Alice),* or a goal that is set relating to work, personal development or education. The process of *internalised misogyny* is initiated when a person does believe they are able to, or worthy of, achieving an (un)realistic goal, leading to the internalised feeling of hatred towards themselves or, towards other women online; usually women who they perceive "have achieved that thing that I want" (*Millie).* During their interviews, participants (45.45%, n=10) disclosed enquiring about the purchase of enhancement procedures such as cosmetic surgery, facial fillers, or performance enhancing drugs due to their perceived failure to achieve the (un)realistic goals they had set for themselves.

The rise of cosmetic surgeries across the life course was apparent in discussions with participants. It was observable in conversation threads in health and fitness subreddits investigated as part of the ethnographic dataset. 27.27% (n=6) disclosed engaging in cosmetic surgery or beauty procedures: lip filler, cheek filler, jaw filler, breast augmentation, breast enhancement, tummy tuck, liposuction, or a nose job. *Caitlin* shared that she had enquired about cosmetic and beauty procedures across UK private hospitals and the cosmetic tourism industry, specifically in Turkey. These procedures included lip fillers – which she followed through with investing in – liposuction and a tummy tuck, of which she decided the risks of engaging in such surgeries were too high for her and her health. *Grace* was forthcoming in describing her negative experience of undergoing a

tummy tuck and breast enhancement surgery; the outcome of this surgery was not as straightforward as *Grace* had anticipated. *Grace* explained that she had expected, post-surgery, to have a lift in self-esteem and a boost in confidence, but this was not the case – she experienced severe health implications that ended up in follow-up surgery. Her private healthcare provider compensates her with scar-covering tattoo appointments to further her low self-esteem after surgery. Once again, recognising that longer-term changes to the body do not provide you with body satisfaction and high self-esteem. *Millie* framed her understanding of increased levels of cosmetic surgery as something that was "becoming more and more popular", although she had not undergone appearance altering surgery herself, she reported that her friends, peers, and acquaintances have had recognisable procedures since leaving school, aged 16-years-old.

Although *Grace* shared her experiences of disordered eating habits and investing in cosmetic surgery based on the "ideals" she believed social media embedded into her perception of herself, she was able to recognise what she termed as "falsehoods" in the sharing of broader elements of life online:

> But honestly, even that comes with its own intricacies, because then you've got people presenting these fake, beautiful homes that are perfectly tidy all the time and are polished. And it's like, bitch please. My house is a shithole. It's always a shithole. Unless I can manage to clean it on the Sunday. And then I wake up on Monday and it's a shithole again. So it's like these same sort of like standards around like falsehoods about what our lived realities are like are still there. Now they don't affect us in the same way. But I think that's because I can't control what my house looks like. So I'm very happy with that aesthetic.

Here, *Grace* frames falsehoods as being the false narratives sold by diet culture that have the potential to initiate the altering of a consumers, behaviour offline, or influence the products that they consume based on the narrative that is presented by their "favourite" influencers. This narrative does not need to be an explicit message of cause and effect but could be an indirect message whereby a consumer is led to believe that a product or behaviour, for example, could impact their life that it may not have the power to achieve. In *Grace'*s experience, this included seeing influencers undergo cosmetic surgeries and talk about their "positive experiences" of such surgeries and the "positive effect" this had

had on their body confidence. Given *Grace's* lack of self-esteem at the time that she consumed this information, the "falsehood" for her was that cosmetic surgery would "fix her self-esteem issue". Or that purchasing a "big, fancy house" would support her in feeling more successful, or worthy. Looking at her experience of multiple cosmetic surgeries, and purchasing a large family home, retrospectively, *Grace* recognised that none of these purchases improved her self-esteem, as her perception of herself remained the same; leading to the feeling of failing to achieve her (un)realistic goals.

Within this, the trend 'Instagram vs. Reality' has started to emerge, seeing influencers posting either stringently posed or filtered images alongside the unposed or unfiltered image to show the 'behind the scenes' of being an influencer, as well as what meets 'beauty standards' in online cultural spaces, and what does not. Thus, what receives the 'likes' and has financial value, and what does not. Some participants, such as *Anya*, saw this content as positive in deconstructing online filtered lifestyles. Others, such as *Alice,* saw this trend as "another deceiving attempt for popularity online that does not have the correct intentions". In this, *Anya* stated:

> I think from a positive impact of social media, I started following people who spoke outside of the box around social media, like people who were more about kind of urm, kind of like that 'Instagram versus Reality' but when it was good not before everyone jumped on it for the insights. So, people who just have different opinions and make you question why you think that way and it's like, to actually think 'do I think this is healthy' or 'do I think this is good?'

When going into further discussion around the trend of 'Instagram vs. Reality' *Anya* believed there to be a line that could be drawn between when this content was harmful and ill-intended and where it helps demonstrate (un)realistic goals set up within the online space; usually by influencers whose full-time job is to make money based on the content they post on social media. For *Anya,* the "evolution of fillers... is seen as aspirational and the norm" whereby influencers and public figures who engage with cosmetic surgery and appearance altering procedures, are glamourised and positioned as an aesthetic to "aspire to look like... if you look at them and when they do their shit you have to understand, but people don't, that they have economic advantage and people working around them to support them look good all the time... It's not realistic". *Lizzie* upheld

similar views on young people's perceptions of the online space and the authenticity of the content they consume online in that whereby she stated that "young people forget that influencers, it's their job to post on social media and look a certain way", and to generate an income from the content that they post. The prioritisation of profiteering of influencers, and social media companies, over the harms inflicted by the sharing of falsehoods and the infiltration of newsfeeds with filtered imagery that feeds into the setting of (un)realistic goals (see Chapter 6.4).

5.6 Filtered Lifestyles and the Pathologisation of Attractiveness

How participants conceptualise 'self-esteem' is paramount in the setting of (un)realistic goals, the motivation behind the goals we set ourselves based on social media content we consume as well as our 'why' for the impact that social media has over our self-esteem, and the worth we attach to ourselves. The marketisation of cultural spaces online, such as diet culture, and influencer culture (see Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2022a), encourage the setting of (un)realistic goals set by social media users, based on societal expectations that come from the mass media, their family/loved ones, and through people of influence across their social media platforms. This is reflected in the increasing use of filtering applications recognised by participants in this research and discussions within the digital ethnographic data set. A particular concern of participants in the interview phase of this research was the impact that filtered lifestyles and inauthenticity online would have on the younger generation, with participants reflecting on their experiences as teenagers growing up in the earlier years of social media on smartphones and portable devices, with young people becoming an emergent property of the dataset. As a gym owner, *Anya* disclosed her own experience of trying to debunk diet culture myths and support women in her local community in finding confidence in their health, body, and self, more holistically than through 'personal training and weight loss, offline:

> I think because I see women come in at like 14-15 [years old], and they can't look at themselves in the mirror, so the more we make this known and get people in and get people aware from early stages and start being that different voice in the industry, the more change we'll make. Like really, we can see that scale of how it

> can effect later life and people defer doing things in life because of how they look or how they perceive how they look, and how other people thing, so if we can start our message younger or to a wider audience, we are just helping people and that's what been the thing.

It should not be assumed that diet culture is only influential when online or that social media consumption is the only trigger impacting a person's self-esteem. Offline variables such as comments/opinions of family members or loved ones were a huge trigger to lowering participants' mental health, whether opinions had been shared directly or this was an assumed opinion. Participants in this research (72.73%, n=16) identified a dichotomy between "looking well" and "weight loss". Whereby, *Rachel* discussed having attended family events after a period of weight loss and being commended by family members for "looking well"; without a family member stating that she looked well, due to weight loss, *Rachel* was aware that the difference her appearance that family member(s) were referring to. This was also reflected in *Annie's* account whereby she stated that "we need to stop using the terms of attractiveness or 'looking good' as an attribute to weight loss, or surgery, it's hugely problematic and feeds into disordered eating habits or anxiety around foods" whether they take place on or offline. *Annabelle* had witnessed her mother's relationship with food deteriorate because of comments made to her offline before the rise in online diet culture:

> Mum's got a severe eating disorder and that's came from somebody calling her fat. When she was younger and now like laxative addiction and stuff like that. And all you can it then because social media wasn't even around. But what what I can now absolutely do is see how social media backs up this narrative that me mum carries in her head because the way she sees the world in regards to weight and health is completely different to the where I say the world.

Annabelle's experience demonstrated that the emotional, psychological and physical harm posed by diet culture (experiencing an eating disorder) is not exclusive to the online diet culture, it can occur in offline diet spaces. The online space, however, amplifies potential harm to diet culture consumers due to the risk of misinformation being shared with larger audiences at a rapid pace alongside online diet culture being more accessible than offline diet culture. For example, online diet culture content is available 24 hours a day on smart devices, whereas offline diet culture content is contained within weight loss

clubs, newspapers/magazines, or in the gym space. Despite relaying his experiences of disordered eating, perpetuated by his use of social media and his consumption of bodybuilder-related content online, *Zak*, unlike other participants, stated that he had not noticed a dip in his confidence during his weight fluctuations. *Zak* was initially reluctant to admit that he had high self-esteem as he believed this held negative connotations, as it had been so normalised within his friends, peers, and loved ones not to be fully confident in yourself. *Zak* went on to justify that:

> ...despite self-acclaimed egomaniac I say I am, I'm not like… I love myself but I don't love myself. I don't think I am better than anyone in life. That's where I saw the line. I don't think I'm above anyone I think I'm quite privileged in my life because of this, you know I'm a white young lad, yeah like I'm aware I'm very privileged.

Dissimilar to *Zara* and *Bekki, Zak* recognised external variables as indicators of decreasing self-esteem rather than his weight, a long-term breakdown in a long-term relationship. *Zak* could relate to lower moods and become more aware of his physical appearance and confidence following the breakdown of this relationship. *Sara*, however, could relate to both experiences: her weight determining her feelings of self-worth and external perceptions of her appearance (I.e., changes to relationships). Participants in this research (50%, n=11) recognised the importance of a support network in maintaining self-esteem during life-altering events such as relationship breakdowns, changes to employment, and the Covid-19 lockdown. The Covid-19 pandemic can be positioned as a condition that has emerged and changed the way that social media was used during lockdown periods, and beyond, by encouraging people across the globe to use online networking software such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom and Google Meet to socialise and interact with loved ones during periods of lockdown restrictions. As an effect of this, if a support network is lacking or is a network you do not feel comfortable disclosing personal struggles with, you are more likely to turn to the online space for advice, support, or companionship. *Bekki,* like *Zak*, reported feeling 'lucky' that she had a 'strong' support network in her friends and family, people who did not judge her based on her appearance but appreciated her for the person that she was:

> So I have always been someone who has struggled with their weight, and I have always been, always went through phases of being really motivated to want to lose

> weight but not to be health, but to look better so not for the right reasons... I think that has been a lot of people around me, the people around me are very supportive people generally. So, when I have been even bigger and I have put on more weight there has been more worry about my health side of things, not actually being overweight, or looking overweight.

Grace was a participant who focused on the ability to hide the feeling of low self-esteem and, therefore, hide the 'damaging' behaviours that she partook in to achieve the (un)realistic goal that she wished to achieve: the 'perfect body' image. *Grace* discussed how it was not about whether she had an adequate support network around her; it was about not wanting to share her feelings of lacking confidence as she saw this as further weakness in her identity as a professional, as a partner, and as a mother to her little girl whom she did not want to follow in her footsteps of "bulimic tendencies*". Grace* stated that it "frightened" her to think about her daughter engaging in the disordered eating habits that she had in her young years, as she "dreaded to think where [she] could have ended up" if she had continued with such behaviours. On the other hand, *Alice* felt that her online profile was the more appropriate outlet for help-seeking validation, demonstrating how she keeps up a 'positive, productive' lifestyle that could be useful to others around her.

Sometimes, we need help recognising whether the images we are looking at and wishing we looked at are authentic. *Bekki* gave the example of side-by-side images being posted on Instagram alongside one another as a comparison which "looked like two completely different people". The advancement and growing accessibility of filtering applications such as Facetune, Faceapp, or Airbrush continue to blur the boundary of authenticity in social media production. The use of filtered imagery in conjunction with the historic dichotomous relationship between attractiveness and achievement in health discourse has fed into the consumerist market that surrounds cosmetic tourism, the expansion of image-filtering applications and the beauty enhancement industry (events resulting from behaviour changes); this is clear from the findings of this study. The dichotomous relationship underpinning these events has altered the conditions of which society views attractiveness, leading to a pathologisation of attractiveness whereby society views attractiveness to be a key component to health. As a mechanism, attractiveness in this regard is the state of a person's physical appearance including their physique, their body

fat percentage, or their facial features; all of which are socially constructed through wider beauty and fashion trends. The notion of pathologising attractiveness is a contribution to knowledge within this thesis that ties into Brinkmann's (2016) discussions of diagnostic cultures, as outlined in Chapter 2, whereby an individual who feels they cannot attain the "attractive" aesthetic, or fails to achieve the (un)realistic goal that they have set themselves are at risk of turning to disordered eating patterns, or being (self)diagnosed with a body-related anxiety such as body dysmorphic disorder. This can also be likened to the growing body of scholarship that identifies the correlation between body dissatisfaction and mental health illnesses such as depression and anxiety (see Chapter 2). The problematic nature of the "spread of diagnostic vocabulary and associated social practices" (Brinkmann, 2016: 11) is that individuals who experience body-related anxiety, like *Grace* or *Alice,* they are led to believe that something is "wrong with them" as they are not happy with their own body, due to being medically labeled as "disordered". As per earlier discussions in Chapter 2 the label of a disorder has been heavily stigmatised as being an abnormality throughout the history of disability and illness and remains to be a label that is avoided by many. However, the stringent nature of "diagnostic cultures" is also problematic in practice whereby individuals may not be eligible for diagnoses depending on the visibility of their symptoms, or where their symptoms do not map across the diagnostic categories defined by medical diagnostic manuals. As *Annabelle* explained, in the case of her mother's eating disorder:

> ...they won't consider her to have anorexia because it isn't technically that low of a weight to be. And I'm like, anorexia has got nothing to do with the actual weight. Anorexia, the meant look like, you know what I mean? But. And even then, even that boils down to the, to the weight, everything is about the weight, whether you're healthy or not.

The stringent categorisation of symptoms in the diagnostic process of disordered eating, or body-related anxieties can be a barrier to accessing support for individuals who are experiencing them. This leads us back to earlier discussions of the reliance on the online space, by some individuals when reaching out for support, whereby people turn to discussion forums or social media sites if they feel their voice is not heard by medical professionals, or surrounding support services. Where access to support services cannot

be achieved, or individuals do not feel ready or able to reach out for support, this can be where research into the investment of cosmetic surgery or performance-enhancing drugs can be initiated. Participants such as *Zak* and *Grace* shared their experiences of hitting their physical goals in their training and nutrition. Such participatory accounts discussed the presumption that being deemed 'attractive' and having the 'ideal' body type through dieting or by investing in cosmetic surgery to achieve the 'ideal' look would bring happiness and self-satisfaction in one's body. *Zak* and *Grace* highlighted the feeling of 'is this it?' when achieving their desired body type. For *Zak*:

> I had such a strange relationship with food... When I was big I didn't care for how much I was eating and I didn't understand the consequence of eating so much. So, I didn't understand that when you eat more, and move less, you are going to get fat really. As I became aware of it I kind of liked counting calories and I remember I got really lean. That's what I'd always wanted, a six pack and I was miserable. And I just didn't care about having this six pack because it brought me no happiness and even my girlfriend at the time didn't care I had it, so like what the hell have I don't this for if no one cares. I

Grace did report feeling a sense of success and could recall a feeling of satisfaction to a degree in that she felt more attractive to her partner than she had previously. However, she believed the extent that she had to go to to achieve her 'ideal' body type (i.e., starvation and disorder habits) was dangerous, and one that she would not want to see her friends, family, or loved ones go through. *Grace* recalled the "efforts" she had put in to lose weight and "sort [her] body out" through cosmetic surgery as "not worth it" as she continued to suffer with low self-esteem after achieving her physique goal as she "still didn't feel good enough" despite receiving a multitude of complements from her friends and family, as well as more "likes" on her social media posts. Such a sense of self-satisfaction, along with the validation received by increasing likes and follows on social media, is a feeling that feeds into later discussions of the addictive cycle of social media in Chapter 6.2 as well as comments on how 'well' a person is looking linked with their weight-loss, or outcomes of cosmetic surgery. *Zak* highlighted the impact of the beauty standards obtains by "people like the Kardashian... Kim Kardashian starving herself... to get into a dress for an event... what the fuck is that?". *Zak* expanded on this by bringing performance-enhancing drugs into his example:

> I think people turn to surgery or to steroids because they're not happy with themselves and they want to be like the people that they see online... there's the temptation with photoshop I guess because there's less risk to your health, no risk to your health. Mental health maybe, but if I took steroids there are so many risks whereas if you Photoshop your picture, you will probably get more likes.

Where public figures glamourise the use of FAD diets, or in this case, starvation as a mechanism of weight loss for high profile events as means of fitting into a specific outfit or meeting the perceived "attractive" physique for the red carpets normalises the "pressure" of starving oneself to adhere to the beauty standards of contemporary diet culture. *Bekki* referred to the "influence" that the celebrity narrative of dieting, attractiveness and body image has over young women "where everyone turns up using the same outfits so if you go into town, you'll see a group of lasses wearing the same thing but just ever so slightly different". However, *Chloe* described once again the addictive nature of aspiring to and working towards the goals she set based on the social media pages she followed at a time in her life when, offline, she felt low in self-esteem mood and somewhat vulnerable due to feeling "a bit depressed" which resulted in her losing "quite a lot of weight". Links to aesthetic, fashion and trend changes are not new and are not exclusive to social media communications. The findings of this research, however, demonstrate the way that social media consumers have adapted to the new pressures of diet culture that are presented in the online space in a more intense format than they had in alternative forms of mass media. Fashion and gossip magazines of the 1990s and 2000s with the "hot or not column" and "beauty rankings" (*Annie*) used the same rhetoric as online diet culture of what is attractive and what is not (embedded harms), with the outcome of implications on body image and self-esteem. As can be seen in Figure 5.2 below, the conditions of the delivery of diet culture narratives are at the core of what has changed in the diet culture space: the shift to the online space.

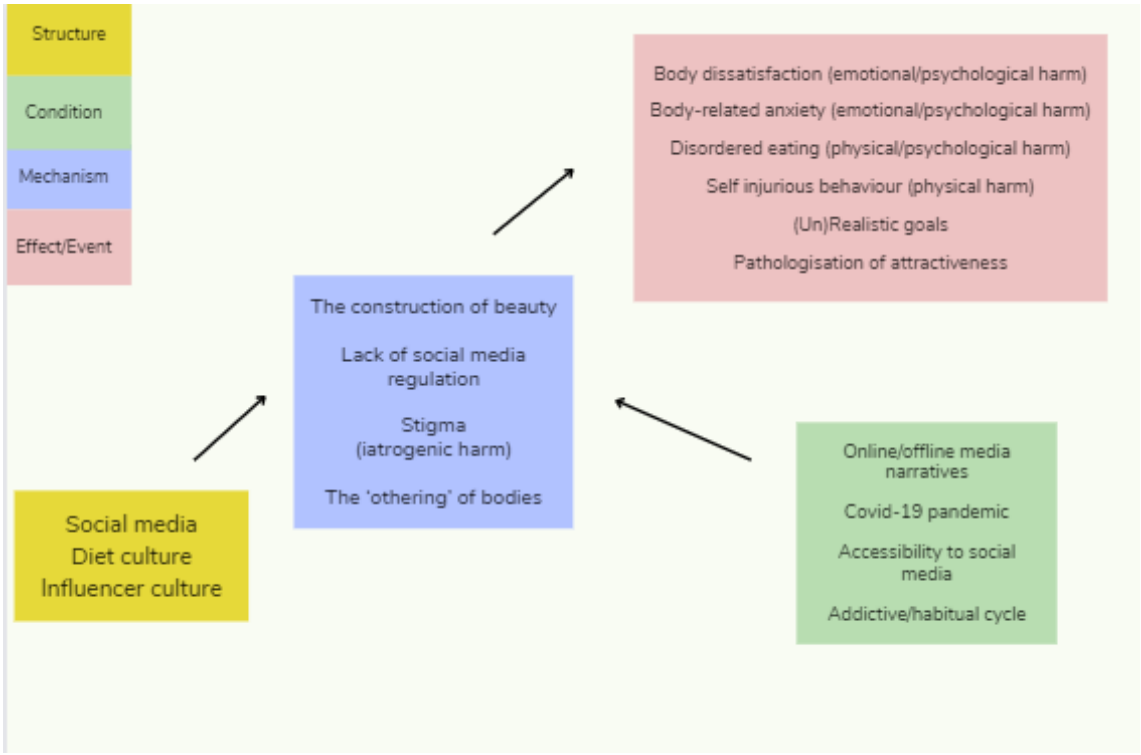

Figure 5.2: CR mapping of the changing conditions of platform cultures

Under these new conditions diet culture narratives are accessible wherever internet connection is available to a consumer, they are searchable online or available for browsing on social media platforms themselves so are therefore delivered more often, more rapidly and in higher volumes. Engagement with such content, through the algorithmic mechanics of social media business models heighten the levels of consumption of diet culture narratives online, encourage conversations on posted imagery or videos through comments functions, or discussion threads in gossip forums. Thus, encouraging distasteful and potential hostile feedback on images, videos and other diet-culture related content online. This could be, as deliberated earlier in the chapter, hostile comments on a person's physique, on their daily routine, or their more general appearance. Thus, feeding the level of psychological harm that can be posed by the delivery of hostile or negative narratives online. As per the findings in this chapter, the psychological harm inflicted by the snowballing of diet culture narratives feed into the pathologisation of attractiveness whereby an individual's consumption of (un)realistic content continues and/or heightens online, they read negative comments about a body

online that does (the effects of internalised misogyny, or hostility online), or does not (comments directed towards the stigmatised, “unattractive” body), adhere to the “idealistic” attractive body and they internalise the perspective that their body is not attractive, and they start to feel anxiety towards their body (Dye, 2016). This could then lead to considering dieting, FAD diets, food restriction and as they move deeper into experiences of body dissatisfaction, they may enquire about cosmetic surgery, appearance altering procedures or, performance enhancing drugs (McLean *et al*., 2016; Quittkat *et al*., 2019). Finally, finding themselves (self)diagnosed, or experiencing symptoms of disordered eating or body-related anxieties such as body dysmorphic disorder. The effects of “diagnostic cultures” (Brinkmann, 2016) are prevalent to the findings of this research and the potential outcome of the pathologisation of attractiveness in modern society. It is important than when making recommendations for developments in the education provided to young people around the online space, body image, healthy relationships or, the “healthy body”, as we will visit in Chapter 7.2 it is paramount that we incorporate experiential knowledge of the real effects that (un)regulated spaces online can have on social media consumers, producers and prosumers on a day-to-day basis, and the longer term harms that this can inflict on lifestyle and health.

5.7 The Changing Conditions of Self-Worth Culture: Productivity, Beauty and Acceptance of Hate Online

Returning to the broadened definition of diet culture, as applied in this research, this chapter so far has considered the mechanisms and changing conditions of diet culture, and the effects that these have had on the engagement with diet culture, identity online and a person’s relationship with themself (self-esteem, and food; thus, the micro-level effects of the changing conditions of diet culture. What will be considered next are the macro-level effects that findings from both phases of this research demonstrate. This will build on the discussions of Chapter 5.3 in the role of forums such as Tattle.Life in the facilitation of online hate and hostility to consider the normalisation of online hate that has been found in this research to be an “accepted” part of being online. As introduced in Chapter 5.3, Tattle.Life as a gossip forum has been identified in this research as a space for hate to take place, and for those who battle against, or disagree, with this hate to be othered, or ostracised from discussion threads. Tattle.Life predominantly sees hatred

directed towards influencers, bloggers, or public figures, as per the terms of conditions of this forum to only create discussion threads based on individuals who "put themselves in the public eye" (Tattle.Life, 2022: unpaginated). This does not stop experiences of hate and trolling by those who are not in the public eye; if a user had wanted to make a comment that could be categorised as positive, supporting, or kind, findings show such users to be berated and told, "don't come to this platform to be nice, if you don't like what we've got to say... fuck off" (*Tattle.Life user*). However, failure to conduct oneself as an influencer in the idealistic parameters of diet culture(s) comes at the cost of potentially experiencing trolling and online hate.

