Setting (Un)Realistic Goals: The Influence that AI Filtering Applications Have on the 'Pathologisation of Attractiveness'

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Research Context

This conference paper stems from an area of my doctoral findings, titled:

The 'Insider' Club of 'Diet Culture': What is the Role of Social Media in Creating the 'Picture Perfect' Based on Filtered Lifestyles?

The **broader research aimed** to understand retrospective and current experiences of people's relationships with social media, and their body. 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.

Research Objectives:

·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.

AI Filtering Apps: How do they shape appearance?

Political Attention

Changing the Picture Perfect: An Inquiry into Body Image (2021)

Compulsory calorie labelling for vendors that employ 100 or more workers (2021) - Department for Health and Social Care

Digitally Altered Body Images Bill (2022 - dismissed, 2024 - new bill recommended by MP Dr Luke Evans)

Attractiveness or Health?

The entanglement of 'health' and 'attractiveness' was recognised in 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.

Real or AI?

A standard mode to achieve optimal gratitude for posting on an online photo for many young men and women is using a filtering app on their phone, or 'filters' to their camera that can be applied through specific platforms (Eshiet, 2020).

The 'aesthetic' of a selfie has become increasingly important to popularity online (Cambre & Lavrence, 2023).

Digital forensic gaze - presumption that imagea are authentic (Lavrence & Cambre, 2020; Cambre & Lavrence, 2023)

Self esteem and social media

Existing literature, that mostly falls under the umbrella of psychology, when focusing on self-image explores alterations we make to the body due to our expectations created by the digital world.

SELF ESTEEM

Santarossa & Woodruff (2017) explore the relationship between self-esteem, body satisfaction and social media in undergraduate students.

THE 'PERFECT' SELFIE

Cambre & Lavrence (2023) discuss the increasing pressure to produce the most aesthetic, smooth selfies in today's society.

SNAPCHAT DYSMORPHIA

Purtill (2020) coined the term 'snapchat dysmorphia' to refer to the influx in clientele by plastic surgeons, in London, whose consultations were based on Snapchat filters.

Diagnostic Cultures

Bringing together the narratives of medical sociology and cultural disability theorists, the work of Svend Brinkmann (2016) and 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.

Diagnostic cultures

Brinkmann (2016) refers to the social context that underpins the rising use of psychiatric diagnoses to label personal problems, emotional responses and behaviours. Thus, a rise in terming behaviours as 'disordered'.

For Conrad (1975; 1992), explorations of medicalisation **must** consider the *impact* of medicalising behaviours - i.e., the impact of the culture of over-diagnosis.

Medicalising beauty

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).

- Disordered body image
- Interlinking being 'healthy' and 'attractive'
- "What is wrong with you" rhetoric linked to disordered eating patterns.

Prioritising the market

Embedding diagnostic cultures within the existing BPS approach to health, and public perceptions of 'health' encourages ongoing using of medicine, intervention and support by the health service - with little regard for how the expansion of medical labelling may have on a person (Conrad. 1992; Brinkmann, 2016).

Growth in selling dietary products, programmes and support communities through social media to support being 'healthy' and 'attractive' prioritises the profiteering of individuals and organisations, rather than focusing on the potential harms this could inflict consumers (Zuboff, 2019).

Methodology

A qualitative two-step approach was taken in this research.

- **A digital ethnographic investigation** into 2 gossip/chat platforms [**Reddit and Tattle.Life**]. This took place over a 6-month period.

- A series of **22 semi-structured interviews** over the summer of 2022.

  [20 female participants, 2 male participants]

  [14 interviews took place via Microsoft Teams, 1 via Google Meet, and 7 took place in a face-to-face setting].