Lizzie highlighted that hate and hostility are not just an 'accepted' part of influencer culture but are something influencers are 'expected to receive'. This was supported by findings from the Tattle.Life element of the digital ethnographic dataset, whereby users were found stating that people "shouldn't be online if they don't want this", or that they are not "fit for a career in the spotlight" if they can't "take the abuse". This was further evidenced by another anonymous user who justified contributions to the forum by stating that "people might post harmless shit, but they'll get shit... just deal with it". Comments such as these were observed across Tattle.Life discussion threads when another user would attempt to reject negative comments made regarding the influencer that the discussion thread was based upon, demonstrating a clear acceptance or expectation that trolling or becoming subject to hateful comments online should, as *Lizzie* stated, be a "normal" element of the influencer job description. Further to this, a multitude of hateful comments and conversations were observed across Tattle.Life that discussion Tattle users' feelings towards an influencer, opinions on parenting abilities, derogatory comments on influencers' bodies, voices, makeup, poses as well as the content that they produced online, as follows: *"baby number 2... still no clue", "waste of oxygen", "shit parenting", "I'd class her as a twat", "...unsubscribed and still annoys me" "ugh, the way [influencer] talks makes me want to die", "eating that many digestive when she's pregnant, I hope her baby is fat", "...this outfit, all I see is a sausage bursting out of its' casing",* and *"...she reminds me of a cartoon pig".*

Some comments that were relating to the physical appearance of an influencer or the content that they produce were attached to screenshots of images pulled directly from their social media feeds. The contributions to Tattle.Life above will not be linked in this thesis to the influencers' that they were originally written about, as per discussions of the ethical considerations of social media data in social science research in Chapter 4. However, to acknowledge the extent of hateful, hostile and/or violent comments that are directed towards social media users, whether these comments are placed on a forum such as Tattle.Life, made on a person's posted content, or sent directly to them through a private messaging function on a social media platform, the outcome can be just as detrimental; the extent of which hateful comments and incidents of trolling are facilitated by social media has fed into a culture of normalising experiences of hate online.

Acceptance of online hate was reflected in conversations regarding direct experiences of hostile comments online by *Zara* who discussed being called 'fat' when gaming online:

> I laughed it off then and think afterwards I was a bit like, oh, damn... And you have mods on Twitch and they can kind of control, umm the chat so they can quickly like delete the messages as well if they do come in. But I've seen other people experience, like, hate. It's not all sunshine and rainbows unfortunately, but it's not the most toxic platform I've seen.

The role of the 'mod' (moderator) was also found across both sites (Reddit and Tattle.Life) in the digital ethnography for this study. Across discussions, 81.82% (n=18) participants identified Twitter as the platform they were most likely to avoid due to 'hate', 'arguments online', and 'politics'. However, Instagram was identified by 95.45% (n=21) as the most harmful platform for trolling and the 'normalisation' of online hate - I.e., hate taking place and neither the state, the platform, or the 'users' taking any action against this; no matter how derogatory and violent the comments made may be. The Centre for Countering Digital Hate (2022) found that Instagram had failed to act upon 90% of abusive messages that its users had received – it should be noted that this statistic only considers the abusive direct messages that are reported to Instagram; this will not consider those that are received and ignored, deleted and not reported. Thus, hate directed at a person's public profile and posts were not restricted to gossip forums such as Tattle.Life took place

across multiple forums. As per the findings of Riemer & Peter (2021), there remains further work to be done in the algorithmic mechanisms within social media business models to effectively tackle the exertion of free speech that leads to hate speech and hate incidents online. Whereby the Online Safety Act 2023 attempts to address harms within the online space more broadly, it has been said to be the policy development that will now legislate the requirement for social media platforms to consistently police hate and harm across their platforms (see Coe, 2022; Butler & Turenne, 2022). At the time of writing, the recent enactment of the Online Safety Act restricts the researcher's ability to analyse its' efficacy in practice but will position findings relating to the normalisation of online hate within policy recommendations that should be considered in the ongoing review process of the Act, in coming years. This will be discussed further in Chapter 7.3.

An attempt to minimise the potential of experiencing ostracisation or hate comments online is to adhere to the "idealistic" standards of diet culture. *Alice*'s self-esteem and reliance on external validation stemmed from a fear of not being accepted or viewed as "worthy" by her followers online. A 'trend' on social media that positions the importance of daily routine, productivity, and self-care is the 'it girl' or 'that' girl; this can be related back to discussions of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the changes to daily routines, priorities and conditions of how social media was used during a period of furlough, minimal socialising and lockdown restrictions. There was a recognised shift in the "productivity" content within diet culture that emerged during the initial UK Covid-19 lockdown from March 2020-July 2020, by participants such as *Charlotte* and *Lizzie* whereby more recommendations of "side hustles" in the form of hobbies or business opportunities were shared by influencers to their followers, or recommended daily routines as we have discussed in length in Chapter 5.3 in relation to the connection between self-esteem and worth. *Alice* was not the only participant who identified external validation as a driver for confidence and self-esteem. For *Zara*, it is her partner's opinion of her physical appearance that is important to her, not how people view her online:

> My boyfriend when we first met, I looked very different to how I look now. I had like the shortest hair you can imagine. And you know, I was very different to how I look now, and I always say to him, I, I, because I talked to him, and I would worry about

> how I look. He always says, like you're beautiful no matter what. Like I think you're beautiful... like, I don't have a flat tummy and I have slightly uneven thighs and you know everything like that.

Zara followed on from this by stating that she had had people tell her what she "should" and "shouldn't" wear due to her body shape, which had impacted her relationship with her body. For *Anya*, a 'journey to self-acceptance' and increasing her self-esteem has not been about external validation but shifting her focus away from idealism and beauty standards and into what makes her feel good on a more holistic level – fitness.

> I suffered with really, really bad acne... I used to take time away from school and I used to compare myself, and feel a little bit like timid. Kind of more through my skin, so I think that was comparison for me not necessarily from like a weight stigma point of view but from like a, like that perfect image and perfect like existence. And then... I went into fitness and that kind of was my outlet.

The experiences of *Zara* and *Anya* provide cause to suggest that the mechanics/mechanisms of influencer culture as a hyper-competitive, marketised, and 'always on' form of work/putting to work of the body that has implications for harm are broadly understood. Some participants argued that the rise in influencer culture had changed the delivery of dietary advice and had compounded the 'urge' for young people to feel validated, worthy, and attractive. Participants such as *Alice*, *Bekki*, and *Christie* argued this to have caused detriment to young people's well-being and aesthetic (beauty) goals. And to have fueled the misconception of self-esteem is only linked to physical appearance through a pressurised state of idealistic beauty standards and the value "beauty" has over identity. For *Christie*, although dress size and weight stigma have impacted her social life, intimacy, and self-worth for "many years", social media has amplified the pressure to achieve her "ideal" physical appearance, and saw a continuation of her disordered eating habits into her late 20s:

> That's not what I was like when I was younger, I wasn't like that. I was like 'if I don't fit in a size 8 or 10, I can't go out'. Like it was bad, and we didn't even have Instagram then, well we did but it wasn't like this pressurized as it is now. I do feel for younger people now.

This was replicated in *anti-diet culture* discussion threads on Reddit, demonstrating a power struggle in contemporary society between 'perfection' and self-satisfaction, as the boundaries are continually changing. What society tells us is 'beautiful' and 'healthy' are continually changing. What society tells us is 'successful' and should be celebrated is continually changing. Thus, leaving a generation who will never be fully satisfied with their relationships, with how they look, with what they have achieved, and therefore never fulfilling their self-esteem:

> I'm always preparing to be thin, or perfect... [When I meet my boyfriend] and we are intimate I will be thin. [When I meet my best friend and her mom] I will be skinnier. [Once I lose 50 pounds] I will finally be pretty and worth something. It's never ending every second of my life... God forbid I eat even one thing "off track"... These dieting people don't understand what counting calories does to a person, I [do want] to be healthier. [But in the height of] my eating disorder I would count every single calorie.

The sharing of idealistic beauty expectations is felt outside of the social media arena, which further compounds the pressure that some participants feel to meet specific beauty standards and be deemed 'worthy' in their relationships. An account from the emotionality diary that I feel ties together discussions of self-worth is one where I pose the question to myself "at what stage will young people feel good enough, without making adjustments to their appearance?" (Researcher Emotionality Diary, June 2022). The underlying generative mechanism of the 'construction of beauty' that underpins the idealistic beauty expectations of diet culture is influential in online and offline spaces. This feeds back to the family links in diet culture discussed in Chapter 5.1, whereby participants felt that some of their dieting habits were influenced by perceptions of their parents – with parents who had dieted throughout participants' younger years, thus influencing participants' relationships with food. *Alice* disclosed an experience of being told what clothing would suit her body and what would not from her mother in her early teens, explicitly recalling when her mother would tell her, "if I looked fat and tell us [she] couldn't wear something because it doesn't look right". The acknowledgement of the role of external validation, or specifically family narratives surrounding dieting, beauty, health, or productivity, leads to a key finding of this chapter, whereby participants made consistent recommendations for the need for evidence-led Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) improvements

for young people throughout their schooling years that will then feed into the narrative of future parents and guardians.

A recommendation to improve and standardise education surrounding body image and filtered imagery online must consider the 'trending' nature of beauty standards, also identified by Evan *et al.* (2005) and Shilling (2012) that recognises the construction of beauty as a social construction that changes over time (usually changing each decade). These recommendations will be positioned alongside the UK Government's commissioned work on *Changing the Picture Perfect* for young people and concerns around body image and health based upon the problematic dichotomy of "health" and "beauty" that has emerged from a history of mainstream media glamourising and commodifying diet culture and public figures who are used to promote it, whilst identifying the harms that are posed by platform cultures as embedded harms (the normalisation of online hate, the pathologisation of attractiveness, the 'othering' of bodies), physical harms (disordered eating, self-injurious behaviours), iatrogenic harms (the facilitation of online hate, the marketisation of 'idealism'), and emotional harms (low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction. The recommendations for developing education align with the need for further regulation of the online space to directly tackle the normalisation of online hate that is compounded by the continuation of the "ideal body" and the commodification of "attractiveness" through influencer culture.

5.8 Forming an Identity Based on (Un)Realistic Goals: Self-Branding and 'Changing the Picture Perfect'

Throughout Chapter 5, we have discussed at length the prevalence of filtered lifestyles promoted on social media alongside the rise in 'influencers', the marketisation of social media presence, and the power of social media in day-to-day life. The daily exposure to non-authentic (filtered) imagery on social media has paved the way for the blurring of boundaries for social media consumers, producers and prosumers of what is 'real' online and what is not. Thereby, as emphasised in Chapter 5.4, has led to the formation of identity based on (un)realistic goals and standards for health, dieting, wealth, beauty and lifestyle. (Un)realistic goals act as an effect of the 'othering' of bodies, the experience of

stigmatisation based on diet culture narratives and the filtering of imagery that sets a standard that is neither real nor realistic to those setting them. When reflecting on this, *Rachel* identified this as a critical area of need in the education around online safety and what we can use social media for in young people during their school years:

> We need to address the misconceptions and teach children the power of the internet. And, we need to teach them how the internet is fake at times and we need to kind of, I'm not sure how we do it – I kind of teach it through non-fiction books, so if I'm teaching a non-fiction book we kind of look at different sites and we use like Wikipedia and how reliable they are, how they teach us different things. We kind of brush off social media and almost ignore that they have it just because we think they shouldn't have access.

The need for further education on a variety of levels was discussed throughout all interviews with all 22 participants: education for young people around the safety/power of the information, education for parents around online safety for young people and the types of social media young people use, education of practitioners and policymakers around what support young people want to see surrounding their use of social media, and the support that could be implemented for issues such as body image, disordered eating patterns and becoming victim to hate online. *Bekki* acknowledged that there may be resistance from parents, guardians, or educators initially when embedding a more detailed understanding of misinformation online and the complexities of artificial intelligence and filtered lifestyles. But *Bekki* believed this could be counteracted by a transparent narrative of the impact of (un)realistic goals and filtered imagery on the rise in cosmetic surgery, appearance-altered procedures, disordered eating, and the use of performance-enhancing drugs as "people and especially parents really don't understand that everything you see on social media isn't necessarily real life". Where this may seem "harmless" from the outset, it is clear from the findings of this research that the failure to achieve (un)realistic goals have very real consequences.

Concerns of the lack of understanding of authenticity in diet culture-related content was not the only area of improvement in Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education that were recommended by participants but also, an overhaul in education surrounding "healthy" bodies and food. For *Lizzie,* she believed she teaching "what you

actually need in your body... like... iron, a lot of women need more iron and don't understand iron deficiencies and what to look out for" as well as:

> understanding food for what it is, not labeling of 'good and bad' foods, but recognising the importance of diversity in the diet... Let's move away from the use of 'sizes' to talk about how much protein, veggies and carbs we should be having and think about what different food groups offer to the body.

This links back to discussions in Chapter 5.2 of the detrimental effects of demonising specific food groups, which has been prevalent in diet culture for many years prior to the rise of diet culture online. As an employee of an organisation involved in relationship and sex education, as well as PSHE, *Millie,* believed there was more scope for the improvement of the way that education surrounding body image and healthy eating could be delivered in mainstream education, in the content delivered as well as the training and support provided to teaching delivering the content:

> ...teachers and stuff aren't probably given enough training to to really take it as far as it should go. Like, what I see in schools is really quite basic stuff about like filters and photo editing and how that can affect self-esteem and. And maybe it's a bit on like diet culture, but to be honest, not a lot. It's all about like. Yeah, like photo editing and things and or like fake photos and and yeah, and stuff like that but. If you're a teacher who, yeah, you can maybe deliver that. But then how do you take it further?

Rachel delivers sessions around relationships and PSHE to junior school students which further starts with using the correct terminology in terms of anatomy and the appropriateness of relationships. For *Rachel,* feeding forward the concerns she may have around questions asked by students can be problematic; this may be recorded on a formal system in school but, there are no supervision mechanisms provided to her (or her colleagues) by external organisations, or the local authority as a state school teaching delivering the curriculum that they recommend. *Rachel* identified that there are:

> ...misconceptions [of the body] that are already coming out at ages 5 to 7... we need to address these misconceptions and I think we need to teach children of the power of the internet alongside this... we kind of brush on social media and almost ignore it just because they 'shouldn't' have access to social media, even though we know young kids do.

The education of young people surrounding the power of the online space, diversity in bodies, holistic health and nutrition was a frequent recommendation made by interview participants when posed the question of “what could we do better” to support people with platform cultures, and the harms identified in participatory discussions. The mechanisms that underpin misconceptions of the body, and of health, that are identified by *Rachel* as a fundamental area of improvement in PSHE curricula, can be recognised in Figure 6.4 whereby platform cultures, and social media more generally act as the structures that are influenced by conditions such as online/offline media narratives, access to social media (of young people, in this instance) and the relationship between social media user and social media platform (the cycles of social media that are to be detailed in Chapter 6.2). Social media and platform cultures are underpinned by mechanisms such as the construction of beauty, stigma as an actor of iatrogenic harm, a lack of social media regulation that has been detailed at length in this chapter, and the ‘othering’ of bodies, all of which can be brought into PSHE discussions in the classroom to address misconceptions and empower diversity of bodies online while teaching young people of the power of (and potential harms posed by) misinformation, inauthentic images and social media algorithmic trends that could lead to the setting of (un)realistic goals and a later impact of self-esteem, self-worth and satisfaction with the body and lifestyle in later life.

The conditions that young people engage with social media under can also be linked to forthcoming discussions in Chapter 6.1 surrounding the complexities of social media companies' current lack of ability to verify the identity of the individual behind the profile. When identifying gaps within existing PSHE provision in schools in the UK, the reality of which age groups are accessing social media must be addressed, rather than building education frameworks on the assumption that, for example, young people do not access social media before the age allowance stated in the terms and conditions of social media platforms. Recommendations for the development of PSHE education in schools will be outlined in Chapter 7.2, based on the findings analysed in this chapter.

5.9 Chapter Summary

The findings of Chapter 5 adopt a definition of diet culture that considers both online and offline narratives that promote an idealistic aesthetic underpinned by a socially constructed understanding of beauty, health, success, and productivity, constructs that are usually influenced by historically stigmatising views of normativity. The use of entries from my emotionality diary at different stages of data collection, where relevant, has encouraged a reflection of my subjectivity whilst collecting the data as an 'insider' within the research. Figure 5.3 as addressed in this chapter's introduction represents the mapping of the broader findings of this thesis outlined throughout Chapter 5.

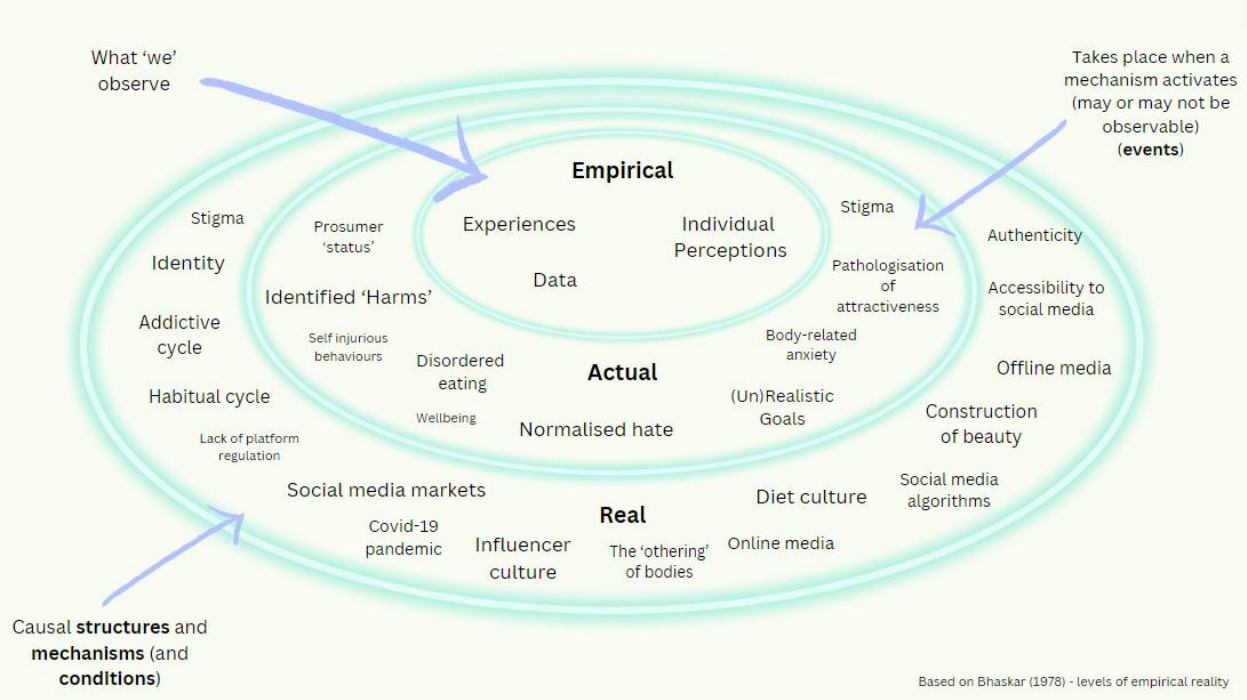

Figure 5.3 CR mapping of thesis findings using Bhaskar (1978) levels of empirical reality analogy

The visual representation of the findings from this doctoral research, using Bhaskar's levels of empirical reality framework has enabled the researcher to demonstrate knowledge from the deepest layer of social reality (Bhaskar, 1978). As an alternative to Bhaskar's original 'iceberg' analogy within which generative mechanisms remain unobservable at all times, this thesis recognises some generative mechanisms (and conditions) to be observable to some people, under some conditions or at the least some

people may be perceptive to the mechanism. For example, platform cultures are observable (diet culture and influencer culture) whereby participants in the interview phase of this research were able to identify behaviours that are conducted and encouraged through diet culture narratives, and subject accounts in the ethnographic phase of this research demonstrates discussions of their understanding of diet culture. What is unobservable are the conditions they occur under and at times, the effects of the mechanism activating. Regarding diet culture, the stigma that is compounded by the construction of beauty (of which alters according to beauty trends) that then leads to the occurrence of disordered eating, the pathologisation of attractiveness, body-related anxiety, and the potential of setting (un)realistic goals, as events to follow. At times, the 'othering' of bodies occurs as a mechanism to harm events such as disordered eating (physical harm, psychological harm, emotional harm), body-related anxiety (psychological harm, emotional harm, physical harm, iatrogenic harm), and difficulties with wellbeing (psychological harm, emotional harm, physical harm, cultural harm). This can be 'observable' through stigmatising narratives such as fat-shaming, thin-shaming, weight stigma and hatred towards 'different' bodies online or can remain unobservable through less directive forms of 'othering' such as less followings for those profiles that do not adhere to the 'idealised' body or 'perfect' aesthetic of its time, or comments that are not hateful but can be considered to be indirect forms of othering through recognising someone as 'brave' for posting their curves, or 'inspiring' for being a representative of diversity online (embedded harm, cultural harm).

The analysis of self-esteem and participatory engagement with diet culture, in retrospect, has considered the pathologisation of attractiveness that aligns with the expansion of diagnostic language used in modern society, as an attempt to explain behaviours that deviate away from normativity, or the social "ideal" (Brinkmann, 2016). A key area of consideration throughout this chapter has been the responsibilisation of self-esteem and the ways in which mechanisms of self-management online, which will be outlined through visual cycles of social media engagement in Chapter 6 can frame be affected by the setting of goals based on filtered aesthetics.

This chapter coined the term *(un)realistic goals* to explain those set by social media consumers, or prosumers, based on content they believe is authentic but filtered. The coining of (un)realistic goals has further evidenced the need for the regulation of self-branding specific to the branding and commodification of influencer culture. This thesis has found participants to experience *internalised misogyny* as a consequence of the effects of consuming filtered lifestyle to refer to the internalised experience of misogynistic thoughts and emotions towards other females online because of failing to achieve an (un)realistic goal. As emphasised at the opening of this chapter, at the time of writing, no regulatory bodies place responsibility on social media platforms or the state for the harm posed to young people online, although the need for this to be managed by social media platforms directly is outlined by the Online Safety Act 2023. Alternatively, at least, the 'harms' recognised by participants in this research. This has, like the self-management of the addictive cycle, made social media users responsible for investigating the authenticity of the images, new articles, and 'information' that they are subject to online. Thus, social media users are responsible for understanding whether they are setting realistic or (un)realistic goals.

6. Addictive Habits and Social Media: “Losing control” at the hands of a reel

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline social media consumption outlined by respondents in this research. This discussion will consider the production of social media content, consumption of social media, and personal perceptions of social media use. This chapter will draw upon findings that emerged from the interview dataset to provide the foundational knowledge for which social media platforms were discussed as part of this study, starting with the profile of social media use outlined in the Chapter 4 moving into the interview participants’ understanding of what social media is, and their reason for using it. Experiential knowledge has been used to evidence mechanisms of social media consumption before unpacking the conditions under which social media consumption and social media production overlap, and the harms that emerge from experiencing these conditions. By bringing together critical realism (CR) and zemiolog, the research is able to position qualitative accounts of lived experiences of harms in online spaces. This allows the thesis to look at the specificities as to why prolonged periods of time spent online can have a negative impact on a person’s mood, mental health, but also to understand if there is a deeper meaning behind negative impact on mood. The findings demonstrate that time spent online is not the only factor that can be detrimental to a person’s offline mood and perception of oneself by recognising wellbeing as an event that is influenced by underlying generative mechanisms such as social media algorithms (the design to maintain a person’s attention when using the application), platform culture narratives (the creation of trends to hook an individual’s attention), and the marketisation of social media to profiteer from engagement with social media content as well as the selling of products through platform cultures such as diet culture and influencer culture. The types of content consumed, the “pressures” faced by social media, as well as an internal battle of recognising that social media makes you feel more negatively towards yourself but not wanting to disengage with the online space altogether (embedded, cultural psychological, and emotional harms). This will be discussed further in relation to the addictive and habitual nature(s) of social media later in this chapter and consider the instigation of physical and iatrogenic harms because of the “pressures” faced online.