  [1 participant identified as disabled, a further 4 participants disclosed having medical diagnoses of eating disorders or mental health conditions].
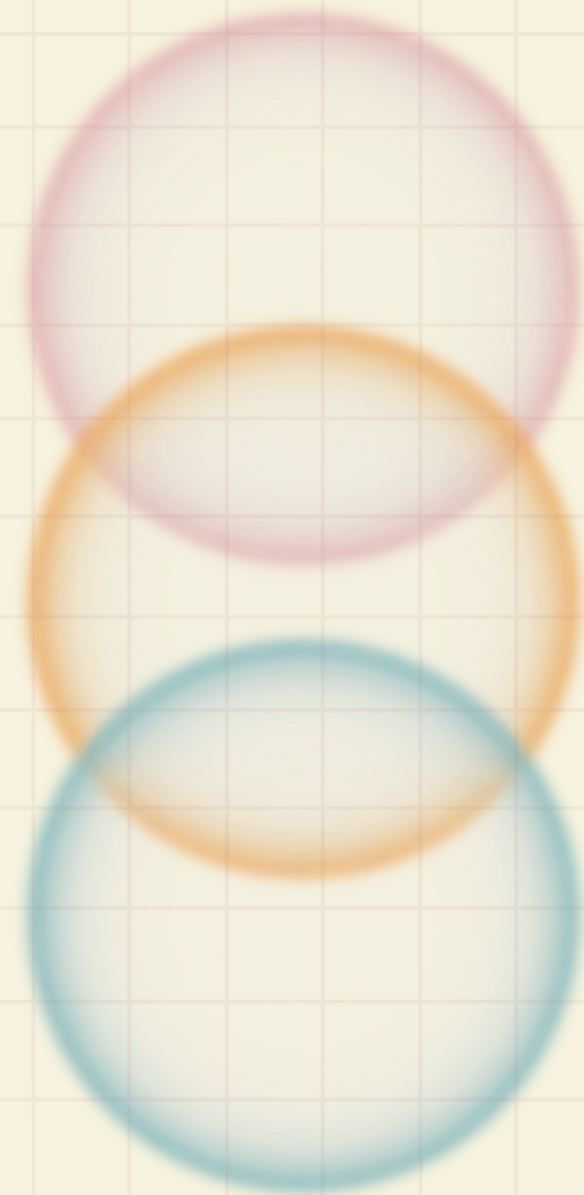
Public vs Private Data

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).

Public Data?

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.

Private Data?

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).

Public vs Private Data

How did I approach this?

Reddit - declaration in each 'subreddit' that I was there as a researcher.

Tattle.Life - no ability to disclose to users, moderators or platform owner.

Screenshots were taken of images, discussion threads and 'thematically' chosen titles of discussion threads. **No communication between researcher and others in the forums.**
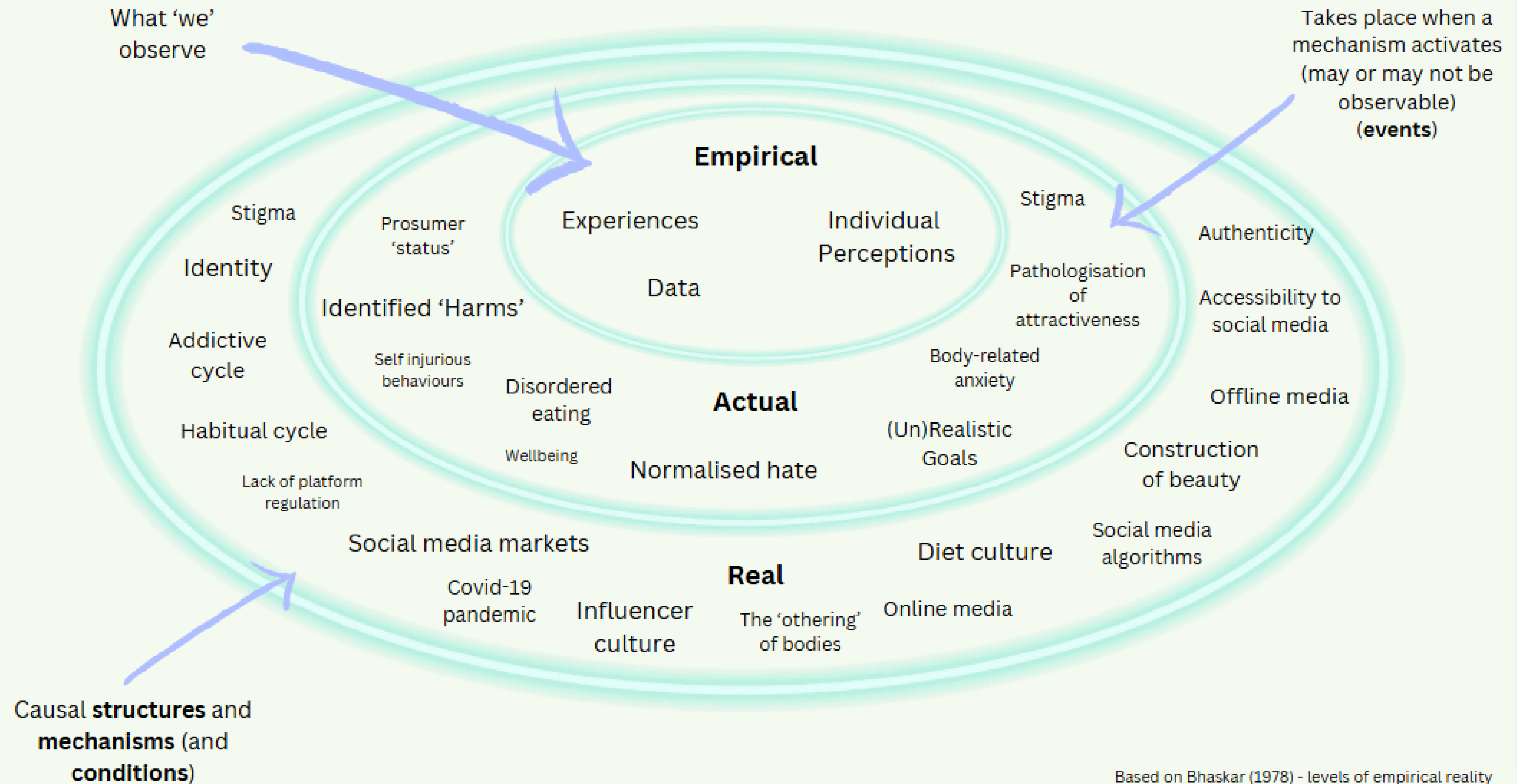
Non-reactive ethnography