The chapter will then move into discussions of the *addictive* and *habitual cycles of social media* and will consider findings that emerged from the digital ethnography element of this research in relation to self-regulatory measures implemented to manage one's own social media use. The chapter will distinguish the cyclic conditions that the *addictive* and *habitual* nature(s) of social media occur as well as considering participant's positioning of their use of social media as a 'daily habit', a 'pass-time', and a mechanism of escape from reality. This chapter will then recall discussions of Howard *et al.* (2017) concerning how social media business models are designed to 'hook' their users and will revisit Chapter 3's alignment to research into the rise of the 'prosumer' (Toffler, 1990; Ritzer & Jurgensen, 2010) to conceptualise the changing conditions of the 'prosumer' in line with the contemporary role of the 'influencer'. The chapter will conclude by recommending further parliamentary intervention in regulating influencer culture and considering the concept of 'self-branding' within influencer culture, how this impacts diet culture, and the (un)realistic goals set by young people based upon (un)authentic images and lifestyles falsely advertised online; following on from Chapter 5's analysis of (*un)realistic goals,* filtered lifestyles and falsehoods.

As the findings in this chapter are focused on perceptions of use, the mechanisms underlying social media engagement and relationships with social media it will draw less upon data from digital ethnographic observations; due to the ethnographic phase of this research being non-reactive, the data therefore comes from 'subject accounts', as opposed to 'participants' as discussed in Chapter 4. It would be inappropriate to build presumptions of subject's relationships with social media, and their intentions for using social media based on observations that involve no direct dialogue between the researcher and subject account.

6.2 Social Media Consumption

As detailed in Chapter 4.5, participants were asked if they could recall when they had started to use social media, what social media platforms they used/have used previously, and the purpose of this social media use. Participants' social media consumption and experience of social media were reflected in the use of a range of social media platforms.

For the most part (95.45%, n=21), participants could recall an approximate time when they started using social media. For *Zara*, this was a normalised experience in her teenage years in which caregivers were aware that they had created social media profiles:

> I started using social media probably about 13 before that I wasn't allowed it. Really, I think I might have had Instagram a bit earlier, but apart from that like Facebook, I didn't have it until 13. And that's only because I kind of went into foster care. So, it's kind of a way to keep in contact with like family.

This was more of a hidden experience for others, such as *Rachel*. Her parents were not in favour of her using social media in her early teens, which led to *Rachel* and her friend(s) creating a joint Facebook account that she hid from her parents:

> I remember being in year 6 - yeah I was, I definitely remember having some because [friend] came over, I wasn't allowed anything but we made like an e-mail address, and I can't remember what it must have been like MSN or something.

Rachel described this not as an attempt to deceive her parents intentionally but as a way of 'keeping up with Jones' and fitting in with her peers as she was about to transition from primary school into secondary school. At the time, *Rachel* wanted to make sure she could connect with her potential "new friends at secondary school" as she lived farther away from the school than some other friends. Due to rules her parents set in place; she could not spend time with her friends in the evenings after school due to her friends meeting up outside of her local area. This was the same for her friend with whom she shared her first Facebook account – as they lived on the same street. Like most participants (77.27%, n=17), *Annabelle* also described using social media in her early teens (during secondary school) as a place where she "connected with her friends and could socialise out of hours".

Bekki likened the use of social media to not just the expansion of ways to communicate with new contacts but also a way of casting the friendship net further afield and expanding "friend bases or followings" online:

> Especially at our age, back then with MySpace, Bebo, MSN and stuff it was about having as many friends as you could have. But, you didn't even really know them or you knew them through someone else, but I think that was genuinely a thing – I

> was thinking about this a couple of weeks ago, so how many friend you had on one of these sites or Facebook determined how popular you were.

Bekki stated that she had recently "completely culled" who she was connected to across her social media platforms as she no longer needed to relate to vast numbers of people, that she either did not know at all or had little to no communication with when offline. She identified this as something she believes has come with age and knowledge of the potential harms of the online space. *Lucy* recalled a similar experience to other participants in that social media provided an additional layer of a sense of belonging in their teenage years, at a time when insecurities around friendships, self-esteem, and a person's identity may start to surface. For *Lucy*, it was seen as "weird" if you were not using social media by the age of '13' as it had started to be recognised as a 'normal' protocol by 2009/10:

> So, I've probably had Facebook since I was like 13, cause everyone at school had it. It was how you always found out what was going on and. And I think that was probably the main reason that I used to just cause everyone else did. It was like if someone said Ohh you got Facebook and you said no, it was weird not to have it and it was like your parents, not like you have it, like do you not wanna get involved with stuff?... And I found that as I've gotten older I just don't care about it as much.

Lucy was not alone in recognising that both the reliance on and use of social media had altered as she had aged. *Bekki* viewed this change in social media consumption as a process of 'maturity'. This was linked to the number of hours per day spent on social media and priorities changing when moving from full-time education to full-time work. *Kayla* built on this by reporting that she felt this had changed due to her long-term relationship status and other work/education commitments. *Kayla* said she felt she "possibly spent less time on social media and posted fewer images [of herself] online as she had been in a long-term relationship from 13 to 14". The comparison that *Kayla* made between herself and her friends who had not been in longer-term relationships was that she did not require external validation from her online following, but she found her relationship to be an influential factor in whose content she engaged with, or whose she did not. *Annie* shared a similar experience of which she "wouldn't say I base my body image off what he thinks, but having somebody who accepts you for you...helps you

accept yourself". In his teens, *Zak* reported using social media for exactly this – to meet potential new partners:

> I'd talk to people even sliding into the DM's and like that sort of thing. Then as I've gotten older, I've became more like, very rarely post, I've still got everything but I just very, very rarely use anything whereas now I use something like TikTok or YouTube all the time. I don't post, I just like constantly, yeah, like Instagram and Facebook, I'm barely on it.

Zak also acknowledged that his need to post on social media had altered since meeting his current partner. However, he could not decipher whether this was a direct influence of meeting his partner or due to "caring less about what people online think about him" now that he is older. *Zak* discussed "retracting from social media because I just think if someone's bothered about the way I dress, the way I look, and for me I don't care, I don't care to have them in my life". *Sam* relayed his experiences of social media with less of a linear approach, in that he had changed his social media consumption over time, but this depended more on what he found interesting at one time than there being a specific life event that had triggered this change:

> So, at one point or another, I've had all the social medias except some of the very new ones, starting with Bebo back in the day. If you recall Bebo, I had that for ages and ages and then I do recently, maybe it was past 3-4 years, well I've tried to cut down my usage of it, delete accounts that I don't use much already use. And now I pretty much just use Instagram, I'll search and go through the recommended 'for you' videos, that's alright, and I use Reddit.

Like the experiences of *Sam, Zak* discussed a categorisation of the social media platforms that he currently engages with depending on the 'type' of content that he wants to engage with in that "Twitter's like everything I'm interested in. TikTok is more like food and obviously a lot of it's the gym... Facebook is more like I follow a lot of holiday pages and stuff". For *Alice*, the types of social media she consumed were not dependent on categorisations of use in the way that *Zak* described. Where each platform served its purpose to *Zak* rather than the interactivity of the platform itself drawing in his attention, *Alice* reported the design of the platform to be a contributing factor as to whether she would download and actively use a social media application. With this, *Alice* stated that Instagram was the platform that she used the most and had used for the "longest amount

of time". Where *Alice* had had accounts on Facebook and Instagram for a similar amount of time, she reported not "...ever posting anything on it" as it is "just [a platform] for family and friends to see how your birthday was and that's about it", but termed her relationship with Instagram to be "obsessive". When asked what the difference between platforms was for her *Alice* responded:

> I think it's like the picture side of things. I'll just like to post photos and stories, it's very interactive, yeah, it's, it's very interactive it's become more interactive it never used to be like that... I saw this meme the other day that was saying about Instagram, like back in the day when I first came out and put like a 'lark' filter on it and nobody would like it but now... it's like... I love it but I also have a very, it has a negative impact on me as well. I find it too that I sometimes I have to actually take myself off it and deactivate it 'cause I feel like it does have an impact on my life, and wellbeing.

During interviews, participants (63.63%, n=14) identified a difference in the impact of consumed content over offline behaviours and self-image depending on how the content was delivered: for example, image-based content on the Instagram grid, compared to an image-based story available for 24-hours on Instagram, language-based status permanently available to view on Facebook or a 30-second video on TikTok. Of these 14 participants, 9 discussed how their favourable delivery (type) of content was dependent on the platform they were using – for *Caitlin* images were best placed on Instagram, whereas short video clips were best placed on TikTok. The findings clearly show no straightforward answer to what social media respondents use and what content we enjoy consuming; this can neither be quantified nor simplified. As already outlined, there are many reasons given to explain why and when participants in this study have engaged with social media, but it is far more complex than it appears on the surface. Not everyone has the same 'why' when sharing a part of their lives with their social media following. Not everyone uses social media to widen their net of friends, acquaintances, and contacts. And not everyone has the same relationship with their use of social media. Some people like to produce content, and others like to be a "silent observer" (as described by *Kayla* and *Lizzie*), which likens to Kennedy & Funk's (2023) description of the habitual scroller. This thesis builds on the work of Kennedy & Funk (2023) to demonstrate the individuation of experience of social media as well as the conditions that may alter a person's 'status'

or identity in the online space, as a habitual scroller or an active engager. Although *Zak* and *Zara* recalled their use of social media to be 'fun' and like a hobby, as we can see above, *Alice* recalls her relationship with social media to have been previously, and to remain, recognisably problematic in her offline life. The cross comparison provided by participants evidences the potential for embedded harms due to an individual recognising the potential "problematic" nature of their social media use but accepting this as being a 'normal' part of engaging social media. For example, *Anya* stated that:

> I think it takes such a big chunk of your day. Like it's no wonder the people are either so consumed or so obsessed with what the online world tells them because there is that kind of blurred boundary of what your 'offline life' should be like versus 'online life'.

For most participants (81.82%, n=18), their social media consumption had a recognisable impact on their general mood, how they interacted with people in the offline world, and their feelings towards themselves somehow. Social media consumption in this context was linked explicitly to the influencers and online public figures that participants followed at the time of interview or previously. *Alice* reported being "more likely" to "go to the gym, cook a healthy meal, or buy a new product", if she saw someone that she followed, on Instagram for example, doing any of these activities, or new products relating to their health, fitness, or working from-home workspace. *Lizzie* relayed similar experiences that she labeled as the "pressures of social media". The discussions with *Lizzie* and *Alice* surrounding the "pressures of social media" leading to purchasing products or a place within a specific diet community resonated with my own experiences, I reflected on this in my emotionality diary with the following account "...the amount of money I have spent over the years trying to meet the needs of diet culture is shocking... always pushing for the next 'motivation'" (Researcher Emotionality Diary, June 2022). Existing research surrounding the impact of social media use on mood, mental health, and wellbeing is predominantly positioned from a psychological perspective that puts the onus on the use of quantitative methods of data collection to understand concerns surrounding prolonged time spent on social media, and its impact on mood and wellbeing (indirectly identifying potential psychological harms).

For the 18 participants referenced above, they could see that they were in control of, for the most part, what they consumed online; they could attempt to regulate and self-manage their social media feeds. Therefore, they may be able to manufacture a relationship with social media that is more beneficial to their lifestyle and to their relationship with their offline self. For example, if they were to unfollow the profiles that they disagreed with the values of, that would make them feel unproductive, unattractive, or were generally otherwise harmful. Participants could see, or had seen, a positive change in their self-esteem and relationship with social media. *Charlotte* critiqued this experience, however, finding that although she did not intentionally follow 'influencer's' content that had a direct effect on her self-esteem, she could still consume their posts on her 'recommended for you' stream on Instagram:

> … you can go through and cancel this stuff, that's just not appropriate on Instagram. If you're a woman, I just feel like it's either 'this is what you need to do this summer', or there'll be something around what you should be doing at the gym instead, all them daft posts about 'lose so much weight in so many days' or this is the detox stuff and things like that and I just don't want to see it… I don't follow things like that, but I'm still getting the pop ups.

This was the same for participants *Katie* and *Grace*, who reported removing their social media applications from their phones, and *Kayla*, who had not deleted the applications but had removed the shortcut links from her home screen to avoid the temptation of 'overuse'. Self-regulation mechanisms, and the conditions of which social media use being a habit to it becoming an addiction will be considered further in the *addictive cycle* section of this chapter.

Regardless of aspects of their social media consumption, participants felt in control of, there was a change in condition that no one was in control of, but participants (n=9) could recognise its impact on their use of social media, that change in condition was the Covid-19 lockdown(s). At a time when the UK came to a standstill and was expected to remain home under a strict Government regime when leaving the house, something that supported interconnectivity and a sense of belonging from outside of the home was social media or access to smart devices. This continued to enable individuals to communicate verbally or in text with loved ones, friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and partners. With

this, 1 in 4 people in the UK workforce were placed on furlough from March 2020 to June 2021 (ONS, 2021). For participants who were employed or were studying full-time, the furlough process hugely impacted the meaningful activities in their day and their opportunities to be away from social media. According to *Sam*, the Covid-19 lockdown(s) "took away [self] control" for everyone, and for *Caitlin*, this saw her screen time increase from an average of 4 hours per day to 10 hours per day. This came as a direct consequence of the removal of routine due to the pandemic restrictions imposed across the globe. *Lucy* believes there has been a cultural change in the online space, specifically social media, since the initial Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020. That saw heightened engagement with social media and more people wanting to share more of their lives publicly on social media. Whether this be their workout routines, their morning routine, or what they were eating on that day, *Alice* had a similar perception to *Lucy* but started to produce content of this nature to feed into the pressure she was feeling from the heightened levels of diet culture-related social media content that was consuming throughout the lockdown period.

The Covid-19 pandemic was highlighted by all participants (n=22) as being an aggravation to their relationship with social media: for some (63.63%, n=14) this had a long-term impact on their relationship with, and perception of, social media and for the remainder (36.37%, n=8), this had had a short-term effect on their relationship social media but had altered their perception of social media in the longer term. The changing conditions of Covid-19, as recognised by participants, was the shift in – or complete loss of - daily routine, the introduction of furlough, and the loss of sociality with friends, family members or acquaintances. As well as these changing lifestyle conditions, participants described a shift in the intent behind content produced on social media; specifically in relation to "diet culture", "daily productivity", and "motivation" quotes or videos. For example, *Zak* reported having an "intense focus" on his nutrition during the Covid-19 lockdown due to being unable to access a gym and maintain his fitness routine. This inability to maintain his fitness regime amplified his consumption of health and fitness content on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok. An account from the emotionality diary kept as part of this research was made after the interview with *Zak,* due

to a recognised change in conditions under the Covid-19 pandemic that the researcher had not previously recognised in her own relationship with social media:

> "... that is something that I did, focusing more on posting my daily routine and plans on social media, looking for which 'live' videos I can follow for another workout, working out 2-3 times a day, and I wonder why my fitness and physique levels were so different then, it's not sustainable despite what online says" (Researcher Emotionality Diary, May 2022).

Zak stated this was based on what his social media feed told him he should do - "the best ways to maintain muscle", "the best ways not to get skinny fat", and "the most productive morning routines during the lockdown". *Millie* stated that she had noticed higher levels of 'recommended' posts on her social media apps due to spending more time online during the lockdown periods. For *Millie,* she could "feel [herself], like, going down a bit of a rabbit hole". Where *Millie* would feel comfortable unfollowing accounts that made her feel self-conscious, negative, or that did not adhere to her values, she identified that due to influxes of 'recommended' posts on platforms such as Instagram during the UK lockdown(s), "obviously you cannot control what they're [influencers/producers] gonna post and you cannot completely tailor what it is you consume". If the business models that underpin social media platforms enable the use of algorithms that are based on content that a person has previously consumed, without consideration that a person may no longer wish to consume this content, self-management measures to regulate social media consumption may not be feasible nor realistic. Therefore, social media algorithms begin their role as an 'amplifier' in the dissemination of information that has not been intentionally searched for (i.e., a condition), aligning with the critical criminological literature that identifies the sociality of social media to be manufactured for the purpose of profiteering from the general public through platform cultures (see Chapter 3).

Grace built on a similar experience to *Zak* and *Millie* but related this to a feeling of shame and self-dissatisfaction due to not being able to maintain the routines and aesthetics that she was witnessing online:

> The thing is like through the lockdown - because at that point I was still using social media - and through the lockdown, I was like, I was seeing people on Instagram, getting up in the morning and doing these amazing workout routines and stuff, because there were really using that time, and it did just kind of make us feel fucking shit about myself because I wasn't doing that, and I wanted to. But I didn't have any motivation for it, and I had other things going on in my personal life meaning I couldn't prioritise my fitness, but that made me feel not good enough.

The amplified use of social media, compounded by the restrictive lockdown measures imposed from March 2020 through to Summer 2021, directly influenced self-satisfaction and self-worth in participants of this study. With fewer external distractions such as employment, education, broader family commitments, exercise regimes, or social occasions, there was more time for scrolling through social media and broadening the scope of how many social platforms you consumed. Arguably, it influences one's ability to regulate the content we consume, the amount of time spent on social media, and thus, managing our relationship with it. The findings of this thesis position the Covid-19 pandemic to be a condition that causes 'harm' to increase, or further 'harms' to emerge. The facilitation of 'harm' was influenced by a heightened use of (and at times, reliance on) social media during Government enforced lockdown periods.

It was clear from the broader findings that participants recognised it to be wholly their responsibility to regulate their social media consumption and manage their relationship with social media and their self-esteem. This was managed through strategies broader than removing social media applications from phones. Participants (n=19) stated that micro-level strategies like trying to control the algorithms can be self-managed on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and X. This was achieved by participants only engaging with their 'following' newsfeeds on these platforms. For example, when opening Instagram, a user will be presented with a newsfeed filled with content posted by individuals they follow on the platform. Along the bottom of your screen, when logged in on the smartphone application, you will be presented with several other tabs (newsfeeds), the 'explore' function of which you can scroll through content that should be similar to the pages that you regularly search for, already actively follow, or have previously followed; the 'add' function that you can click onto to post on your 'feed', on your story or create a video-based image (a reel); the 'reels' function to explore all reel videos posted in the

areas you regularly search for or currently follow and the ‘profile’ function to access your profile. In both the ‘explore’ and ‘reel’ functions, your profile algorithm provides you with content it predicts you are most interested in or most engaged with to keep you on the application for longer. For example, as a social media user, if I use Instagram to look for recipes and food ideas during the week, I am busy with work, research, or social occasions. Within this, my ‘explore’ function would then recommend me images and reels (short videos on Instagram that are modeled on the TikTok short video content) categorised as ‘health recipes’, ‘high protein’, ‘dinner ideas’, ‘healthy food’, ‘recipe ideas’, ‘meal prep’, ‘food photography’ or, ‘home cooking’. Instagram does not require me to follow the posts I will consume from these separate newsfeeds, as it relies on my profile algorithm to understand what should keep me on the application. Like the experience of *Charlotte*, even if you have actively chosen to ‘unfollow’ a specific profile, this content will remain available to you if you do not manage your own time and social media use in regimenting what ‘functions’ of the application you use, and what you do not. Platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and X use similar algorithms within their business models. Algorithms prioritise the positioning of social media as a business as opposed to a social networking space; resulting in algorithms being embedded into business models with data-driven revenue generation as a core driver (see Turow, 2011). This therefore results in the lack of acknowledgement by social media platforms of the potentially detrimental impact that ‘recommended’ content, based on a quantified understanding of a person’s social media consumption, as well as the increasing use of push notifications across smart devices, can cause. And the marketised nature of social media content production and influencer culture and online advertising continues to become deeply rooted into the ongoing complex development of social media interactivity.

Anya stated, however, that such content of beauty standards, and leading into wider content consumption coined as ‘diet culture’ should not be viewed as solely harmful in that:

> I think from a positive impact of social media, I started following people who spoke outside of the box around social media, like people who were more about kind of urm, kind of like that ‘Instagram versus Reality’ but when it was good, not, before

> everyone jumped on it for the insights. So people who just have different opinions and make you question why you think that way and it's like, to actually think 'do I think this is healthy?' or 'do I think this good?'... just witnessing people and how it affects them being constantly consumed by this kind of weight loss stigma and this perception of fitness... [we need] to create a space that's from a different space and different angle.

Chloe identified similar experiences with social media. Like *Anya*, she could recognise that not all content was harmful. Some posts that discuss the way that women (or, more generally, bodies) look, inspiration around food and fitness-related content is put into the online space to educate users, but also to support in challenging existing and potentially problematic views around what a healthy lifestyle is, and what is not. *Caitli*n agreed with this: as a woman with autism who identifies as fat, *Caitlin* had always found widening her food palette difficult, meaning that she had regularly tried to turn to social media for food ideas. She struggled with textures of foods and certain foods touching. *Caitlin* made clear when relaying her experiences of social media that she had not engaged with such content to attempt to 'diet' but to attempt to find foods that were different from what she would usually eat as a way of relieving the pressure she felt from her family to 'try new foods'. For *Millie*, she discussed the way that the positive impact of social media can be achieved by manually constructing a social media newsfeed to include "[bodies] you don't usually get to see" through "mainstream" influencer culture such as "trans bodies, black bodies... kind of like, fat positive stuff". By doing this, *Millie* identified that this supported her own self-esteem in being able to see different bodies that were praised for being "sexy" or "attractive"; things she did not feel about her own body previously because of the mainstream aesthetic that is demonstrated through influencer culture. This was visited earlier in Chapter 5 and that there is an expectation of responsibilisation of the self when facing the disabling nature of low self-esteem, which resonates with the mechanisms of self-regulation discussed throughout this chapter.

This brings us back to the complexity of social media consumption and the attempt to position different experiences of social media consumption and production into the framework of online harms. Although the UK Government is, at the time of writing, commissioning research into understanding 'influencer culture' and social media

consumption of young people on a macro scale, it is not as simple as providing solutions to protect young people from online harms based solely on the quantification of the type of content that they primarily engage with, the platforms that they find most enticing and what devices they use to access social media. From this data, we can see that to produce an effective mechanism of support for young people, individual perceptions and qualitative experiences of social media - demi-regularities within the dataset - (see Lawson, 1998 discussed in Chapter 4) are essential. Along with this, the conditions which those experiences take place within must be identified to adequately address recommendations for future political intervention.

6.3 In Control? The Addictive and Habitual Cycles of Social Media

Attachment styles in young people and the association of addiction to social media have been discussed in an array of psychology and 'addictive behaviours' studies over recent years (see Andreassen *et al*. 2014; 2016; 2017; D'Arienzo *et al.*, 2019; Zivnuska *et al.*, 2019; Tullet-Prado *et al.*, 2023), being something that this thesis consciously wishes to move away from the former medicalisation of 'addiction' and social media. What emerged in this research was how participants conceptualised the addictive cycle of social media, which was two-fold: the habitual side and the addictive side. This was a personal experience for all participants, but their relationship with social media could be positioned within each 'side' of this cycle at some stage of their lives. The word 'habit' cropped up regularly in conversation: the habit of scrolling through social media platforms, the habit of posting on social media, the habit of checking the likes and follows received on social media. For participants in this study, habits were individualised and perceived in various ways, depending on their use of social media. *Katie*, like other participants, said that social media had become a daily habit for not just her but others around her, one that was very much normalised in contemporary society:

> I think it's just a habit now, I think for most people – I've logged out my Instagram app and my Facebook app and I think that like, so now I have to log in through a website and I think that makes you so much more of how many times you'll just click on.

Similarly, *Zara* discussed her social media habits and the impact this may have on her daily routine and mood:

> Like you scroll for like 5-minutes, 3-hours later and it's like what – I was going to get at like 3 o clock in the, 2 o clock in the morning because I just gone. I'd done it for 10-minutes before I go to bed but it wasn't just 10 minutes… I'm on like Instagram or Facebook videos for example, I seem to get tired and I'll watch it for maybe 10/15/30 minutes and then I go to bed. So TikTok, it was just, nah it just wasn't good.

But this habit was usually attached to the caveat of self-regulation and the recognition that spending 'too much' time on social media was problematic or could potentially harm one's general well-being, productivity, and, at times, self-esteem. *Anya* positioned this in the context of generational differences when referring to her partner's sibling and girlfriend. She could recognise the habitual and addictive sides of social media blurring into one:

> ...honestly like he doesn't brush his teeth without watching his phone, and he is watching while eating his dinner, but the tele is on, but he's still got that on, his girlfriend and him will be sitting on the sofa watching stuff together but like, both sitting on their phones and I'm like 'oh my god, this generation is like, well fucked.