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 minimise chance of misinterpreting context of data being presented.

What 'we' observe

Takes place when a mechanism activates (may or may not be observable) (**events**)

Empirical

Stigma

Prosumer 'status'

Experiences

Individual Perceptions

Stigma

Authenticity

Identity

Data

Pathologisation of attractiveness

Accessibility to social media

Identified 'Harms'

Addictive cycle

Self injurious behaviours

Body-related anxiety

Disordered eating

Actual

(Un)Realistic Goals

Offline media

Habitual cycle

Wellbeing

Construction of beauty

Normalised hate

Lack of platform regulation

Social media markets

Diet culture

Social media algorithms

Real

Covid-19 pandemic

Influencer culture

The 'othering' of bodies

Online media

Causal **structures** and **mechanisms** (and **conditions**)

Based on Bhaskar (1978) - levels of empirical reality

Diet culture and AI filters

Dominant theme underpinning the justification to filter lifestyles, engage with beauty altering procedures, or type of content that was linked to 'filtered lifestyles' and (un)realistic goals = **diet culture**

95% (n=21) of participants identified a rise in visibility of diet culture–related content on their social media feeds (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube most discussed here):
- What I eat in a day
- 'Follow me on my workout' content
- Fitness 'communities'/apps
- Advertisement/selling of diet products.

Definition coined from this research:

"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"

Algorithmic reinforcement of harmful content

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.**

Platform profiteering rather than duty of care
The neoliberal profiteering of social media platforms is bound up with the harms experienced by social media users - **profit outweighs the individuation of harms experienced by users.**

Online Safety Act (2023)
Online Safety Act (2023) commits to placing responsibility in the hands of tech companies to moderate the content being shared through the platform.
Two fold - *priority harmful content* <u>and</u> *user-generated content*


Exposure to harm?
Participants in this research reported feeling a sense of responsibility to themselves to regulate their emotional response to social media use, and the content that they consume.
- **What responsibility does the platform hold?**