Like discussions in the framing of social media consumption of participants in Chapter 6.1, participants being away for their familiar daily routines such as being furloughed from work, working from home, breaks in education/being educated from home, directly affected the nature that social media was used under. For example, *Caitlin* emphasised that her screentime increased and that this was not just time spent directly on social media platforms, but she would move from the advertisements on her Facebook and Instagram accounts across to webpages for online shopping purchases, that would lead to "[sitting] for hours, and shop online, and then take everything out of my basket that I couldn't afford."

Participants framed the boundaries of the habitual and addictive sides of social media as becoming blurred due to such drastic changes to their living conditions, during this period – such as being locked down under strict Government guidance in a way that they had never experienced before – making it difficult to differentiate between 'boredom scrolling'

and ‘doomscrolling’. Thus, blurring the boundary between social media becoming a part of their habitual daily routines or being something that they are addicted to. Findings in this study distinguish between ‘boredom’ scrolling and ‘doomscrolling’ whereby boredom scrolling uses social media as a time filler during parts of the day where a person may have nothing else to concentrate on, such as the experiences of *Zak* and *Caitlin.* Doomscrolling, on the other hand, encompasses spending prolonged time scrolling through content that causes the reader concern, anxiety or negative thoughts. Kennedy & Funk’s (2023: 187) five themed perceptions of ‘habitual scrolling’ in their exploration of consumers of sport-related content across multiple social media platforms: passive, distinct, periodic, habitual, and universal. Like the relationship between social media platform and user, the nature of social media use, when previously examined, is heavily framed throughout psychological analysis that lacks the explanation as to why ‘habitual scrolling’, for example, may differ depending on our social surroundings, our economic circumstances and what could be viewed as our less significant day-to-day experiences. Findings of this study, however, can support in providing a visual mapping of the cyclic nature of addictive and habitual nature(s) of social media.

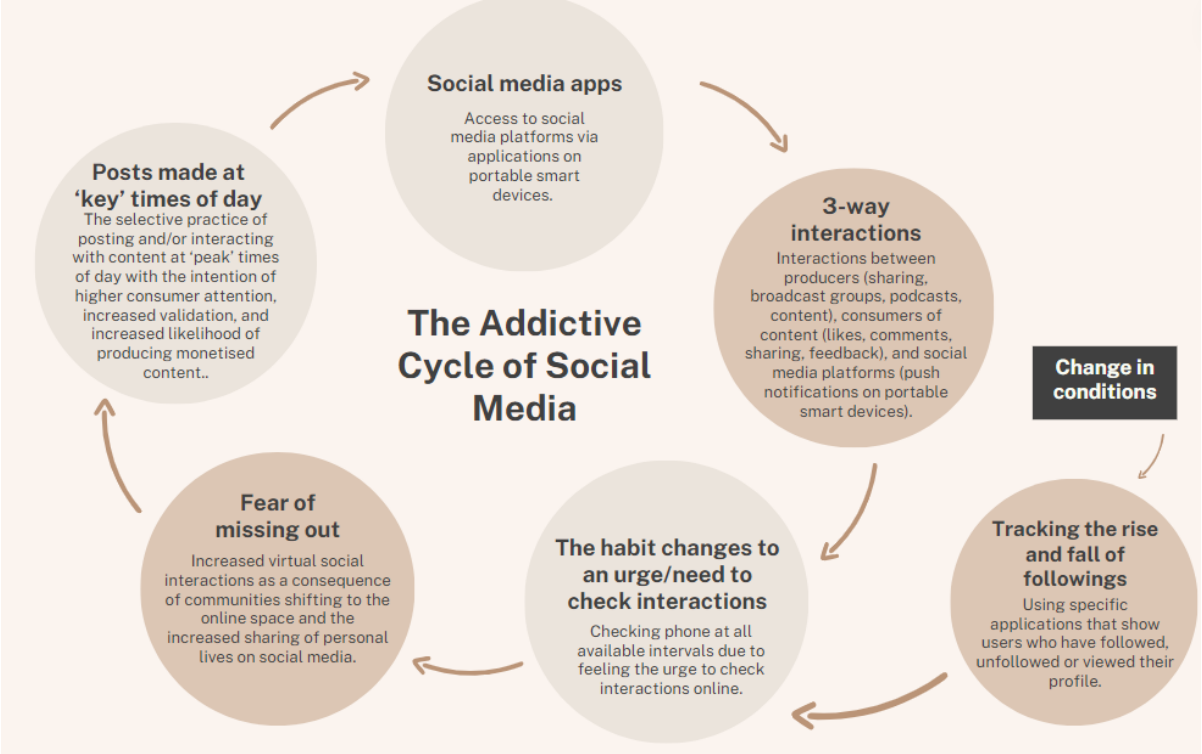

Figure 6.1 The Addictive Cycle of Social Media

As per Figure 6.1, entrance into the *addictive cycle of social media* starts with access to social media platforms throughout a smart device (a smartphone, a tablet, a laptop, a smart watch, a desktop computer). When actively using the social media app, a 3-way interaction is initiated between social media producers, consumers, and the platform. The platforms involvement in this 3-way interaction is part of what keeps the attention of the social media user and potentially draws them back into the platform on multiple occasions per day; this can result in the habitual nature of social media that then turns into an urge to check interactions. Interactions could involve notifications of posts from someone that profile follows, sharing of broadcast discussion groups, sharing of links to podcasts or content on alternative platforms, or messages from online connections. The 3-way interaction that initiates both the *addictive* and *habitual cycles of social media use* acts as structure of social media engagement.

The "addictive" attribute discussed by *Annabelle* and *Alice* creates a sense of 'fear of missing out' (FOMO); this could result from push notifications to smart devices or increasing virtual social interactions because of communities shifting to the online space.

The concept of FOMO has been explored in studies such as Brown & Kuss (2020) relating to the abstinence of social media over a short-trial period for participants in their study; this study found FOMO to stem from a fear of isolation and the desire for social connectedness as opposed to a fear of missing out on particular content, or posts online. Regardless of the cause of FOMO, this compounds the 'urge' to check interactions online and leads to a social media consumer spending longer periods of time on social media. This 'fear of missing out' was argued to be the deciding factor between whether *Alice* or *Annabelle* would use or delete social media. *Annabelle* said that "if you try to withdraw from it all you almost isolate yourself. I don't get FOMO that bad, like too bad, but I got it a little bit." *Alice*, however, related the self-management of screen time to self-discipline and personality types:

> It is fear of missing out, but it is not fear of getting a phone that you urgently need to take – it is understanding what this life or death feeling is of being on or off social media. It is a form of addiction, yeah. Where everything has to be a story, or a post – is that a personality type, or a habit that you can't break?

In the case of *Zak,* this led to the use of an app that allowed him to track the rise and fall of his followings. In Figure 6.1, the use of a tracking app to show the growth and depletion of a social media following changes the conditions in which a person, such as *Zak,* is experiencing the addictive cycle of social media.

> It used to matter when I was younger the ratio of how many people, I followed vs. who followed me. Like I think like it just, because like your life is online so much – or so much was online – and then I think you get caught up in like trying to be like this up-and-coming influencer or something. Not that I ever was or tried to be. But I think you get caught in things like that, and then I used to have, do you know that Instafollow app? I used to have that, I used to think what am I doing? I don't care who is following me now.

The use of a tracking app to observe the rise and fall of followers demonstrates an individual's 'addiction' to social media engagement as a content creator, as well as a content consumer (shifting to become the 'prosumer'), but this is not a mechanism that underpins all *addictive cycles* of social media use. The tracking of followers can be recognised as a demi-regularity (and change of condition) within the findings of this thesis. Although it was not an experience shared by many participants, this was an experience

identified by *Zak* as a significant shift in his experience of social media engagement. As was alluded to in Chapter 6.1, the design of social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram were named by participants as intentionally manufactured to pull in their users for prolonged periods of time. *Zara* believed the design of TikTok to be a "clever business model" as "...they know the types of content that they need to strategically post on each of those platforms to then get the right amount of following and the right amount of income the right amount of engagement as well". *Zara* was not the only participant to acknowledge the business of TikTok, specifically. *Caitlin* had also experienced "going down the rabbit hole of TikTok" (doomscrolling) and she believed this to be specifically due the nature of the content that TikTok is designed around; the short 20-30 second videos that we discussed when exploring social media consumption of participants. For *Caitlin* she did not use social media as a passtime, it was now a part of her daily routine, no matter what her schedule were to look like: "... even if I have got a lot to do, and sometimes when I wake up on a morning the first thing I do, I like to scroll through TikTok".

Finally, FOMO can lead a person to the crossroads of whether to remain a consumer of social media or cross the line to become a "prosumer". The role of the prosumer will be discussed further in Chapter 6.3, but it is paramount to the addictive cycle of social media. Data collection became a reflective process for me as the researcher due to increased acknowledgement of my own relationship with social media in my teenage years and into my early 20s. In this case, the reflective process allowed me to see myself as a 'prosumer' at a time where I was reliant on social media for validation, information sharing and connectivity, feeding my feeling of legitimacy to carry out this research as an 'insider'. This is reflected in the following account in my emotionality diary at the late stages of data collection: "can people actually see what their 'status' is online, I was a prosumer of social media through monetary means and as a content creator/consumer, but I had never saw myself as that because I wasn't an 'influencer' at any time?" (Researcher Emotionality Diary, July 2022). Using this reflection to consider the perceptions of participants, no participants referred to themselves as having a dual identity as the consumer and producer of social media content, nor did any participants refer to themselves as an 'influencer'. The language that was used by participants was that they were a 'silent

observer' (consumer), or that they posted due to the pressures of social media (producer) but did not discuss their consumption and production in the form of an identity, building on the work of Fergie *et al.* (2016). Identity as either a 'prosumer', 'consumer' or a 'producer' acts as a generative mechanism that is underlying and therefore is not observable to social media users. Identity can also shift to become a condition that alters the way in which an individual engages with social media, as per the *addictive* and *habitual cycles of social media use* that are identified later in the chapter.

As a producer of social media content, there becomes a selective practice of the type of content to post, at what times of day, and on what social media platform. Alice discussed "peak times" when influencers and prosumers would post their content to attempt to generate higher levels of likes, shares, and comments and the potential to generate higher levels of revenue through paid posts, advertisements, or brand deals. Exposure such as this does not need to be monetised, however, to feed into the addictive cycle, it must simply generate a number of likes or comments that are significant, or satisfactory to the person posting (producing the content). FOMO can be positioned as an underlying mechanism within the cyclic nature of *addictive social media use* whereby it alters an individual's motivation for using social media. Depending on the nature of the content that individuals are engaging with, may also interact with their experience of identity embodiment. Alike Piran (2017) whereby a person's experience of embodiment is affected by various dimensions of their connection with their body. This includes their experience and expression of desire; their desire to engage with people, their desire to share their lives or share content online, or desire to engage in relationships both online and offline. If a person is feeling a lack of desire, findings show they are more likely to experience FOMO and pressure to engage and be 'present' online, despite feeling disconnected from their desires. FOMO is a mechanism that can shift a person's social media use moving from *habitual* to *addictive*, as they no longer scroll through social media with no (or minimal) intention behind the information they wish to gather. Instead, the individual will use social media to gather specific information (updates) on specific situations (for example events, individual's, influencers). The behaviours and mechanisms demonstrated in the *addictive cycle of social media* then lead to the posting

of content at ‘peak’ times of day to encourage higher levels of following and engagement with the content produced (event/effect).

Whether a social media user decides to become a producer (prosumer) of social media content is a key distinction between the *addictive cycle* (Figure 6.1) and the *habitual cycle of social media* (Figure 6.2). The habitual cycle of social media is initiated in the same way that the addictive cycle is through access to social media apps, and 3-way interactions. FOMO is apparent in the habitual cycle of social media in that, as discussed by *Annabelle* and *Alice* above, whether social media scrolling a part of your daily routine or something you have the ‘urge’ to do, FOMO has the power over an individual to stop them from deleting social media as they want to maintain a sense of belonging and cohesion with friends, families, and acquaintances as well as keeping up with local, national and international news stories. What makes a relationship with social media ‘habitual’ are steps 3 and 5 in this cycle: the use of ‘scrolling’ as opposed to ‘urges’ to check social media during regular intervals of the day. The use of social media to “catch up on the day” as alluded to above. It must not be assumed that the *habitual social media cycle* does not cause harm. *Caitlin,* as discussed above, identified the use of social media scrolling upon waking in the morning. *Zak* relayed experiences of completing a nightshift at work and sitting on his phone where he “found [himself] scrolling for hours”, he viewed this as “so bad, [as] this is what they [social media platforms] want... but, I don’t have anything to do. It keeps you awake.” Some people produce social media content to feel involved in the communities that they engage with online (for example, to feel actively involved in creating content that feeds into the cultural space of diet culture), as this provides a sense of belonging and being accepted by the community. A sense of acceptance can be linked to earlier discussions in Chapters 2 and 5 of the experience of being ‘othered’, whereby an individual feels ostracised as they do not fit in with the idealistic aesthetic promoted by platform cultures (diet culture and influencer culture). If the individual can become a producer or prosumer of such content and feel accepted through social media validation and engagement with their content, they will no longer feel ‘othered’. The feeling of validation will then feed into the motivation to continue to produce social media content, and potentially lead to the filtering of images to ‘improve’

content to attract more attention, likes, comments and followers to their page. This is where an individual may see their shift in social media usage moving from the *habitual* to *addictive.*

The conditions in which scrolling takes place are where harm can be identified, and potentially compounded. Participants in the interview phase of this research identified 'harms' within social media use, without being probed with harm-related language through the interview schedule, therefore 'harm' became an emergent property of the datasets. For example, participants likened their experience of social media 'addiction' to emotional and psychological harms whereby they felt they "couldn't get through a day without checking social media" (*Alice/Caitlin/Sara/Zak),* not due to a habit but due to the 'urge' described in the *addictive cycle of social media.* The content consumed when doomscrolling can include general information sharing (mainstream news stories) such as world conflict, guidance surrounding global pandemics. Alternatively, doomscrolling can be experienced of a micro-level, linking to diet culture, hostile comments about themself, or someone else, online, or potentially discussions of pro-harm content such as self-harm, suicide or pro-eating disorder discussions. The consumption of pro-harm and pro-eating disorder content online has the potential to cause real life implications such as a diagnosis of an eating disorder that could lead to wider health ramifications and potentially the admission to hospital for treatment (physical, psychological, and emotional harms). Moreover, the facilitation of pro-harm and pro-eating disorder content on forums such as Reddit and Tattle.Life normalises the consumption and production of such content (leading to embedded harms that cause an acceptability of pro-harm, and the facilitation of harm).

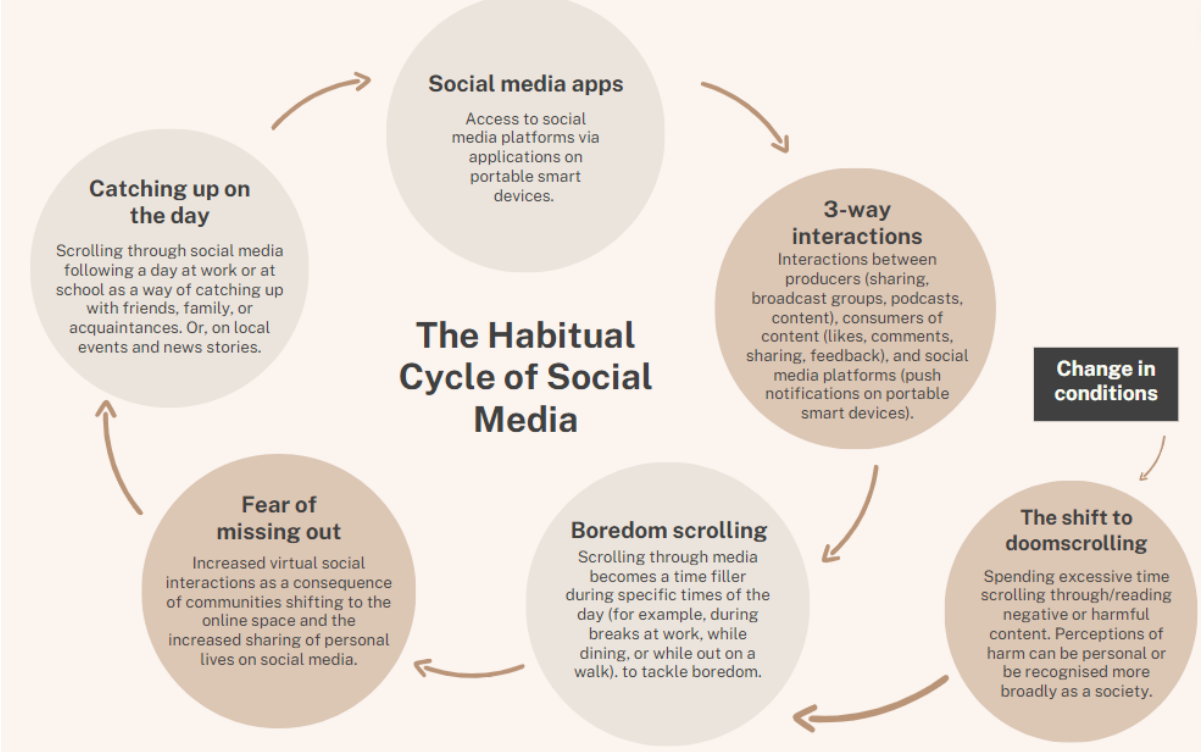

Figure 6.2 The Habitual Cycle of Social Media

Harm caused by either cycle of social media can be recognised as potentially causing iatrogenic harms (harms caused by social media platforms, usually due to the design of the algorithms underpinning the format of their app), embedded harms (harms that are 'normalised' interactions with social media), psychological harms (the direct impact of social media interaction on a person's wellbeing, or specifically the cause/impeding of mental health), emotional harms (the direct impact of social media interaction on a person's wellbeing and experience of belonging or, isolation), cultural harm (spaces created by social media platforms) or physical harm (the direct impact of social media interaction on a person's offline experience of self-injurious behaviours such as self-harm, suicide, undertaking cosmetic surgery, or engaging with disordered eating habits). The experience of harm will be personalised to the individual, their perception of social media, their identity in the online space, and the platforms that they use, hence the acknowledgement of demi-regularities in the formulation of the cyclic nature(s) of social media use. This can be used to build on the Hall's (2019) understanding of embedded harms; where Hall recognises embedded harms to be entrenched in everyday behaviour,

perceptions of how harms are embedded into the 'everyday' will alter depending on their own experience (demi-regularities). Embedded harms become normalised, and built into the norms, values and beliefs that underpin wider cultural structures such as influencer and diet culture. Due to the current UK definition of harm under the Online Safety Act (2023), the listed harms that have emerged from participatory accounts in this research cannot be wholly addressed as this legislation defines harm to be "physical, psychological and emotional". Therefore, current legislation does not address the macro-level harms perpetuated under the conditions of broader social structures such as social media platforms. This thesis can be used alongside Hall (2019) and Canning & Tombs (2021) as evidence to demonstrate the need to broaden the definition of harm under the Online Safety Act (2023) to effectively tackle 'real' experiences of online harms.

When analysing into the addictive and habitual nature(s) of social media, it was interesting to see that participants did not take full responsibility for the addictive mechanisms of social media on the platforms themselves. A degree of self-regulation and responsibilisation of the self was found in that participants had taken specific measurements to manage their daily use of social media, how it may affect their productivity/day-to-day routine, and how it may change their offline behaviours. For *Sam*:

> It depends how it's used and it's used effectively. It is the communication tool that itself, or part of the business model, is set up to be very addictive and hold your attention... I think it could have a positive impact if it were used correctly, but that's feel about most social media like. I feel like it's got the power to do so much good. But at the end of the day, whatever makes money, he's gonna be how the platform used, which currently adverts and proper placement.

Measures of self-regulation as an attempt to tackle both the habitual and addictive sides of social media in 86.36% of interviews (n=19). However, this could not be measured through the digital ethnographic process. As briefly highlighted earlier, some participants found removing social media applications from their phones or merely removing the shortcut to the application from their smart device home screen was an adequate measure of managing their screen time. For *Kayla*:

> I am very like strict on screen time. I don't have any of the apps on my phone home screen. So, where you don't delete the app, but you remove it from your home screen. So to get onto the likes of Instagram I have to go to the search bar and search it, like Googling something. I am really strict on it. If I have more than 4-hours screen time on my phone a day, I am pissed off. And that includes like, that's not just social media, it's like texts, phone, emails, whatever. I think that is a big help.

Self-regulation was an individualised experience across participants, demonstrating demi-regularities within the research whereby some participants demonstrate this experience and others do not, but it remains a significant experience to be shared in the analysis of the data. With this, the outcome and 'success' in managing one's own addictive relationship with social media was also individual. For participants such as *Zak*, attempts had been made to reduce time spent on social media due to recognising a "vicious cycle" of returning to social media, despite how it would affect his mood and offline behaviours. But then time spent on one platform would be replaced by another platform, therefore refueling the "addiction".

Rachel shared her previously "addictive relationship" with social media that she could not liken to the habitual nature of social media, but more so the validation and comfort that likes and follows of her content brought to her in her younger teenage years:

> I think about five years ago I was pretty addicted to Instagram and I would post everything on there to show off. I don't know what it was I think I felt insecure in myself, and I just had like kind of look at my holiday, look at my boyfriend like look at this it wasn't really it just it was just approved to myself that I am having like a good time and stuff. I used to like kind of especially Instagram like five years ago I used to be like addicted to the likes "like, oh this looks like it'll get a lot of likes". It was more popularity than anything.

For young people like *Rachel*, social media provides a space for added confirmation of the popularity and attractiveness that they aspire to. In the rise of social media and the 'influencer culture' it feeds into, large followings online holds the utmost importance in the 'success' of your platform – the more followers you have, the more likes you are likely to get on the content that you produce, and thus, the higher likelihood that you, as an 'influencer' becomes monetised they are paid for their contributions to social media which

could then lead to brand deals and partnerships in the future. This goes beyond the popularity and validation that one may look for in the classroom or from one's peers when moving through the stages of educational institutions and the making of potential new relationships. The process of forming new relationships, and gaining a following online, served the purpose of gaining validation, as opposed to gaining 'influencer' status online. As *Grace* attests below, there is heavy onus placed on the competitive economy of social media 'influencing'; growing popularity online becomes addictive and therefore, social media producers may become reliant on online validation for their self-confidence and esteem both on and offline:

> And like, I was deleting things off it thinking, Oh my God, I can't believe that I posted this sort of rubbish and in pretty quick succession I ended up getting Instagram once that came out, that was just kind of like a popularity contest as well. I think all of those sorts of things were at that point when they were first coming out because it was very much about how many followers you had, how well known you were.

Here, *Grace* is demonstrating a feeling that comes with believing your posts, physical appearance and 'selfies' are not good enough and will not receive 'enough' attention if they do not adhere to a set quality and aesthetic that is pushed to the forefront in the curation of the 'recommended' social media images outlined in Chapter 6.1. As discussed in Chapter 3, this finding is supported by the work of Cambre & Lavrence (2023) when developing their interdisciplinary frameworks of affective engagement using selfies and image-based social media in *The Sociology of Selfies: The Filtered Face.* From here, *Grace* started to recognise that her pro-longed use of social media felt 'addictive' and that it was creeping into more areas of her day-to-day routine. Thus, she removed herself from social media for 18-months to work on her relationship with herself in the offline space. The feeling of 'not being good enough' based on likes and following online was reflected by *Lizzie* when stating the reason that she would need to remove herself from social media, from time to time, alongside attempts to decompartmentalise her experiences of feeling low in self-confidence:

> ... every now and then I do tend to actually like just completely delete the Instagram app off my phone. And just like and I, I tend to do it when I feel like either I'm

> scrolling like way too much or like I'm just feeling a bit rubbish for a little while. So, I'm like it might not be like Instagram that's making me feel rubbish, but I'm like, it's definitely not helping. So, I just tend to delete stuff like that and tends to be when I just try and step away from my phone and I don't know, I do it for like a couple of weeks or something like that.

The efficacy of a 'digital detox', as discussed in Chapter 3, has been praised by studies such as Radtke *et al.* (2022) and Coyne & Woodruff (2023) in reducing experiences of exhaustion, low mood, and low self-worth. Radtke *et al.* (2022) use similar terminology to *Grace* in controlling her mental health and well-being by removing herself from social media. Or, like *Katie, Kayla,* and *Charlotte*, who removed the applications from their home screens to reduce the temptation of using social media. However, regardless of removing herself from social media, the negative self-esteem and concerns with her body image (iatrogenic harms caused by social media/diet culture as mechanisms of social control) followed *Grace* investing in multiple cosmetic procedures to change her physical appearance based on her perception of attractiveness being directly influenced by the young women and 'influencers' she followed and aspired to look like, on social media. This experience aligns with earlier discussions of the pathologisation of attractiveness, and the responsibilisation of self-esteem in Chapter 5.

6.4 Becoming the 'Prosumer': Can we Distinguish Between the Content Consumer and Content Producer?

There is no straightforward dichotomy between social media producers and consumers. It is not as simple as a social media user being a social media "producer" or, a social media "consumer". A person's status online as a social media user should consider the influence of the capitalist marketisation of content production and consumption (Zuboff, 2019), the rise of the 'prosumer' in the self-production of services and goods (Toffler, 1990) as well as the rise of influencer culture as "micro celebrities" across social media platforms (see Brown, 2022 cited in Kristensen, 2023; Nouri, 2018). In Toffler's works of the *Powershift: Knowledge, Wealth and Violence,* he builds on his earlier definition of the 'prosumer' in the self-production of goods and services that could be purchased elsewhere but are self-produced because of late modern lifestyles and consumer markets (Toffler, 1990). As discussed in depth in Chapter 3, the role of the 'prosumer' in the digital age, has been interpreted in a variety of ways (see Ritzer & Jurgensen, 2010; Bruns &

Schmidt, 2011; Fergie *et al*., 2016). In this research, the definition of the prosumer resonates with that of Fergie *et al.* (2016: 49), in that the prosumer describes the social media user who is “frequently in production and consumption” of social media content. Alike Fergie *et al.* (2016), this research found that all participants who were interviewed (n=22) described themselves as either someone who both consumed and “posted” (produced) content, someone who “silently observed” (non-engaged), or someone who actively consumed and engaged with (liking and commenting) content across the social media platforms outlined in Chapter 4.5. Participants interviewed in this study did not use terminology such as producer, consumer or prosumer to describe their use of social media, but provided the mechanical details of how they use social media, at what times of day, and why they use different social media platforms (for both production and consumption of content).

The monetisation of social media production and consumption in the digital age has had a direct impact on the relationship that social media users have with social media platforms. This has occurred through a prioritisation of the increased profiteering of social media engagement (Zuboff, 2019), over the consideration of potential harms caused by the nature of social media business models, the culture of content creation and the “celebrification on Instagram and Youtube” (Nouri, 2018: 5) of social media influencers and prosumers. In this research, the “frequent” prosumption of content was positioned in line with the *addictive* and *habitual cycles* of social media use. As emphasised earlier, the marketisation of social media cultures (diet culture and influencer culture, in particular) as a mechanism for harm within the online space such as social media addiction and the normalisation of low self-esteem caused by prolonged social media use and active engagement with the “idealistic” narratives that underpin platform cultures and “other” bodies that do not meet the “idealised” standards of the online space.

For example, *Katie* positioned her addictive social media habits into the context of being both a social media consumer and producer of ‘diet culture’ content: in other terms, a ‘prosumer’. For *Katie*, removing the applications from her phone was beneficial in her journey away from restrictive eating habits. As can be understood from the account below,

Katie believed there was a connection between her restrictive eating habits and the type of social media content she consumed. She believed this connection to be the fuel for the 'addictive' side to her social media use, the fuel for her urge to use social media for multiple hours her day:

> I'll go on the trends and it would just, yeah, it would just really annoy us. And so, I used to have apps on my phone and I would. I would regularly use all of those things. I would regularly post things about my life. And in recent years and so, like I said, I used to have a fitness Instagram. I would say about, I think would probably about eight-years ago now. So just as the whole boom was kind of taken off and urm, I just started to recognize that perhaps I was spending a lot of time on it and it was beginning to, I think we've all had unhealthy kind of body images. And I think I it was I had quite restrictive eating habits at the time and I felt that actually that was making things worse rather than improving things so, so I just decided, like, one day I just, I just decided like this is probably not healthy. So, I just came off that.

Katie's experience resonates with the findings of Zuboff (2019) in that the profiteering of social media companies has become a priority in the digital age, in comparison to the effect that increased exposure to social media – and, in this case, diet culture-related content – can have over a person's general wellbeing, and relationship with their body. At this stage, it is important to acknowledge that in the case of *Katie*, like *Kayla* and *Ivy*, removing the easy access to these platforms by "deleting social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram" from her phone created a barrier between *Katie* and her social media accounts. This meant it required effort and more time to get into her account, as she would need to log into social media via her web browser manually. From here, *Katie* discussed a history of "treatment in the past, for things like, low mood and anxiety and found that that [social media use] was a huge trigger" for her self-esteem and mood. Therefore, removing social media apps from her phone supported her breaking the addictive cycle of social media consumption that she found "triggering and harmful". This support mechanism, and change in behaviour, found that *Katie* was less likely to feel the "pressure" to produce social media content also. By actively engaging with social media less, *Katie* felt that this ease of the "pressure" to share her daily food and exercise routines therefore minimised her position as prosumer of social media content. The consideration

of “pressures [faced by participants] within diet culture” as discussed in Chapter 5.2 relating to the experiences of *Katie* and *Alice*.

For *Christie*, addiction comes from the validation you receive in both the online and offline spaces that re-introduce you to a sense of belonging and worthiness in the idealistic realm of beauty standards and attractiveness that are enhanced through diet culture across all social media platforms:

> But it it’s one of those things. It’s addictive. Once you start to lose the weight. And you hear the comments and you, you know, you, you, you stopped feel good. You just wanna lose more and more and more and more.

Christie’s lived experiences represent the normalisation of adjusting lifestyles around social media, whether our perception of the nature of our social media usage is habitual, addictive, or perhaps neither; these findings align with the outcome of studies as Bruns & Schmidt (2011) where the ‘produsage’ of social media has changed in the age of millennials[1] and Generation Z whereby the encouragement of open participation and communication has become embedded within business models, and application development. As found within this research, there is an impact of the addictive elements to social media platforms (for example, the attention-grabbing nature of image-based applications such as TikTok or the introduction of the ‘reel’ on Instagram). The business models that underpin social media platforms do not account for the impact of the addictive nature of their platforms, the addiction that they are aware they are perpetuating. Participants – people with lived experience of using these platforms – are telling us that as young people and at later stages of their lives, they have found embedding social media into everyday life harmful. At the very least, it is potentially harmful. This is amplified when there is a lack of education around spreading inauthentic information on social media through filtered imagery, misinformation, and diet culture-related content that promotes restrictive eating habits, intensive dieting, and the false advertising of diet products.

To conclude, the *addictive cycle* of social media does not stop and start with social media consumption or time spent online. It is a complex entanglement of the way the addictive

nature of social media draws users back into platforms, despite reporting to be able to recognise its, sometimes, detrimental impact on their self-esteem, well-being, and offline behaviours; one which can determine their identity online. As is demonstrated in Figure 6.3, a person's identity online (producer, consumer, prosumer), as an outcome of the way that they engage with social media, can alter depending on the conditions that they engage with social media under. Social media use (as an outward facing observable structure) is generated by unobservable behaviours and motivations, that can be affected by the user engaging with its platform under the gaze of the *addictive cycle* or the *habitual cycle.* Findings from this study demonstrate that when a social media user is under the influence of the *addictive cycle,* they are more likely to be drawn into the competitive mechanisms of social media economies by becoming prosumers. Whereas, if a social media user is under the influence of the *habitual cycle* when online they are more likely to be a consumer; this can be as a "silent observer" (non-engager) or an active participant in the liking and commenting on content.

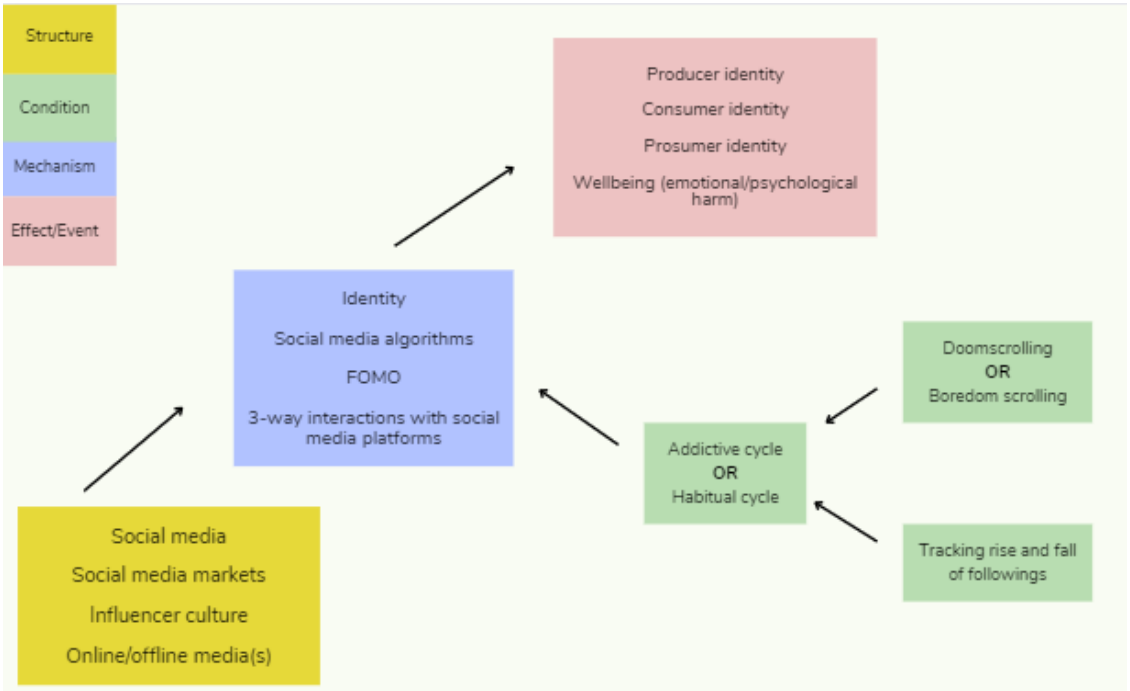

Figure 6.3: CR mapping of social media participation

This is reflected throughout all participatory accounts that contribute to the findings of this research, wherein participants have clearly articulated concerns with:

- The need to remove oneself from social media platforms altogether;
- The need to remove social media applications from your smart device/the home screen of your smart device;
- The need to access support [online or offline] to navigate the negative emotions attached to feeling that you are not 'good enough'.

This can be concerning restrictive eating habits like *Katie* (emotional or psychological harm), investing in cosmetic surgery like *Grace* (physical, emotional or psychological harm), temporarily removing oneself from social media altogether like *Zak* and *Annabelle* (emotional or embedded harm), or self-management strategies such as deleting social media applications from your phone to reduce screen time and an attempt to break the addictive/habitual nature(s) of social media like *Kayla* and *Katie*. This can be closely examined alongside the complexity of online identity relating to the role of the prosumer on social media, and the impact of the marketisation of social media platforms in the digital age.

Like Figure 6.3 this chapter has demonstrated the underlying mechanisms that influence experiences and perceptions of social media platforms, social media markets, influencer culture and online/offline media(s) as causal structures. For example, a social media user's identity within the online space is impacted by the conditions that they engage with social media under; whether this be in a habitual nature to keep up with friends, family or current affairs (including boredom scrolling as a demi-regularity, when social media scrolling is used as a time filler rather than a daily habit), or whether this be as an addiction where the individual's habit changes to an urge, or need, to check interactions and engagement online. As detailed in Figure 6.1 (the *addictive cycle of social media user*) participants in this research were able to identify feeling 'addicted to social media' and that social media was 'designed to keep them hooked' into the platform, but they were able to recognise that they could only identify the feeling of 'addiction' as they were

discussing experiences retrospectively. Participants stated that young people were more prone to the 'harmful' side of the addictive cycle of social media which could lead to 'wellbeing' concerns (emotional or psychological harm). Although social media users involved in either the *habitual* or *addictive cycle* of engagement were subject to FOMO, the effect of feeling 'left out' differed depending on the conditions that they were using social media (i.e., the cycle they were involved in). The acceptability that social media algorithms are 'designed to keep [users] hooked' demonstrates that the *addictive cycle* is entrenched in social media business models and development to increase engagement with their profiles, therefore demonstrating the embedded harms of social media algorithms.

6.5 Self-Branding and Regulating Influencer Culture

Alongside perceptions of self-identity online, participants interviewed in this research highlighted the rise in influencer culture because of the monetisation of social media interactions. With this, there was an evident curation of information that participants would put online, and what they would not (Rifkin, 2022). As well as how they would present themselves online compared to their presentation of the self, offline; this be likened to existing research of self-branding, the "private" self (Hearn, 2008), and identity management in the digital age (Hearn, 2017). This section of the chapter will analyse findings that demonstrate the conflicting identities of participants in online and offline spaces. It will go on to position lived experiences of influencer culture, online, within the parameters of the existing UK Code of Non-broadcast Advertising and Direct & Promotional Marketing (the CAP Code) enforced by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) (see ASA, 2023). Using findings presented throughout Chapter 6, this section will outline recommendations for the regulation of influencer culture in line with the self-branding of influencers and public figures online.

The conflicting way of presenting the self in online and offline spaces was discussed by Zara. As a member of the online gaming community, Twitch, *Zara* detailed the way that she "created an online persona" that demonstrates the theme of her community. For *Zara,* the purpose of her online community is to create a space that is safe for her, and those

who wish to join her following. However, when it comes to her online and offline self, she felt she was able to distinguish between her two personalities. *Zara* stated:

> That's quite an interesting thing in fact, that I kind of have two names that I commonly go by and now I'm so used to being called both because I am so frequently addressed as them. Obviously, I am the same person but it's definitely two identities I would say.

Where *Zara's* forum online is not monetised, she has highlighted the experience of having "two identities" due to having an online presence. This can be likened to the earlier works of Goffman (1956) whereby Goffman identifies the control and manufacture the version of their persona that they wish to present as an attempt to avoid feeling that they have embarrassed themselves or, to avoid the potential of ostracism from wider society. This can be informed by Chapter 2's discussion of 'stigma-craft' whereby media narratives have the power to feed into the crafting of stigma towards "othered" groups of individuals (Tyler, 2020), as identified in the findings of this thesis, the growth in social media has amplified the crafting of stigma through the increased accessibility to, and growing dissemination of, media narratives. In the digital age, this can be termed the curation of the information that social media users wish to put online (see Rifkin, 2022). The curation process can be determined by the social media platform that is being used, or personal preference of living one's life "publicly" online, or "privately" (*Alice);* the formulation of a dual identity that is underpinned by a 'need to be perfect in the public eye' can be considered as a mechanism towards the perpetration of harm (emotional, psychological, physical, iatrogenic and embedded), depending on individualised experiences of 'identity' as an event. The crafting of the 'aesthetically pleasing' social media image has become a 'normalised' (embedded) element of content creation (see Cambre & Lavrence, 2023), which can directly impact a person's self-esteem, the 'highlight reel' that they show online (see Chapter 5), and therefore the identity that they create for themselves online. At times, this identity is based on inauthenticity and builds a filtered lifestyle of falsehoods which influence the creation of (un)realistic goals for those who consume their content. As per Chapter 5, this the digital altering of images as an embedded behaviour in social media

use is a harmful behaviour that can lead to ‘real’ experiences of disordered eating, the setting of (un)realistic goals, engaging with dangerous dieting strategies and the investment in appearance altering procedures or cosmetic surgery.

Identity can be understood as a both an underlying mechanism, unobservable to social media users, and an event that is initiated by the activation of other mechanisms such as inauthenticity, accessibility to social media, stigma, or the construction of beauty. Identity can be formulated differently across different platforms intentionally, depending on the motivation for using the platform, for example, *Katie* discussed the separation of information shared on Facebook in comparison to LinkedIn:

> I try not to blur the line because you know it’s not something... I think, physio in particular, most of us are fit and active so you end up people put things on like they put the things that they are training for, marathons and things like that [on LinkedIn]. I’m happy to talk about that at work but I like my work is a very much professional profile, I see it as employers and potential recruiters would go onto there and I just, well I don’t think they would care that I was going to run a marathon.

On Facebook, *Katie* would be more inclined to share information more personally such as “social occasions, birthday parties, or trips away”. Rather than this being to distinguish public and private narratives online, *Katie* framed this as being to maintain professional integrity on LinkedIn for when networking with others in the sports industry, and, when searching for future opportunities. The curation of the self-online was also likened to the “highlight reel” of social media by a number of participants (59.1%, n=13) in that content creators (producers) will only share what they want to share online. This could be for a multitude of reasons: not wanting to share parts of their life that they are not happy with, not wanting to share parts of their life that make them feel not worthy, wanting to meet the trending aesthetic of social media (this was considered in depth throughout Chapter 5), or, wanting to post content that they believe will generate the most attention and potential gain. For example, *Zara* highlights the need for successful influencers to have “the ideal

Barbie style" body that adheres to societal expectations of the "ideal" body type of the time. The highlight reel is a concept was also reflected in the findings of Rosalind Gill's parliamentary report *Changing the Perfect Picture: Smartphones, social media and appearance pressures* (2021); relating to the presentation of "your best self" and the fear attached to ensuring the content posted online is adequate and meets the standards of the ideal online aesthetic. This resonates with the work of Hearn (2008; 2017), who acknowledges the changes to identity management and self-branding in the age of big data, such as the self-branding of influencers and public figures online. As per the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee (2022) definition of the influencer, participants in this study refer to individuals with large social media followings and are viewed as "content creators" on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok. The curation of the self online was loosely addressed in primitive parliamentary discussions surrounding the Digitally Altered Body Images Bill, as a concern for filtered lifestyles and authentic imagery across social media platforms. As discussed in Chapter 2, this Bill was dismissed by the UK parliament following its first reading in January 2022 and has yet to be reviewed by MP's.

Participants such as *Alice* and *Lizzie* highlighted the inconsistencies in the self-branding of influencers compared to the branding of established brands or independently-ran companies. *Alice* questioned (rhetorically) during her interview why the UK Government was not actively pursuing the "false advertisement" of influencers surrounding their appearance. She related this to an influencer's (potential) use of cosmetic surgeries and their filtering of images. *Lizzie* also highlighted the concerns around the lack of authenticity in influencer's posting of image-based content. Over recent years, influencer culture has become a professional industry in line with the marketisation of social media prosumption (see Zuboff, 2019; Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2022). The professionalisation of this industry has led to social media influencers - when using content creation as their employment – becoming their own brand: the advertisement of themselves then becoming their self-branding. Where The CAP Code applies to most areas of the influencer industry, it does not regulate the concept of self-branding (ASA, 2023). Section 3 of The CAP Code outlined the rules that

advertisers (in this case, influencers) are required to follow to “avoid misleading people” (ASA, 2023: unpaginated).

If influencers are their own brand, as a self-employed commodity, where advertising standards are applied to the marketing of brands, wider marketing regulations that are applicable to the marketing of brands and advertising of companies should be applied to the advertising of social media influencers. Therefore, if an influencer were to alter their image using a filtering application such as FaceTune, FaceApp, or Airbrush, for example, and not disclose this to their audience they are falsely advertising their product: themselves. The filtering of images would be recognised as a breach of The CAP Code of conduct if the advertisement of influencers held the same regulations as advertising alternative brands (such as products or gifted experiences). The regulation of filtered imagery would have the power to influence the narrative of social media users; this was reflected in the digital ethnography phase of this study where *Reddit* users discussed being “unphotogenic”, as not “having a good side” to take photos on, and “practicing how to pose” to work towards “always trying to be perfect” (Anon User, Reddit). The misadvertisement of the self-brand has broader implications of the perpetuation of harms relating to self-esteem, the rise in cosmetic surgery, body-related anxieties, disordered eating patterns, and the pattern of dieting that are then followed when offline. Furthermore, the presentation of the self through a highlight reel can lead to is the normalisation of online hate when received by individuals who are aspiring to be influencers, who have influencer status, or who do not meet the “aesthetic” standard set out in the idealism of social media content (see Cambre & Lavrence, 2023). The broader harms (thematised accordingly as actual and real levels of reality) that are compounded by the lack of regulation surrounding the self-branding of influencers can be interlinked with the broader findings of this thesis and are shown in Figure 6.4, which demonstrates the levels of empirical reality of these findings. The harms relating to filtered lifestyles, the lack of regulation surrounding influencer culture and the cyclic nature of social media use represent the effects of these areas including embedded harms (the normalisation of online hate, addiction to social media, the pathologisation of attractiveness), iatrogenic harms (addiction to social media intended by social media platforms, misleading marketing leading to deceptive purchases), emotional harms (low self-esteem, body-

related anxiety, body dissatisfaction), psychological harms (low self-esteem, disordered eating, body-related anxiety), and physical harms (disordered eating, self-injurious behaviours).

6.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter addressed the macro-level mechanisms identified in this study by giving personal perceptions of what social media is, how it is/can be used, and its role in a person's daily life. It has also considered the intricacies of individual relationships with social media and the 'why' for participants: why they consume social media content, why they produce social media content and under what conditions their relationship between social media app and user may shift. The use of entries from my emotionality diary at different stages of data collection, where relevant, has encouraged a reflection of my subjectivity whilst collecting the data as an 'insider' within the research. Reflections recorded in the emotionality diary also supported the researcher to observe participants' subjectivity in relaying their experience of social media and platform cultures. Within this, changing conditions such as the Covid-19 pandemic, employment, and relationships have been clearly articulated by users as external conditions that influence their social media usage. This research has distinguished two personal conditions of which social media can be engaged under: the *addictive* cycle of social media, and the *habitual* cycle of social media.

Below, Figure 6.4 reintroduces the mapping of the broader findings of this thesis recognising the 'actual' and 'real' levels of empirical reality that have been mapped to the identification of harms that emerged from the data including those detailed above: embedded, iatrogenic, emotional, psychological and physical harms. Figure 6.4 demonstrates the levels of empirical reality that have emerged from this research, providing a visual representation of which of the discussed harms are 'identified' and observable (i.e., discussed by participants and typologised by the researcher), and those that remain unobservable to participants due to being causal mechanisms, or conditions, that influence an individual's relationship with, or experience of, social media. The findings relevant to Chapter 6 have been outlined throughout the chapter as being either

structures, mechanisms, conditions or events, and where appropriate have been aligned with the relevant harm typologies to demonstrate the real impact of those themes that emerged from the findings of this dataset.