(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.
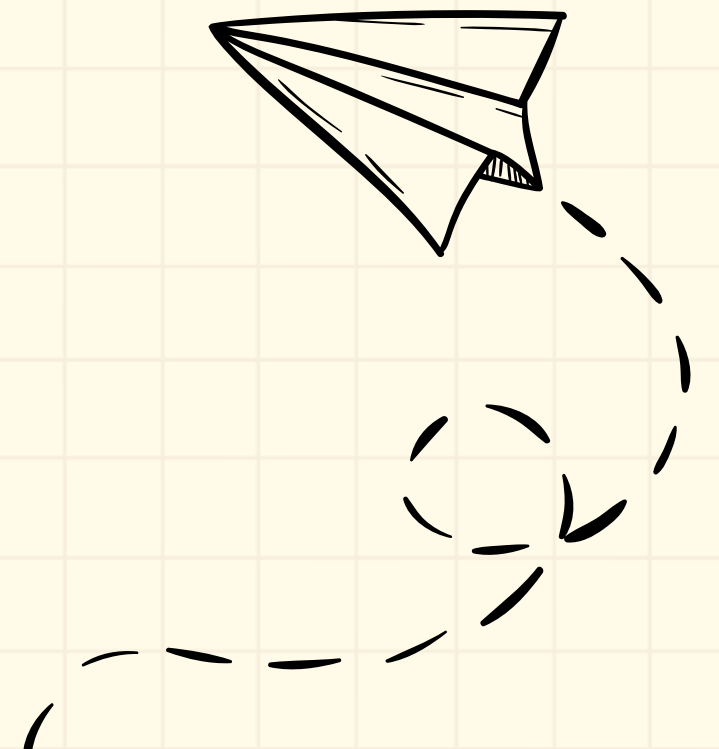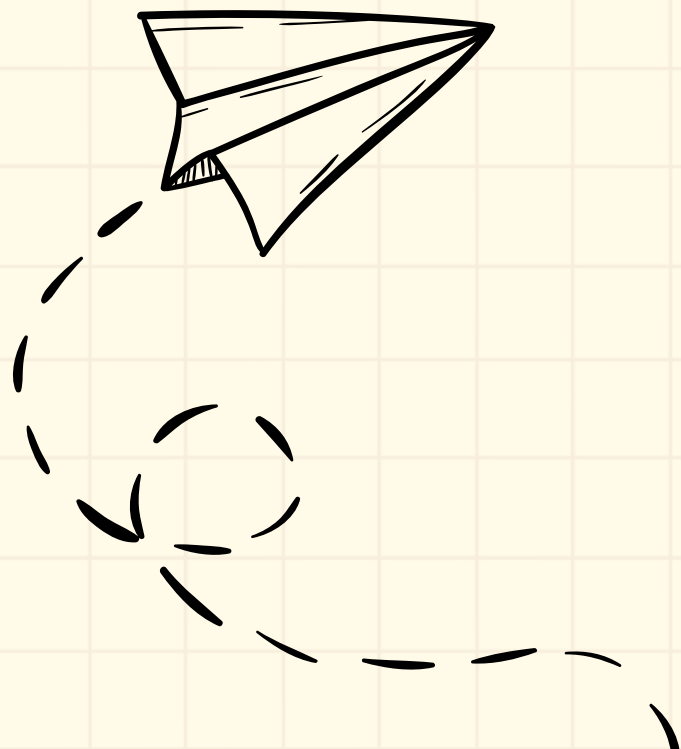
Pathologisation of Attractiveness

How do filtered lifestyles lead to setting (un)realistic goals?

Pathologising attractiveness in diagnostic cultures...

When an individual 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.

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 labelled as "disordered"._

Algorithms encouraging (un)realistic goal setting

Exposure to filtered imagery does not just come through our networks (friends/followers) but through suggested 'for you' content. Therefore, regulating who you follow to minimise likelihood of consuming this content is **not** enough, for many.

Encouraging us to change our appearance?

Filtering apps, and the history of linking 'beauty' and 'health' has fed into the **consumerist market** that surrounds **cosmetic tourism**, the expansion of **AI filtering apps** and the **beauty enhancement industry.**

Broader social and political implications

Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education

- Further standardisation of the PSHE curriculum across the U.K., to ensure that all young people are being adequately educated on areas within social media such as AI and misinformation.
- Discussions surrounding 'healthy lifestyles' and body image to consider more recent research that evidences that impact of the current discourse used in 'healthy lifestyles' sessions; interlinking 'health' and 'good body image'.
- Improved support for teachers delivering this, or the outsourcing of a qualified practitioner to run PHSE.
- 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.

Online Safety Act 2023

- Findings of this research 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'.
- **The current definition of harm under the OSA (2023) fails to encompass exposure to broader harms.**

Standardising UK marketing regulations

This research calls for reconsideration of existing U.K. trading regulations – specifically those that address misleading and deceptive marketing.

- Unfair Trading Regulations (2008)
- Business Protection from Misleading Marketing Regulations.

Influencers are now a commodity - a brand of their own. If so, why are they not held to the same standard as other organisations/businesses?

To be aligned with ASA CAP Code - advice for content creators re: authentic advertising.

Thank you

Questions?

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