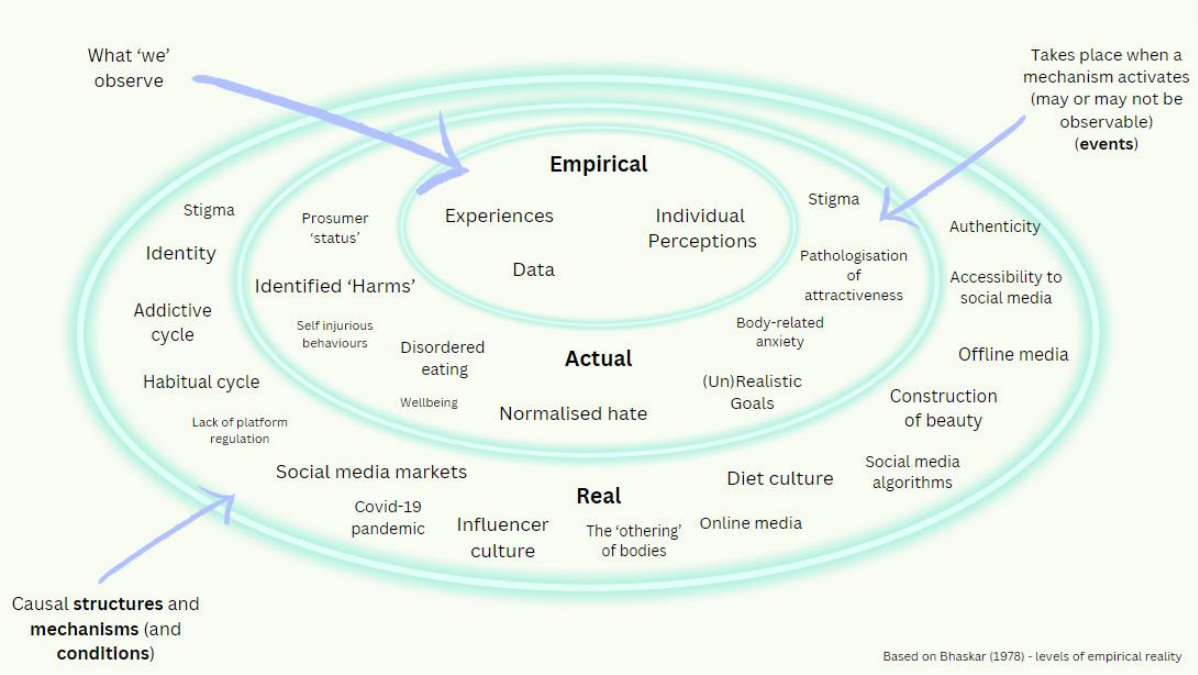

Figure 6.4 CR mapping of thesis findings using Bhaskar (1978) levels of empirical reality analogy

As outlined in Chapter 5.8, this doctoral research argues generative mechanisms to be observable at times, for some people under some conditions. Relevant to this chapter, social media algorithms were a recognisable mechanism to a significant number of participants in this research as an underlying factor that influenced their use of certain platforms. However, the algorithm remains a mechanism towards harm (i.e., iatrogenic harm, embedded harm, psychological harm, and emotional harm) caused by social media platforms in intending to maintain the attention of its' audience for a prolonged period and encourage the production of content. What is unobservable about this mechanism is its ability to alter a person's status or identity within said space; for example, the shift from consumer to prosumer when an individual feels the "pressures" to engage actively with social media following an experience of FOMO, or a shift to the *addictive cycle of social media use.*

The findings in Chapter 6 demonstrated that the nature of one's relationship with social media directly impacts the type of social media user we are, whereby, social media users under the gaze of the *addictive cycle* are more likely to obtain the role of the prosumer online and those under the *habitual cycle* of social media are more likely to maintain the role of the consumer online. Finally, this chapter has considered the impact of the monetisation of social media through algorithmic mechanisms embedded in the business models of these apps as well as the professionalisation of influencer culture. Findings in this research have evidenced that the professionalisation of influencer requires a reconsideration of the ASA (2023) guidelines provided to influencers when producing content that advertises a product, brand, or business. As per the findings detailed in Chapter 6.4, the self-branding of influencers requires further regulatory conditions surrounding the disclosure of the use of filtering applications and cosmetic surgery alongside guidelines within Section 3 of The CAP Code (ASA, 2023). This will formalise the acknowledgement of the influencer industry as a professional industry as well as attempt to address the broader harms perpetuated by the lack of regulation that, at the time of writing, surrounds influencer culture.

7. Concluding Thoughts: Recommendations for Future Policy and Education Intervention

7.1 Introduction

In this final chapter an overview of the findings and analyses presented in Chapters 5 and 6 will be provided. The chapter will consider the contributions to knowledge within this thesis whilst outlining the implications of these contributions to education, policy, and practice. In doing so, the chapter identifies opportunities for further research surrounding the impact of harms across social media and the regulation of the online space more generally. The purpose for this research was to address gaps in existing knowledge surrounding diet culture, filtered lifestyles online and experiences of social media use. From the review of the literature, the dominance of the discipline of psychology in researching diet culture and social media use was identified, as well as a need to build upon the lack of qualitative experiential accounts of using social media to understand its

real-life impact. Therefore, this research was designed using a two-phase qualitative methodology, underpinned by a critical realist (CR) epistemology involving a digital ethnographic observation of Tattle.Life and Reddit, over a 6-month period, alongside a series of 22 semi-structured interviews with individuals aged 18-30-years-old, all of whom had experience of social media. The contributions to knowledge from this thesis have emerged through the application of a CR analysis underpinned by a zemiological framework to consider the, at times, unobservable harms caused or compounded by diet culture, and the online space more broadly.

The chapter will start by presenting the definition of diet culture formed using the experience and knowledge of participants in this research. From here, the chapter will begin to conceptualise the research findings that have evidenced the setting of *(un)realistic goals* based on filtered lifestyles that are posed as 'realistic' imagery, experiences, and lifestyles within influencer culture on social media, spilling into diet culture-related content online. The findings of this research demonstrate a relationship between diet culture and the diagnostic cultures that underpin contemporary understandings of 'health' (Goodley, 2014; Brinkmann, 2016), that has resulted in what this thesis has termed the *'pathologisation of attractiveness'* as a new concept that demonstrates the interconnected nature of 'health' and 'attractiveness'. This chapter will address the cyclic nature of social media as an underlying mechanism of social media engagement, whereby the *addictive* and *habitual* cycles of social media use act as an (at times, unobservable) influence over one's relationship with social media as well as one's perception of self-esteem. When considering the harms posed by diet culture, and the production of social media content (i.e., the marketisation of influencer culture and content creation), this chapter will present a rationale and recommendation for the regulation of self-branding and influencer culture.

The chapter will then discuss the implications of this research, by identifying political and educational curriculum recommendations relating to the Online Safety Act 2023 and the UK Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education to make recommendations for the future direction of research within this area, consultation for curriculum

enhancement and adjustments to the definition of harm in current UK online safety legislation.

7.2 Contributions to Knowledge

7.2.1 Defining Diet Culture

This thesis set out to investigate the impact of diet culture in online and offline spaces, with a specific focus on the impact on an individual's relationship with their body, their perception of self-esteem and their experience(s) of body image. To achieve this, it was necessary to explore perceptions of what diet culture encompasses through dialogue with participants during the interview phase of the research. This research has created the following definition of diet culture as a contribution to knowledge:

> Diet culture is a set of beliefs, norms, and values that promote an idealistic aesthetic that has been socially constructed to set out expectations of beauty, health, success, and productivity in online and offline spaces.

Culture, in diet culture, aligns to previously explained understandings of culture as a set of beliefs, values, norms and values shared by a group of individuals (Hall, 1997). Aesthetics within diet culture can relate to physical appearance (face shape, body shape, body weight, fashion sense, hairstyle, makeup), lifestyle (wealth, investments, employment, education, house décor, cars, travel), as well as engagement with health and fitness (nutrition, exercise, influencer-led communities, producing social media relating to your engagement with health and fitness offline).

The values, norms and beliefs that underpin diet culture are the same whether they occur online or offline, but the behaviours and intensity of behaviours that occur in these two spaces can differ. The findings of this thesis demonstrated exposure to embedded, emotional, cultural, iatrogenic, psychological, and physical harm posed by diet culture that is not exclusive to online diet culture: it can occur in offline diet spaces. The online space, however, amplifies potential harm to diet culture consumers due to the risk of misinformation being shared with larger audiences at a rapid pace alongside online diet

culture being more accessible than offline diet culture. Diet culture is not a new space that emerged from the rise of the internet: this thesis has demonstrated that diet culture has a long-standing history that has changed over time. Historically, diet culture has been reflected through mass media advertisements, newspaper (or magazine) columns, organisations leading specific diets that would discuss fitness and nutrition rules for dieters to engage with if they wanted to 'look their best'. This would include individuals signing up to a 'diet club' and for some (Slimming World, for example) paying a subscription to attend a weekly 'fat club' to be weighed in front of the group and discuss their scale weight. In groups, or via magazine subscriptions (WeightWatchers, for example), advice on the 'good' foods, the 'bad' foods and the best forms of exercise to complete to burn the most calories would be provided alongside media advertisements that would compare the amount of exercise required to burn off a chocolate bar or a fast-food meal. This evidences that offline diet culture was focused on nutrition (at times fitness), adhering to weight loss schemes to achieve the 'idealistic' body. This is a contribution to knowledge as this research provides a concise definition of diet culture that acknowledges wider socio-cultural factors within social media, as opposed to focusing on diet, health, and fitness solely, and is applicable to online as well as offline spaces.

A sole focus on fitness and nutrition did not emerge from the first-hand experiences provided by participants in the interview phase of the research, nor through observations of diet culture discussion threads throughout the digital ethnographic phase of this research. In fact, diet culture-related content and conversations were explicitly focused on the broader routines that could be set. For example, findings in Chapter 5 identified influencers who advise which nutrition plans to follow and would provide broad guidance on fitness without the appropriate nutrition qualifications. This resonated with findings from the digital ethnographic phase of the research, despite ethnographic subjects not producing their social media interactions for the research specifically. For example, a Reddit user relayed her experience of diet culture on social media as influencing her feeling that she must "always prepar[e] to be perfect" in all walks of life. Where interview participants stated that individuals who could not adhere to the routine(s) and 'discipline' required to achieve success in their diet, their workplace and for example, their finances,

felt they were a ‘failure’. The dichotomous use of language such as ‘failure’ and ‘success’ attempting to link various aspects of a person’s life, into one path of pass or fail demonstrates the prevalence of contemporary forms of stigma relating to presumptions of happiness, healthiness, and attractiveness in the digital space. Like the work of Clair (2018) there are presumptions of body size and scale weight that determine one’s self-worth, which is not a new revelation to diet culture within the online space; but rather this was reflected in the examples of ‘offline’ diet culture above. The findings of this thesis extend the work of Clair (2018) by recognising that diet culture does not solely focus on physical appearance and fitness but dictates idealistic standards to wider aspects of life such as productivity, worth and success. Such presumptions are influenced by the long-standing history of stigmatisation of those who do not meet the idealistic standards of normative narratives, in mainstream society, as has been a discussion point that has been revisited throughout the entirety of this thesis.

The findings of this thesis support and develop the findings of Atherton (2021) discussed in Chapters 3 and 6 by recognising that contemporary diet culture is infiltrated by ‘fatphobia’ and weight stigma. This research has extended on Atherton’s findings by positioning stigma and behaviours surrounding fatphobia as underlying generative mechanisms, to then identify the effects of such behaviours through an experiential lens. This thesis has recognised hostility and stigmatising perceptions of diet culture more broadly than those that are weight-related and fatphobic, however. As outlined in Chapters 5 and 6, the Covid-19 pandemic contributed to the changing conditions of social media engagement and the underlying tone of the content being created for motivational purposes. Content, particularly on image-based social media (Instagram, YouTube and TikTok) between March 2020 and February 2021 shifted towards a broader consideration of ‘health’ under restriction. Heightened pressures were placed on social media consumers during this time to achieve productivity through specific step counts, daily home workouts (at times, by logging into live online workouts run by personal trainers online or influencers on Instagram Live), to build their baking skills, and to build a ‘strong morning routine that would set you up for success’ including making the bed, writing in a journal and meditation. This influenced a broader change in the social understanding of

the ‘idealised’ lifestyle that would support you in becoming ‘successful’ and achieving the ‘idealised appearance’.

As discussed in Chapter 3, a gendered nature of diet culture(s) can be dated back to the 1960s (see Gagliardi, 2018; Dodier, 2020), however in this research men and women identified pressures of the online space on their relationship with food, their perception of self-esteem and the way that they formed their daily routine in the offline space. Thus, acknowledging that the long-standing historical ‘pressure’ to meet societal ideals and the values of normative narratives surrounding appearance and lifestyle remain relevant to contemporary society. This is not a new pressure but is now occurring in a different form due to a shift from offline to online. The definition of diet culture is an important contribution to knowledge that identifies stigma as an underlying mechanism that influences the ‘idealistic’ standards set through diet culture narratives, both online and offline.

7.2.2 (Un)Realistic Goals

The term *(un)realistic goals* has been coined from this research as a contribution to knowledge to demonstrate the deceptive nature of influencer content that can be an ***effect*** of the lack of regulation amongst platform cultures and the selling of dietary products through the growth of influencer culture. The setting of (un)realistic goals refers to the setting of goals, by social media consumers, that they believe to be attainable (i.e., realistic) but are based upon inauthentic imagery - a form of indirect misleading or deceptive marketing. In the investigation of lived experiences of diet culture, body-related anxiety and incidents of disordered eating and low self-esteem, a continued concern was raised directly by participants in interviews. This was also alluded to by partakers in digital ethnographic phase of the data (indirectly through hateful and hostile discourse across Tattle.Life, as well as by members of the *EDAnonymous* community on Reddit): *are the goals I am setting myself, based on social media narratives, achievable?* This was addressed in a variety of ways, with some participants outlining the impact that filtered imagery across Instagram (predominantly) had over their ability to ‘like’ a selfie they had taken of themselves, through to the false advertising of diet products and fitness regimes

that were advertised by influencers who had not previously used the product or followed the regime themselves.

In an earlier example of filtered imagery, (un)realistic goals are not always explicit in nature and at times can present as generative mechanisms that are not observable within the social space. An (un)realistic goal may be set by a consumer who perceives the content that they are exposed to is engaging and authentic and something that 'inspires' them to achieve goals and 'better themselves'. The (un)realistic goes from being realistic to unrealistic without the consumer being aware of this. (In)Authenticity of information and images shared online is an underlying generative mechanism that impacts an individual's perception of social media, their experience of self-stigma, the goals they are setting. Behaviours they then conduct in their offline lives (i.e., engaging with dieting, steroid use, cosmetic surgery/beauty engagement, or the filtering of their own images) are subsequently impacted.

Chapter 5 discussed at length how (un)realistic goals manifest in the contemporary consumer market of diet culture. (Un)realistic goals are set through a misrepresentation of lifestyle that can be referred to as the 'highlight reel' of social media, the subtle filtering of imagery and the increasing use of artificial intelligence software to ensure the spreading of misinformation or inauthentic images is not obvious to the consumer. This heightens the harm that consumers are exposed to due to the deception that underpins (un)realistic goals, termed as *falsehoods* in Chapter 5 of this thesis, with 9 participants in the interview phase of this research disclosing having witnessed inauthentic images or misinformation knowingly online, and the rest being unaware whether what they were viewing online was 'real' or not. This does not account for those unobservable incidents whereby participants believe what they are reading or witnessing (in an image) is real, clearly demonstrating the lack of authenticity in the sharing of information and images online, and the lack of platform regulation, as generative mechanisms that underpin the setting of (un)realistic goals. This demonstrates the importance of using CR as part of this project, as the thesis has been able to theorise the 'unobservable' based on demi-regularities (Lawson, 1998) that were observed by the researcher.

When positioned in the context of setting physical (or health-related) (un)realistic goals, the harmful effects of inauthentic images are amplified as there is a misconception as to whether 'beauty' is real or false online. If an individual decides to undergo a beauty enhancement treatment (e.g., facial fillers, fat-loss injections, or lemon bottle facial injections), or cosmetic surgery as a result of wanting to look like a content 'producer', and the 'producer' is posting (un)realistic imagery, the health ramifications of such procedures can be detrimental. The findings of this thesis demonstrated exposure to physical, psychological, emotional, cultural (Hillyard & Tombs, 2007), and embedded harms (Hall, 2019) for individuals who had set (un)realistic goals. The experience of such goal setting was based on falsehoods proposed by diet culture and had failed in achieving their 'picture perfect'. Underpinning this were narratives of diet culture that normalise the 'othering' of bodies that do not meet the idealised aesthetic set by image-based social media, and the platform cultures underpinning their trends and platform markets. This builds on the evidence-base for typologies of harm by the likes of Hall (2019), Canning & Tombs (2021) and Hillyard & Tombs (2007), as well as the work surrounding sociology of the selfie by Cambre & Lavrence (2023).

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) (2023) guidance will be evaluated in Chapter 7.2.5 to discuss a recommendation for managing the disclosure of filtering of imagery in cultural spaces online, such as diet culture and influencer culture. The harm caused by the setting and advertisement of (un)realistic goals can be positioned within the context of normalising the pathologisation of everyday behaviour, at this stage. The intertwined relationship of 'health' and 'looking well' is an underlying mechanism that influences the growing nature of filtered lifestyles online. As discussed in Chapter 5.5, the *pathologisation of attractiveness* is a contribution to knowledge within this thesis that supports and further develops Brinkmann's (2016) discussions of diagnostic cultures, whereby an individual who feels they cannot attain the "attractive" aesthetic, or fails to achieve the (un)realistic goal that they have set themself are at risk of turning to disordered eating patterns, or being (self)diagnosed with a body-related anxiety such as body dysmorphic disorder. This can also be likened to the growing body of scholarship that identifies the correlation between body dissatisfaction and mental health illnesses such as depression and anxiety (Pantic, 2014; Andreassen *et al*., 2016; Seabrook *et al*.,

2016; Bettmann *et al*., 2021). The normalisation of harm caused by encouraging disordered eating habits can influence whether an individual chooses to access medical intervention, which could be detrimental to their physical health in the longer term. For example, this can be aligned with experiences of “meanspo” or “fitspo” online whereby individuals who are suffering with significant mental illness, their relationship with their body, or food, may turn to the online space for influence in various formats as opposed to accessing the appropriate medical intervention.

The online space can be used as a space for support and a sense of belonging at times where individuals feel they are isolated or unable to speak to those in their ‘offline’ life; but should not be used as a replacement to the appropriate and necessary medical intervention. Online spaces are unregulated and involve ‘advice narratives’ that may be led by unqualified profiles or support groups. The online spaces that normalise the pathologisation of everyday behaviours, as well as act as intentional replacements for medical intervention must be addressed directly by social media platforms themselves to moderate or remove these spaces, where necessary, as well as by the UK Government in further consultation around legislating online safety. Recommendations for consideration surrounding this will be outlined further in Chapter 7.3.1**.**

7.2.3 Addictive and Habitual Cycles of Social Media Use

As outlined through visual mapping of the *addictive* and *habitual cycles of social media use* in Chapter 6 (see Figure 7.1 and 7.2 below), findings of this research address the lack of qualitative data underpinning existing understandings of the nature of social media use. The cyclic nature of social media engagement, outlined in Chapter 6 presents the relationship between social media user and the social platform as being dependent on the conditions that the individual user engages with social media under.

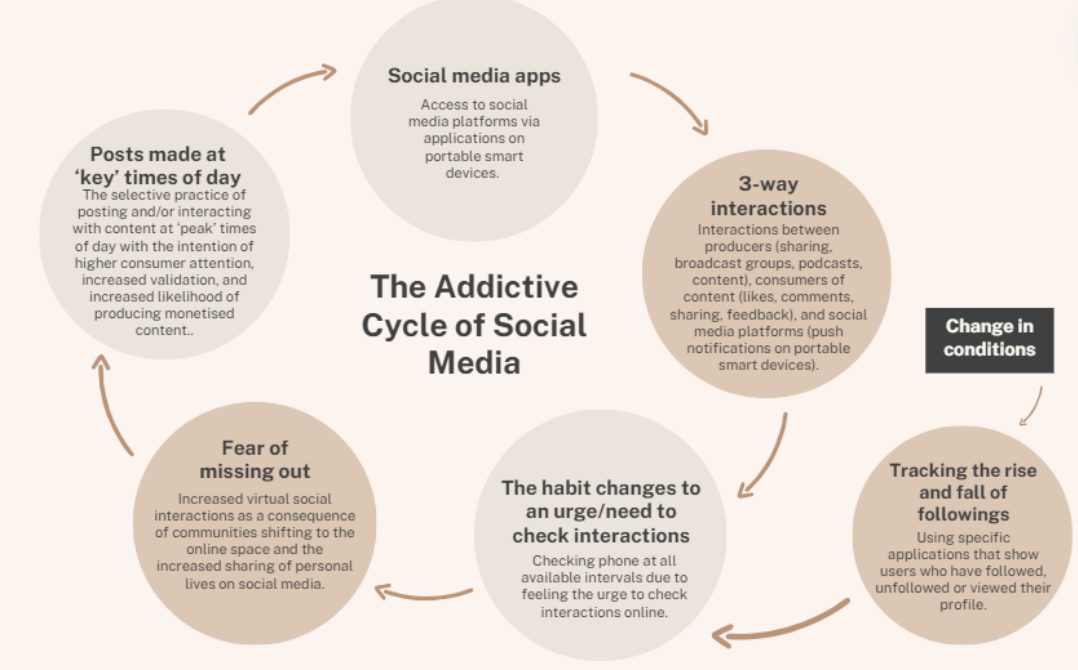

Figure 7.1 The Addictive Cycle of Social Media with CR acknowledge of 'conditions' that social media engagement occurs

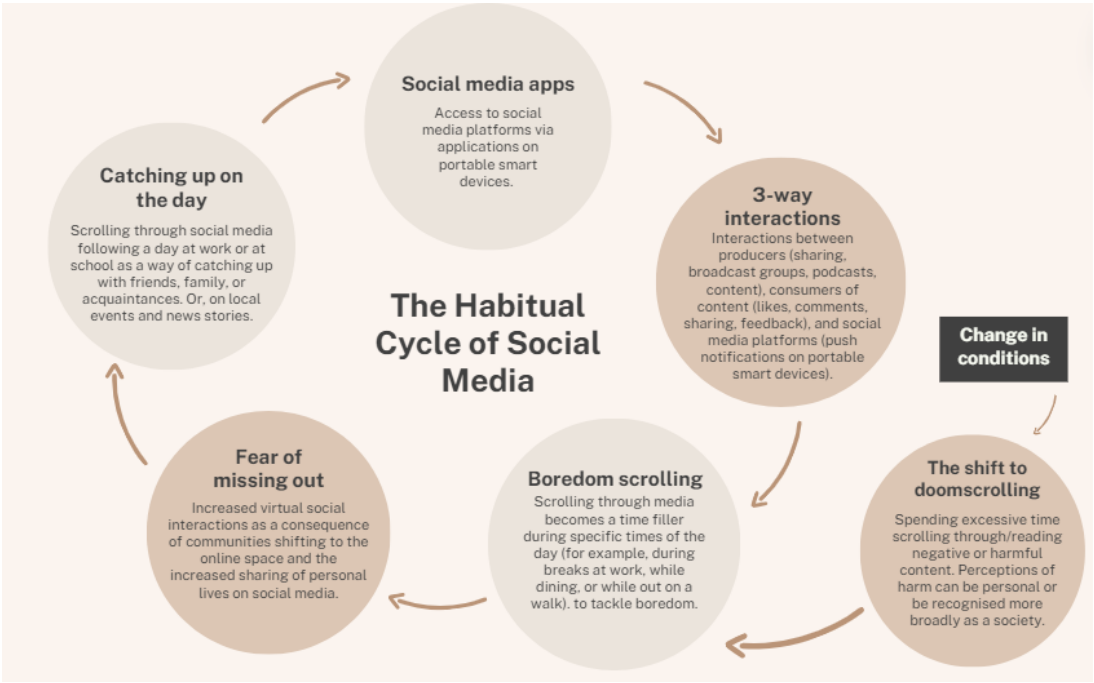

Figure 7.2 The Habitual Cycle of Social Media interlinked with CR acknowledge of 'conditions' that social media engagement occurs

The visual representation of the *addictive* and *habitual cycles* of social media engagement are a contribution to knowledge as they demonstrate that the relationship between social media user (producer, consumer, and 'prosumer'), the social media platform, and the cultures that underpin such platforms do not come to an end, they are cyclic in nature. At some stage when a social media user engages with platforms, their relationship with social media can change, within which a person can go from engaging under an addictive cycle, to a habitual cycle, depending on their self-perceived identity and relationship with social media. The cyclic nature of social media consumption acts as a generative mechanism with emergent properties dependent upon the conditions that social media is used under such as accessibility to social media, the lack of regulation of platforms, stigma faced within platforms, as well as a person's identity shifting from consumer to prosumer. As highlighted in Chapter 6, the cyclic nature of social media is supported by algorithmic platform economics that encourage heightened levels of social media engagement throughout the day, around individual routines. This cycle feeds habitual and addictive relationships with social media as reflected in accounts shared by interview participants throughout this research. The neoliberal profiteering of social media platforms is bound up with the harms experienced by social media users, whereby the profit margins of social media corporations outweigh the individuation of harms experienced by those engaging with the platforms and the content shared across them. This thesis has identified the intersection of iatrogenic and embedded harms experienced by social media users because of the marketisation of social networking in the contemporary world. Similar harms are identified in Chapter 5's discussion of the normalisation of online hate. Where harms are caused at a macro level, the effect of harms and the way they are felt by individuals or groups of people, occur at a micro level (Canning & Tombs, 2021). The normalisation of 'harm' and hate in today's society (embedded harms) demonstrates an acceptance of the effect of harm as the experience is individualised and could be regarded as difficult to regulate, or address. At the time of writing, the U.K. Government and regulatory body Ofcom are working to enact the Online Safety Bill 2023 and put forward action that may address some of these experiences of harm. Recommendations

for further research regarding the efficacy of the existing Online Safety Act 2023 and its definition of harm will be discussed further in Chapter 7.3.

As per Figure 7.1 and Figure 7.2, entrance into social media use is the same in both the habitual and the addictive relationship with social media, starting with access to social media platforms through a smart device. When actively using the social media app, a 3-way interaction is initiated between social media producers, consumers, and the platform. The platform's involvement in this 3-way interaction is part of what keeps the attention of the social media user and potentially draws them back into the platform on multiple occasions daily. The distinction between the two cycles of social media use starts at stage 3 of the cycle, with the 3-way interaction under the *addictive cycle* of social media leading to engagement with social media changing from a habit to an urge to check apps throughout the course of the day, compared to the 'habit' of checking social media if one has time under the *habitual cycle* of social media. At stage 3, demi-regularities in the dataset presented to the researcher through participatory narratives associated with each cycle, detailed as a change in condition. Some participants disclosed their experience of social media 'addiction' intensifying due to the introduction of applications that track the rise and fall of followers, and general profile interactions.

The use of such applications is not a determining factor of whether a social media user is engaging with the *addictive* or *habitual cycle* but is a potentially changing condition that an individual may choose to enter in an attempt to feel in control of their relationship with social media. The harms relating to filtered lifestyles, the lack of regulation surrounding influencer culture and the cyclic nature of social media use represent the effects of a range of harms. The identified harms include embedded harms (the normalisation of online hate, addiction to social media, the pathologisation of attractiveness), iatrogenic harms (addiction to social media intended by social media platforms, misleading marketing leading to deceptive purchases), emotional harms (low self-esteem, body-related anxiety, body dissatisfaction), psychological harms (low self-esteem, disordered eating, body-related anxiety), and physical harms (disordered eating, self-injurious behaviours). Although social media users may feel that they are gaining control over their 'addiction' to social media, the harms posed to users engaging with the *addictive cycle of*

social media can be subtle, and at times, users themselves may not be able to recognise the harms. Further, under the *habitual cycle*, some participants reported a shift from 'boredom scrolling' (stage 3 of the *habitual cycle*) to 'doomscrolling', whereby social media users' consumption of social media shifts to occurring for longer periods of the day and focus on topics or content that makes the individual feel negative, or 'inspired to change' (such as 'meanspo' or 'fitspo' discussed earlier in this chapter). This thesis extends knowledge relating to social media engagement by drawing upon accounts of experiential knowledge in collaboration with ethnographic observations of behaviours occurring, and discourse narrated in social media spaces.

Identity became a theoretical area of consideration in the analysis of the findings, due to the self-proclaimed identity of participants in the interview phase of the research as a *silent observer* (consumer) or an *active engager* with social media (prosumer) (Fergie *et al.,* 2016). As per discussions of Chapter 6**,** the work of Alvin Toffler (1990) in defining the role of the 'prosumer' in postindustrial consumer markets was discussed at length to conceptualise the identity of a social media consumer who also produces content for social media, whether this a paid role (as an influencer) or not. Predominantly the role of the social media prosumer, in this research, aligned with the behaviours of individuals who described their relationship with social media as being *addictive.* Whether the social media user identifies as a consumer or prosumer of the marketised conditions of diet culture, and social media led by influencer, the findings of this research have identified the intentional use of self-regulatory measures implemented into daily routine, that can align to the values of a 'digital detox' and abstinence from social media reported in Radtke *et al.* (2022) and Coyne & Woodruff (2023). Both studies identify abstinence from social media to be temporary but as having a positive impact of management of low-mood, low energy levels and low self-esteem. The use of self-regulatory measures for participants in this research were individualised and varied in impact with some participants reporting self-management of time spent online per day, and others reporting to have undergone a full digital detox. The recognition of individualised lived experiences of the relationship between social media and social media platforms acknowledges the conditions of social media engagement as being variable, therefore the complex nature of social media engagement cannot be solely investigated using quantitative datasets.

7.2.4 Self Branding: Regulating Influencer Culture

The findings of this thesis evidence the need for an overhaul of the existing legislation that addresses trading regulations specific to misleading or deceptive marketing and advertising, specifically the Unfair Trading Regulations (2008), and The Business Protection from Misleading Marketing Regulations (2008). Evidence of a clear need for further regulation of influencer culture and diet culture was found at both phases of the research as a contribution to knowledge. The considerations for future research and policy development detailed in this section of the chapter should be aligned to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) CAP Code, providing guidance to influencers in the advertisement of products to adequately address 'self-branding' and authenticity in advertising the 'self' through all regulatory bodies and relevant policies.

The professionalisation of social media content creation has led to the rise in influencers - when using content creation as their source of income – becoming their own brand; the advertisement of themselves then being the name and face of their business. Where The CAP Code applies to most areas of the influencer industry, it does not regulate the concept of self-branding (ASA, 2023), nor do the existing requirements of the Unfair Trading Regulations, or The Business Protection from Misleading Marketing Regulations (2008). For example, section 3 of The CAP Code outlined the rules that advertisers (in this case, influencers) are required to follow to "avoid misleading people" (ASA, 2023: unpaginated). The UK Unfair Trading Regulations further addresses the use of false or 'deceptive' messages that may mislead the (potential) consumer, as well as "leaving out important information" (Competition and Markets Authority, 2008: 6). The Business Protection from Misleading Marketing Regulations (2008) provides a legal framework to address the deception of characteristics of products (Section 2(3)), the deception in advertising that could cause injury to the consumer (Section 3(2)), and the method of manufacturing a product (Section 3(4)). If influencers are their own brand, as a self-employed commodity, where advertising standards are applied to the marketing of businesses, they should be applied to the advertising of social media influencers as their own business. Therefore, if an influencer were to alter their image using a filtering application such as FaceTune, FaceApp, or Airbrush, for example, and not disclose this

to their audience they are falsely advertising their product (with alternative businesses and brands, this could be identified as deceptive marketing techniques (Competition and Markets Authority, 2008): themselves, as this feeds into the 'manufacturing of a product', as well the 'characteristics of a product', covered by The Business Protection from Misleading Marketing Regulations (2008), but are not currently applied to the consumer market of influence or diet culture. This would also be recognised as a breach of The CAP Code of conduct if the advertisement of influencers held the same regulations as advertising alternative brands (such as products or gifted experiences). The findings of this thesis therefore recognise a need to affiliate harms posed through filtered lifestyles, cosmetic surgery, and beauty enhancements, outlined earlier in this chapter with the potential of posing 'injury' to consumers in accordance with wider business and trading regulations.

7.2.5 Normalisation of Online Hate

The digital ethnographic phase of this research focused partly on the gossip forum, Tattle.Life, with the aim to observe engagement with diet culture, and discussions of those who promoted diet culture (content producers and influencers) on a forum specifically designed to facilitate gossip. As discussed in Chapter 5.6, the narratives that were observed in Tattle.Life were predominantly fueled by hatred and hostility directed towards influencers, celebrities, and other public figures. This thesis found the role of Tattle.Life to be a key factor in the facilitation of online hate and hostility to consider the normalisation of online hate that has been found in this research to be an 'accepted' part of being online. This is a new contribution to knowledge in the field because it does not stop at the recognition of 'acceptability' of online hate, tied in with the challenges posed by existing regulatory measures surrounding hate speech, and hostile narratives, used on social media, but rather identifies the underlying generative mechanisms that influence the 'acceptability' of such behaviours online that leads to the normalisation of online hate. The mechanisms that underpin the normalisation of online hate include the influence of the stigmatisation of marginalised populations that continue into the online space in a more intensified manner (i.e., the accessibility to social media changing the conditions of which

stigma occurs), the ‘othering’ of bodies as a result of stigma experiences, the construction of beauty, and the lack of regulation of the online space.

Chapter 5.6 provides messages passed between Tattle.Life users warning one another to leave the forum (using derogatory, and at times offensive language), if they did not wish to engage in trolling, or other hostile behaviours. The acceptability of trolling within Tattle.Life discussion threads despite trolling being a criminal activity that can be prosecuted by the Malicious Communications Act 1988 and the Communications Act 2003, as well as being addressed by the Online Safety Act 2023 is of concern. As highlighted in Chapter 5.4, controversial content and hate-fueled comments attract a growing number of users to engage with, or at the very least ‘visit’ the posts online which is reflected in a rise in online ‘traffic’ when specific incidents occur or when controversial posts are shared. The higher the levels of engagement with content, the more that social media platforms will financially gain from the rise in online engagement, regardless of the potential harms to individual users. The findings presented in Chapter 5.6 demonstrate the acceptance or expectation that trolling hateful comments online are a ‘normal’ element of the influencer job description, as well as being “something you will always see on social media” (*Alice*), this was apparent in the interview phase of this research, as well as observations made in Tattle.Life. The lack of regulation of forums such as Tattle.Life will encourage the continuation of online hate and the facilitation of iatrogenic harms and embedded harms by providing a space for this to occur, in a forum that does not moderate or report trolling or hate-related offences. The latter stages of this chapter call for the removal and illegalisation of troll-facilitating forums such as Tattle.Life, and the moderation of further websites becoming available as social networking sites.

The recommendations provided in Chapter 7.3.2 regarding the development of Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education align with the need for further regulation of the online space to directly tackle the normalisation of online hate that is compounded by the continuation of the ‘ideal body’ and the commodification of attractiveness through influencer culture. This can also be considered in relation the earlier discussed ‘inspiration’ trends such as ‘meanspo’ whereby the request to receive hateful or hostile comments are requested and welcomed to “motivate” the conditions created by oneself

to diet and lose body fat. This demonstrates a normalisation of online hate in that a request is made and, on the surface, welcomed by the recipient. Where the blurring of acceptability interacts with 'meanspo' is that the recipient is unaware of the nature of a comment about their appearance may be, until it has landed on their photo, or in their inbox. This can introduce the experience of psychological, emotional, or physical harms depending on the recipient's individual response to comments being made, leaving the recipient with a sense of regret, or guilt, if they are detrimentally impacted (experiencing harm) at the hands of hate that they have requested. As introduced in Chapter 3, critical hate studies can be used to theorise experiences of social harms as a consequence of hate incidents, as well as hate crimes (James & McBride, 2021), which in this research can support researchers and policymakers in understanding the events that underpin experiences of diet culture-related harms, and the harms caused by inspiration trends within this. Like earlier discussions, 'inspirational' trends, and the acceptability of hate can both be considered in relation to the social harms that are caused by experiences of stigma (Addison, 2023). The normalisation, and acceptance, of online hate can be explained through the acceptance that not attaining the "idealised" appearance, or lifestyle, positions an individual as being 'lesser' in the eyes of diet culture, and the pathologisation of attractiveness. This can be aligned with the experiences of other marginalised populations where experiences of hate and hostility are acknowledged in the UK by legislation such as the Equality Act 2010, but incidents are underreported due to marginalised groups resigning to the acceptance that they are more susceptible to becoming victimised by hate or hostility because of their identity (Williams, 2021). The latter stages of this chapter will recommend further research into the broader consideration of the normalisation of online hate, to formulate a more accurate reflection as to how this can be more effectively addressed in policy and practice.

7.3 Future Directions

7.3.1 Applying a 'Harms' Framework to the Online Safety Act 2023: Addressing Diet Culture and the Need to Regulate (Un)Realistic Imagery Online

The definition of diet culture produced by this research has been influenced by the individualised experiences of social media users, through direct conversations and the

observation of behaviours within social media platforms. The experiences shared have enabled a more holistic understanding of the cultural spaces embedded into social media (i.e., diet culture and influencer culture), which has identified a gap in the legal understanding of 'harm', at the time of writing. The Online Safety Act 2023 is the first legal framework in the UK to outline how best to achieve online safety, as well as the types of criminalised or harmful behaviours that are to be recognised as posing the most risk to people online.

Chapter 6.2 outlines the cyclic nature of social media that was recognised in the experiences of social media engagement of research participants, showing that the Online Safety Act's definition of 'harm' does not reflect the types of harms that social media users are typically exposed to. Harm exposure in both the addictive and habitual cycles of social media engagement must consider the role of iatrogenic harms, as well as those associated with the Online Safety's Act definition of 'harm', at the time of writing (psychological, physical, and emotional). Zemiologists such as Canning & Tombs (2021) acknowledge a broader range of 'harms' that includes the recognition of structural harm and cultural harm, as well as financial or environmental harm, as well as Hall (2019) recognising embedded harms, in a broader typology that acknowledged harms that are normalised and implanted within day-to-day activities. Experiences of victimisation, hostility, or pro-harm content online such as those detailed in this thesis should not be minimised as individual harms. Psychological, physical or emotional harm is individualised yet variable depending upon the conditions that they take place within, or the prior life experiences of the individual exposed to harm (generative mechanisms, or demi-regularities, depending on the circumstances of harm exposure). However, these wider patterns of harm indicate structural and cultural mechanisms which operate at a macro level. There is no acknowledgement of embedded or iatrogenic harms in the UK's recently enacted Online Safety Act 2023.

This thesis addresses harms that encourage the process of iatrogenesis with other harms emerging as embedded harms that are normalised and therefore 'entrenched' in everyday behaviours (Hall, 2019). Iatrogenic harms allow researchers to discuss and analyse the underlying behaviours (mechanisms) within harms caused or perpetuated by state or

social structures (Corteen et al., 2016), for example the harms caused by social media platforms, that are embedded within the design of algorithms written into platform business models such as the trend-related algorithm of TikTok that encourages regular push notifications on smart devices. The identification of embedded harms can address the acceptability of self-management of social media platforms encouraged in both habitual and addictive relationships with social media (i.e., if a social media believes their relationship with social media is problematic or causing them harm, they are expected to manage their own time and consumption of social media as opposed to the social media platforms being held accountable for content such as ill-informed diet culture-related content or pro-harm content that is posted across their platforms, and at times shared through 'recommended' and 'suggested' newsfeeds. The condition under which iatrogenic harms emerge can also be recognised within the understanding of embedded harms presented by the online space, whereby this unobservable acceptability of misinformation spreading, the promotion of pro-harm content, or trolling/hate speech is an 'expected' attribute to being a social media user. If social media users expect to witness or be recipient to pro-harm or hate-fueled content online, there is less chance that reports will be made of harm experienced to platforms, who are responsible for handling misconduct (and the indirect sharing of such content), on their platforms, under the Online Safety Act 2023.

The CAP Code (ASA, 2023) discusses the parameters of influencer product advertisement, but what it does not address is indirect incitement to engage in appearance-altering procedures caused by the lack of disclosure of the filtering of imagery, or physique altering cosmetic surgery. Pro-harm content is currently used to acknowledge content online that promotes harmful conduct or behaviours, but it does not need to be as straightforward as this (see Lavis & Winter, 2020; McGregor & Clancy, 2019; Dias, 2003). The incitement of suicide via trolling comments online is addressed by the Online Safety Act 2023, with further discussions to be held by the UK Government to acknowledge the complexity of monitoring and addressing comments that encourage suicide, due to its heavy reliance on victims reporting their experiences. The incitement of suicide is regarded in this research as an observable harm, when awareness is raised of such narratives taking place. The less observable (at times, unobservable) harms that

are not addressed under this framework are those influenced by the filtered lifestyles and falsehoods discussed at length in Chapter 5. This thesis details the experiences of individuals exposed to harms through the incitement of undergoing cosmetic surgery or beauty enhancement procedures, because of the setting of (un)realistic goals. Harm exposure to appearance-altering procedures, or engaging with diet products, can be recognised within the definition of psychological, physical, or emotional harm depending on the individual's experience. What cannot be addressed under the existing framework is where the responsibility lies when tackling the incitement of appearance-altering procedures. As discussed earlier in this chapter, and in Chapter 5, if the lack of disclosure of authenticity in images remains unaddressed by legislation or regulatory bodies, the advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) software will continue to blur the boundaries between unrealistic and realistic beauty standards, trends, and expectations in contemporary society.

The current UK definition of harm under the Online Safety Act (2023) does not allow for the lived experiences of harm shared through participatory accounts in this thesis cannot be wholly addressed as this legislation defines harm to be "psychological, physical and emotional". Therefore, current legislation does not look to address the macro-level harms perpetuated under the conditions of broader social structures such as social media platforms. This aligns with a zemiological understanding of harm which recognises social harms to be experienced on an individual (micro) level, whilst perpetuated on a structural (macro) level. If the experiences of harm are individual and, as demonstrated by the findings of this research, represent wider typologies of harm than those that are recognised by the Online Safety Act 2023, legislation must look at the cause of harm and look to widen the definition of harm. This thesis recommends a review of the UK definition of harm, under the Online Safety Act 2023 to align with social harm scholarships that can support future enquiries in understanding the reality of harms posed by online spaces. Without taking a macro-level approach to tackling or managing harms, the online space (in particular, social media) remains a space that compounds vulnerability in young people, specifically in regards to the experience of iatrogenic harms caused by social media platforms, and unqualified influencers who take a lead on the administration of diet, lifestyle and fitness-related advice across social media, of which has the potential to lead

to self-injurious behaviours, disordered eating in people and direct impacts on self-esteem more broadly.

7.3.2 “It starts with education”: Addressing Existing Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) Education and Recommendations for Change

Those with lived experience of diet culture, social media and (at times) disordered eating patterns described what they believed could be improved to encourage the discussion of such experiences and the harms posed within the online space. When posed this question, all participants responded with a belief that this process starts with education. In the UK education surrounding relationships, healthy lifestyles and the online space is covered by Personal, Social, Health, and Economic (PSHE) education. In the duration of this research taking place, PSHE became a compulsory element of the national curriculum in state-funded schools across all key stages (1-4), in England and Wales (Department for Education, 2021). The PSHE framework is recognised to be a flexible curriculum that is non-statutory to encourage schools to tailor the curriculum to the needs of their pupils (ibid), whereby there are optional buy-in materials that can be purchased by schools or individual teachers via TES, Gov.UK or the PSHE Association (online). Under this framework, local authorities and relevant third sector organisations (i.e., those commissioned to support young people in social care, relationships, mental wellbeing, sexuality, or online safety) are encouraged to support their local schools and community to identify the areas of concern that should be addressed by the local PSHE curriculum. Although PSHE is now a compulsory element of the national curriculum, the lack of standardisation of the curriculum due to the reflexive nature attached to it, and the lack of staff training and support to follow, raises potential concern for the impact of the existing PSHE framework.

The existing PSHE framework includes topical sessions discussing digital knowledge, sexting, child sexual exploitation (CSE), understanding the risks of a poor diet, online safety, and relationships. In relation to ‘understanding the risks of a poor diet’ this is scaffolded from primary school into secondary school PSHE curriculum, starting with understanding calories and nutrition in Key Stages 1 and 2 and moving into understanding the wider health risks of an ‘unhealthy’ lifestyle in Key Stages 3 and 4. As an isolated area

of the PSHE framework, the medicalised approach to ‘unhealthy’ lifestyles and the teaching of calories and nutrition that underpin PSHE sessions remains to use the ‘problematic’ narratives that have the potential to demonise food, that can feed into the future disordered relationship(s) with food identified in the findings of this research. The existing PSHE framework surrounding ‘healthy’ eating and lifestyles is underpinned by the observable, socially constructed understanding of ‘idealism’ in health, that is influenced by the long-standing history of stigmatisation of specific food groups, body types and lifestyles detailed throughout the analysis of this thesis. A further area of concern to be addressed here is the lack of support and training for teaching and support staff who facilitate PSHE sessions. Although PSHE lessons are approximately 30 minutes long at the start of the school day, and at time lack structure due to the minimal resourcing provided for staff to facilitate conversations surrounding relationships, ‘healthy’ lifestyles and online safety, individual bias of staff due to this lack of structure and support must be investigated. This is not the fault of the teaching or support staff who are facilitating PSHE sessions but an oversight by the Department for Education when introducing PSHE as a compulsory subject in the national curriculum.

This thesis recommends the standardisation of PSHE curriculum across all educational establishments that offer education at Key Stages 1-4. Changes to the existing PSHE framework should be led by consultation with young people across the UK to address what they would like to see. The consultation should also include 18–25-year-olds to explore retrospective accounts as to how compulsory, structured PSHE could have benefitted them during their schooling years, as well as potentially prevent or alleviate experiences of harms after leaving school, therefore presenting the ‘reality’ of experiences that are required to be covered by PSHE education. Retrospective experiences will allow for an understanding of the outcomes and consequences of social harm in online spaces to be evaluated. The standardisation of the PSHE curriculum can then consider findings of academic research, such as this thesis and alike, alongside Government commissioned projects such as *Changing the Picture Perfect: An Inquiry into Body Image* (Women & Equalities Committee, 2021), alongside *Influencer Culture: Lights, Camera, Inaction?* (Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sports, 2022a; 2022b; 2022c). As per the findings of such research, the topics of online safety, self-esteem and body image

should be considered, with discussions of diet, fitness and body image being tackled through a balanced discussion of medical understanding and social acknowledgements of ‘health’ that supports young people in recognising the (un)realistic elements of filtered lifestyles online.

To underpin this, the thesis also makes a recommendation to the acknowledgement of PSHE curriculum in teacher training, to be incorporated into teacher-training qualifications like special educational needs (SEND) in standardised teacher-training qualifications and apprenticeships into teaching. PSHE training should be facilitated as a compulsory requirement to teacher’s continued professional development (CPD), like safeguarding, to ensure that all teachers are able to access support and training measures surrounding the contemporary issues to be discussed in PSHE. This will also allow teachers and support staff that already work in educational institutions to access the relevant training, as well as their newly qualified and future colleagues, to support the standardised facilitation of PSHE across the UK. The findings of this thesis could be used to develop a training pack for teachers, based on the exposure to online harms, (un)realistic goals, filtered lifestyles and diet culture online. This thesis also recommends opening consultations with parents to discuss their concerns, what they would like support around, as well as what support they would like to see administered within teacher training and PSHE.

7.4 Implications for Further Research

The findings of this research have produced clear knowledge contributions that support the recommendations for improving practice, policy and implications for further research. Starting with recommendations for improvement within practice, this thesis recommends a review of the existing UK obesity strategy that should include re-addressing strategies of supporting ‘healthy’ choices and lifestyles such as compulsory calorie labelling, introduced in Spring 2022. As detailed in the findings of this research, the ‘real’ harms posed to individuals with existing disordered eating patterns, as well as those who are deemed as overweight in accordance the medical labelling of Body Mass Index (BMI), has not been considered in the consultation process of implementing compulsory calorie labelling in food and drinks vendors across the UK; BMI itself being a highly problematic

measure of health due to its lack of individuation or understanding for individual body shape, height or circumstance. This thesis recognises the importance of transparency in the information that should be provided on public health social media pages to support understandings of nutrition and what is beneficial for health through a holistic lens, however, findings of this research demonstrate that existing understanding of 'healthy' lifestyles and food is underpinned by the demonisation of certain food groups. The review of PSHE, alongside a review of the current UK obesity strategy can enable a holistic approach to understanding health that does not require demonising food groups, nutrition or specific exercise regimes whilst teaching young people the importance of health, the importance of nutrition and the importance of balance in lifestyle, nutrition, and exercise.

A further recommendation for improvement of practice, that is underpinned by policy development is a requirement to close, monitor and ban the use of forums that are specifically set up to facilitate trolling, hate, and hostility. The digital ethnographic phase of this research included a 6-month observation of the engagement with Tattle.Life, a forum labelled as a gossip website, that encourages the discussion of public figures (celebrities, influencers, bloggers, and other public figures). The reality of this forum is a space that is infiltrated with derogatory and offensive language indirectly posed to individuals who 'choose' to live their lives publicly. Tattle.Life is a forum that is therefore condoning trolling, which is now a criminalised offence that is punishable by a custodial sentence within the UK under the Malicious Communications Act 1988 and the Communications Act 2003. Observations of Tattle.Life included observations of users inciting self-injurious behaviours and suicide in other users if they did not wish to engage in trolling or spreading hate-fueled or hostile commentary, another criminal offence punishable by custodial sentencing in the UK. The closure of forums such as Tattle.Life, as well as the future monitoring and banning of forums alike, aligns with the approach taken by the UK Government in the closure of revenge porn facilitated websites, following the criminalisation of revenge porn under the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015. This would also address the avoidability of social harm caused by stigmatised identities in the digital age.

As outlined in Chapter 7.3, this thesis recommendations a review of the definition of 'harm' used to underpin the Online Safety 2023, of which currently defines harm as being "psychological, physical or emotional". Despite a multitude of zemiological publications addressing the social harms caused and perpetuated by wider social structures that can be observed as psychological, physical or emotional, but do not hold the perpetrators of said harms accountable on a grander scale. The following harms emerged from the findings of this thesis: emotional harms (body dissatisfaction, body-related anxiety, low self-esteem, wellbeing concerns), psychological harms (wellbeing concerns, body-related anxiety, suicidal ideation, body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, doomscrolling), physical harms (disordered eating, self-injurious behaviours), iatrogenic harms (addiction to social media intended by social media platforms, misleading marketing leading to deceptive purchases, doomscrolling), cultural harms (the pathologisation of attractiveness, the 'othering' of bodies, wellbeing concerns, social media spaces, doomscrolling) and embedded harms (the normalisation of online hate, addiction to social media, the pathologisation of attractiveness, the 'othering' of bodies, stigma). The consideration of iatrogenesis within social harms, and 'embedded' harms to acknowledge normalised behaviours or values that perpetuate harm would allow for the responsibilisation of social media platforms to be held accountable for failures to addressing pro-harm content, or alternative forms of harmful exposure that is currently condoned by the forums.

A final recommendation for improvement to practice, and a policy implication, aligns with the existing gap between the requirements outlined by the Unfair Trading Regulations (2008), The Business Protection from Misleading Marketing Regulations (2008) and the ASA CAP Code (2023) in regulating the misleading nature of diet and influencer cultures as, now, consumerist markets within the online space. Influencers are recognised in contemporary consumerism to be their own brand, therefore where advertising standards are applied to the marketing of businesses, they should be applied to the advertising of social media influencers as their own business. This addresses the requirement for clear disclosures to be made if imagery is filtered online, if an influencer is advertising fitness regimes, nutrition plans or diet-related products but do not have the qualifications to underpin the production of diet-related advice to consumers (this would cover the launch

of ‘fitness’ apps that are named after an influencer, but are not run by the influencer themselves), as well as the disclosure of appearance-altering procedures if an influencer is posing as having ‘dieted’ to achieve an aesthetic goal but has undergone cosmetic surgery or a beauty-enhancement procedure, in the process. This recommendation for an overhaul of business and trading regulations to consider harms posed to social media consumers, that can address experiences of (un)realistic goal setting and the consumption of falsehoods and will align the requirements of alternative businesses to the influencer market, to standardise marketing regulations across all business and trade markets.

As detailed in Chapter 7.4 this thesis recommends a review of the existing PSHE framework in the UK that includes implications further research to underpin future recommendations for the improvement of PSHE practice across all educational institutions that offer education to Key Stages 1-4. As per Chapter 7.4, this thesis recommends the PSHE national curriculum to be standardised as opposed to allowing flexibility to schools and practitioners in areas of delivery. This will encourage a standardised, evidence-based curriculum that addresses contemporary concerns of young people, using the voices of young people’s retrospective experience of PSHE and real life outside of school. The consultation should speak directly with young people about what currently works in PSHE, and what does not, as well as addressing young people aged 18-25-years-old to acknowledge what they feel, retrospectively, would have aided their ‘real’ experiences of diet culture, social media, body image and self-image after school leaving age.

Finally, this thesis has identified implications in the need for further research into a more comprehensive understanding of the normalisation of online hate. An underlying mechanism in conversations facilitated with interview participants, as well as the observation of hatred and hostility throughout the digital ethnographic phase of this data was that online hate of all levels (trolling through to micro aggressions and subtle hostilities) were an accepted part of being online, raising concerns that the receipt and witnessing of hatred has become a normalised part of engaging with the online space. This is a complex area for consideration given the debates surrounding the exertion of

free speech, that was loosely addressed in the consultation period leading upon the enactment of the Online Safety Act 2023 but is something that should be researched more broadly to understanding the structures that underpin the normalisation of online hate, and therefore acknowledge the reality under which it occurs. Further research could be addressed by attempting to reach out to a wider audience, conducting a large-scale sample that explores intersectional perceptions of hate within the online space, how it occurs and whether it is 'accepted' or whether it should be addressed by social media platforms, or the relevant regulatory bodies.

7.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has demonstrated the outcome of investigating the impact of social media on creating the 'picture' perfect through harms to explore the 'real' impact of diet culture on social media user's relationship with their bodies, their worth and their wellbeing. This resulted in harms emerging from the dataset when exploring the 'impact' of social media including physical harm, emotional harm, psychological harm, iatrogenic harm and embedded harm.

The thesis used a CR analysis to identify events (harms) that emerge at 'actual' and 'empirical' levels of reality, but the causal mechanisms that influence the 'real' and underlying reality, justifying the relevance of zemiology in the analysis of this research. For example, individual perceptions of platform cultures and lived experience (empirical knowledge), the emergence of identified 'harms' by participants of the research (actual knowledge), and the identification of underlying generative mechanisms such as the influence that harms and experiential knowledge (real knowledge). The thesis has used Sayer's (2000) model of CR to demonstrate the relationship between structure, mechanisms, conditions and effects in this work as per Figure 7.3 and Bhaskar's (1978) understanding of the levels of empirical reality that are identifiable when using CR to analyse data (see Figure 7.4).

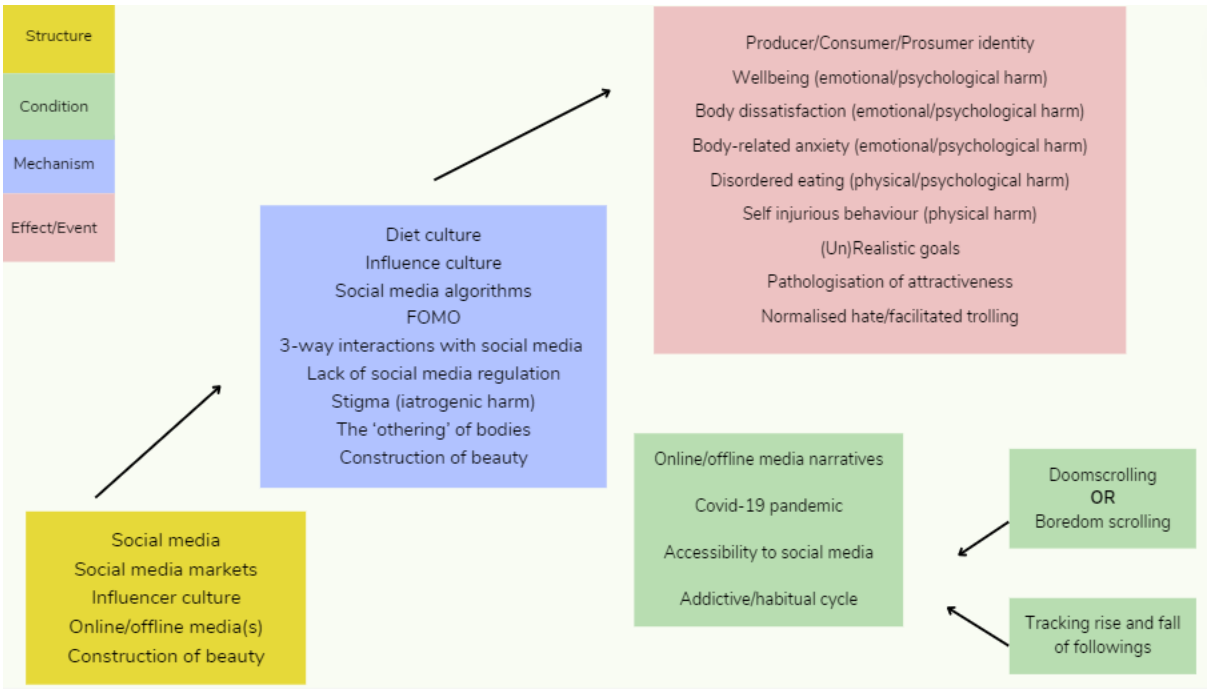

Figure 7.3 Thesis findings mapped using Sayer's (2000) model of CR

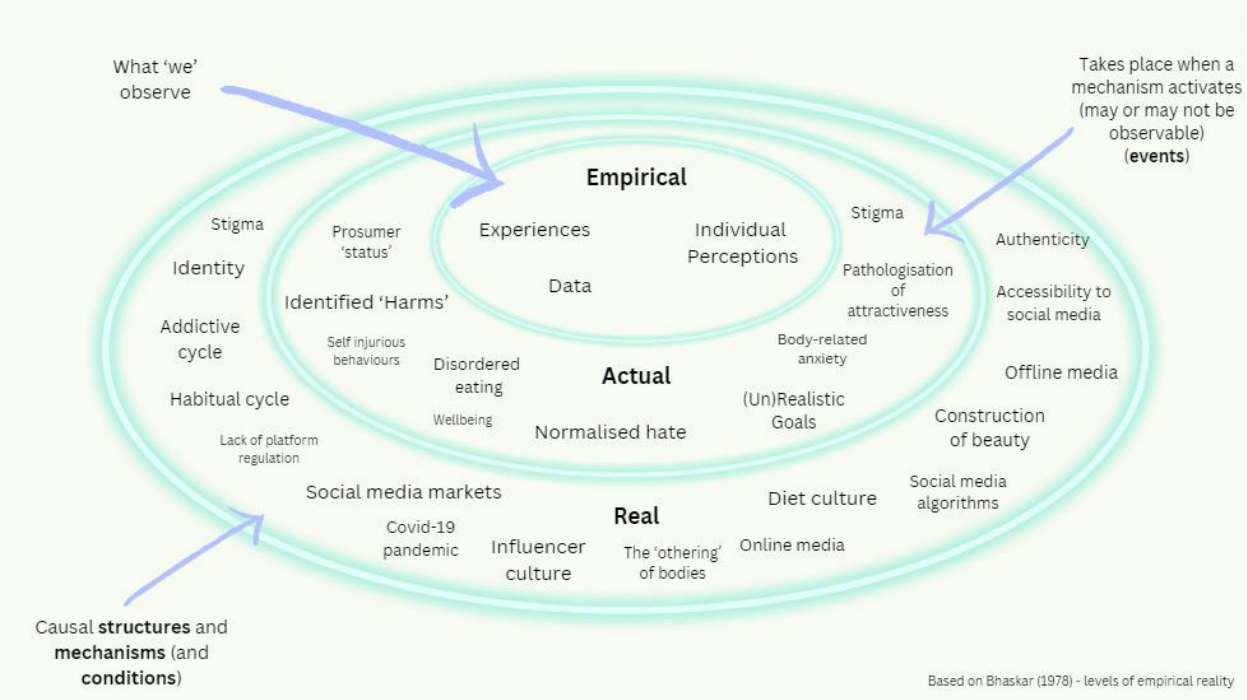

Figure 7.4 Findings diagram of levels of empirical reality, based on Bhaskar (1978) mapping

This research has designed a CR analytical framework that was influenced by Sayer's (2000) mapping of CR research. This analytical framework was deemed most appropriate for this research due to the social phenomena being investigated as part of it. Existing research exploring the impact of social media on a person's wellbeing, and their relationship with social media predominantly includes quantitative accounts. Therefore, this thesis focused on generating qualitative, experiential data that understands the 'real' implications of social media. This has been provided using an extensive, two-phase methodology that explored direct experiential accounts using semi-structured interviews alongside a 6-month digital ethnography concerned with Reddit and Tattle.Life to gather observational, indirect experiences of diet culture and social media more broadly.

The methodological component of this thesis is a contribution to knowledge due to the approach that was taken in using judgemental rationality to create an ontological and epistemological framework that satisfies the needs of this research, but also supports the thesis in producing pragmatic and effective outcomes that are impactful on policy and practice, using lived experience to steer its' recommendations. The methodological framework designed for this research was created for the investigation of harms posed by diet culture, (un)realistic goals and filtered lifestyles using CR and zemiology. At the primitive stages of proposing this doctoral research, it was important as the researcher that I was able to position myself an 'insider' in the work because of my own lived experience of disordered eating that was compounded by my relationship with social media, but also as a practitioner in mental health and wellbeing services at the time. My position as an 'insider' in this research, whilst wanting to take an objective 'observer' stance, landed me at CR as an analytical framework.

During the interview phase of the research, participants referred to experiences and understandings of 'harm' within the online space without being prompted by the researcher, demonstrating 'actual' and 'real' depths of reality. As 'harm' became an emerging property of the interview dataset, the digital ethnographic observation evidenced platform cultures that provided a space of the 'harmful' narratives that interview participants were referring to. As detailed in Chapter 4, the interview schedule was carefully formed to ensure that the researcher did not prompt the interviewee into

discussing perception of ‘harm’. Despite this, harm became an emergent property of the research that was discussed in all interviews (n=22), as a topic or experience initiated by the participant. The identification of harms by respondents in both phases of data collection evidenced a need to consider the positioning of findings using zemiology. The use of zemiology also aligned with the U.K. Government political agenda regarding online safety (under the Online Safety Act 2023) at the time of writing. This doctoral research has combined CR and zemiology in a field of research that has not been previously approached to understand a new area of study. An example of this is the introduction of the addictive and habitual cycles to CR scholarship, to demonstrate behaviours that occur as a consequence of the generative mechanisms that underpin social media platforms, and the cultural spaces (diet culture and influencer culture) created within them.

Bhaskar’s (1978) levels of empirical reality have been used throughout this thesis to demonstrate how zemiology can be mapped together alongside CR to fulfil the needs of research surrounding experiences of platform cultures, harms, and social media more generally. The theoretical framework that underpins this thesis demonstrates how experiential knowledge obtained the role of the ‘empirical’ actor within the framework through the sharing of experiences that I, as the researcher observed, and zemiology was used to analyse and identify the harms that occur as events following the activation of generative mechanisms and conditions of platform cultures and social media (see Figure 7.4). The methodological framework designed as part of this thesis has therefore focused on the actuality of ‘real’ experiences, enabling the researcher to be innovative in the positioning of the findings to evidence its original contributions to knowledge, as opposed to attempting to place findings amongst existing constructed understanding of the online space, and the behaviours that take place within it.

The chapter has detailed an array of contributions to knowledge including a definition for diet culture, coining of the term *(un)realistic goals*, outlining the addictive and habitual cycles of social media engagement, regulation recommendations for the update of the Unfair Trading Regulations 2008, and The Business Protection from Misleading Marketing Regulations (2008), and the identification of platform culture that normalise online hate. It has done so whilst positioning lived experiences at the forefront of investigating ‘real’

harms of the online space. The findings of this research have supported the formation of a holistic definition of diet culture that explores health, fitness, success, beauty, and productivity. In considering the future directions to follow this doctoral work, the impact of this research recommends an adjustment to the definition of harm to include iatrogenic harms and embedded harms within the Online Safety Act 2023, as well as recommendations around the standardisation of the England and Wales PSHE national curriculum and staff training concerning PSHE delivery. The later recommendation of this thesis suggests a standardised approach to business and trading regulations of influencers, and the commodification of influencers, to align with broader business and brand marketing concerned with deception and misleading marketing techniques.

Appendix A Interview Schedule

Section 1: Background

1. How old are you?
2. Do you use social media?
3. And, what age did you start using social media?
4. Tell me about the platforms you would use, and what devices you would use to access these platforms?
5. What attracted you to these sites? What did you use them for?

Section 2: Understanding/Experience of Body Image & Self-Esteem

Statement: As you know, an element of this research is to explore the potential impact social media could have on a person's mental health, and self-esteem, both positively and negatively – specifically how they view their relationship with their body, food, and social media to be.

6. If you think of the term self-esteem, what does that mean to you?
7. Would you say you had any issues with your self-esteem in your teens, and 20s?
    - Could you talk me through this?
    - At around what age do you believe you noticed this? What brought this to your attention?
8. At this time, what would you focus on, in relation to your body?
9. What about your peers, and family, did you ever fixate on, or follow any of their behaviours around food and diet, or training? Was this a positive or a negative experience for you?
    - Did they know about your struggles?
    - Did they struggle with their own self-esteem?
10. What made you feel different to others around you?
11. Did you ever access support relating to this? If so, what did that look like for you?
    - Was this a positive or a negative experience for you?
    - Is there anything in particular that you took from that experience, that you currently use as a strategy in day-to-day life?
12. So, if we are looking at those surrounding you across these years, and the way you spent your time online, did you ever take to the online world for support? Did you feel you needed additional to support to that that was available to you in the offline world? Or, was this something you did not feel comfortable discussing with your offline support networks?
13. Talk me through the profiles you would follow online, or the content you would engage with on social media.
    - How did you find these websites/profiles? Was this a positive or a negative experience for you?
    - Did the content you engage with online alter the way you conducted your day-to-day lifestyle? Or, did this content alter the way you viewed your own lifestyle/body/relationship with food?
    - Did anyone in your offline life direct you to these sites/pages?

- Were people in your offline life aware of your online activity?
- If you felt the need to hide this, why?

Section 3: Perception of Online Self & Diet Culture

14. We hear so much about goal-setting, productivity and online coaches nowadays, seeing content around this [common examples to provide: 'full day of eating', 'productivity lists', 'train with me'], how does it make you feel?
    - If we think back to your teens/20s, what were your goals? Did you have any? Were they influenced by you, or those around (online and offline)?
    - Are they different to now?
15. Within this, the term 'diet culture' is thrown away – what do you think of when you think of diet culture? Talk me through what this means to you?
16. Do you see this to be something you engage with? What are your experiences of diet culture? Talk me through this.
    - Would you say this has been a positive experience, a negative experience, or do you view this to be neither?
    - Has this ever influenced choices you have made in your day-to-day life offline?
17. Are there any websites, content trends, profile names, that come to mind when you think of diet culture? What brings these to mind?
18. Would you identify as engaging with a certain area of diet culture? Perhaps follow a certain diet or training regime? Talk me through this in your offline day-to-day routine.
    - What is your 'why'? What are your reasons for following these structures? (if applicable)
19. What about the use of filtering applications [examples such as Airbrush, Facetune, Faceapp to be given for reference]? What is your opinion on their use in the online space to advertise products, or a person's social media presence?
    - Do you use these applications?
    - Does this impact the way you view yourself, or those around you? Talk me through your experience of filtering the online self.
20. Do you think the use of filtering applications has an impact in the way young people behave in the online world?
    - Why do you think they are so popular?
21. Would this/has this ever had an impact on your relationship with your body, or your nutrition?

Section 4: Where are you now?

Statement: This takes us over to the final section of the interview, where we look to discuss self-identification within lived experience, and where you believe you are now with your relationship with yourself, and the online world. [Briefly discuss the focus of Mad Studies, and the importance of lived experience in research and education].

22. We have touched on elements of this already, but where you feel comfortable, could you talk me through your experience of your relationship with your body? Where do you feel you are with this right now?
23. Has the way you use social media, and other online platforms, changed over the years? If so, why is that?
24. Do you believe social media influences your relationship with your body and food now? If so, do you see this as a positive or a negative experience?
25. Looking at what you know now, and reflecting on your life experience, if you could tell your teenage self anything at all, what would it be?
26. And finally, what do you think we need to do, as a society, to address concerns around young people, and their relationship with their social media presence vs. their body in the 'real world', and make a change? Do you believe it is possible?

Appendix B Consent Form and Participant Information Sheet

University of Sunderland

CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Investigating Social Media and Harms on Youth Body Image, and Perceptions of Diet Culture

Participant Code/Alias: _____

I am over the age of 18	
I have read and understood the attached study information, and, by signing below, I consent to participate in this study.	
I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study without giving a reason at any time during the study itself.	
I understand that I also have the right to change my mind about participant in the study for short period after the study has concluded.	

Signed: _____

Print name: _____

(Your name, along with your participant code/alias, is important to help match your data from your consent form to your interview/transcript. It will not be used for any purpose other than this).

Date: _____

Print name: _____

Date: _____

University of Sunderland

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Study Title: Investigating Social Media and Harms on Youth Body Image, and Perceptions of Diet Culture

What is the purpose of this study?

This research aims to listen to and explore experience of youth and social media use; specifically, looking at a person's relationship with their body, as well as their relationship with the online world. There has been a growing interest in the potential harms that can be posed by the online world, as well as the positive impact social media can have over growing our networks and enabling us to share our livelihoods with the world. This study is interested mostly in exploring the way that social media, and online profiles can influence a person's relationship with their body and/or food in their offline life. Concepts such as filtering applications, imagery-based social media and diet culture will be touched on in this study. This research will contribute towards the completion of my doctoral thesis.

Who can take part in the study?

This study aims to talk with a variety of individuals in relation to their experience of social media during their teenage and adolescent to adult (20s) years. The only criteria for becoming a part of this study is that you are **aged between 18 and 30-years-old,** and that you have used social media at some stage during your life.

Do I have to take part in the study?

Participation is entirely voluntary. If you change your mind about taking part in the study, **you can withdraw at any point during the session without giving any reason and without any penalty.**

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you agree to take part, this study will involve partaking in a face-to-face, or virtual, audio-recorded interview. This interview should take approximately 60 minutes, depending on how much of your story you feel comfortable disclosing. If the interview goes beyond the 60-minutes, or you wish to take a break at any stage, we can do so. The pre-planned

interview schedule is based around elements of the research question stated at the top of this information sheet. Due to this nature of this study, and lived experience being at the heart of the data, the interviews will be semi-structured and led partially by your experience, and partially by the pre-planned interview schedule.

What are the possible disadvantages and risk of taking part?

Due to this being a research project investigating elements of mental health, and personal experiences with this, there is a chance that you may find this triggering. This will be dependent on this individual and how this experience impacted you. This is something to be considered ahead of signing the participatory consent form. However, as highlighted earlier, if there are any elements of this interview that make you feel uncomfortable, you do not wish to discuss, or put you in a position that result in you no longer wanting to pursue the interview, the interview will be terminated immediately and will not be used in this study. Following on from each interview, a de-brief will be held between the researcher and yourself to assure you feel safe, and comfortable leaving the study. An information sheet with contact details of local support services will also be offered to participants if they do feel at all triggered, and unsafe, in this research space.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

This study aims to entirely encompass lived experience and be led by the discussions put forward by the participants. This is with hopes that this will empower participants to feel they are able to discuss their experiences of social media, and their relationship with their body and diet culture in a positive, accessible space to a level that they feel comfortable. This core value of the study is supported by its' theoretical framework – this means that the researchers also have lived experience that may have motivated their interest in the research area.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

You will see on the consent form, the opportunity to give the researcher an 'alias' name for your interview, meaning that only you and the researcher would be able to identify your participation in the research. An 'alias' is an alternative name to be used to a mask a person's identity in confidential spaces. If you do not wish to provide an alias, each participant is provided a code to anonymise participants' identity. In your consent form, you will be asked to provide a signature and print your name underneath; this is **for the record of the researcher only** and is important to help match your data from your interview to your consent form, should you wish to withdraw from the study later. It will not be used for any purpose other than this. Consent forms will be stored in a locked file,

accessible to the researcher only, and destroyed following completion of this research project.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

As stated above, the results of this research study will be written up in the format of a doctoral thesis, that will contribute towards the completion of my PhD. If suitable, the results may also be presented at academic conferences and/or written up for publication in peer reviewed academic journals.

Who is organizing and funding the research?

This study will contribute towards the completion of my doctoral thesis. Therefore, it is funded a postgraduate qualification by Student Finance England. This study is organized between the researcher and their supervisory team at the University of Sunderland.

Who has reviewed the study?

The University of Sunderland Research Ethics Groups has reviewed and approved this study.

Contact for further information:

Dr John Fulton (Chair of the University of Sunderland Research Ethics Group, University of Sunderland)

Email: john.fulton@sunderland.ac.uk

Phone: 0191 515 2529

Appendix C Ethics Approval Letter

University of Sunderland

Downloaded: 28/02/2022
Approved: 28/02/2022

Lauren Doyle
Social Sciences
Programme: Doctor of Philosophy (PhD in Social Science)

Dear Lauren

PROJECT TITLE: Investigating the Impact of Social Media and Harms on Youth Body Image and Perceptions of Diet Culture
APPLICATION: Reference Number 011122

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 28/02/2022 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 011122 (form submission date: 28/02/2022); (expected project end date: 25/05/2025).
- Participant information sheet 1019220 version 1 (24/02/2022).
- Participant consent form 1019221 version 1 (24/02/2022).

If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation please email ethics.review@sunderland.ac.uk

For more information please visit: https://www.sunderland.ac.uk/more/research/research-governance-integrity/researchethics/

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