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| **Title of the article (no more than 10 words)** | *Normalisation of Online Hate: Trolling, Diet Culture and Filtered Lifestyles* |
| **Word count** | **1924** |
| **Author(s ) full name, affiliation, email address, twitter name and (if available) their own website/blogsite address** | **Lauren Doyle, University of Sunderland**<br>**Lauren.doyle@sunderland.ac.uk**<br>**@l4urend0yle** |

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| **Meta-description of 100-140 characters (characters NOT words, as this is the snippet that will show on a Google search)** | **Lauren Doyle provides an oversight into a paper she presented to the BSC Hate Crime Network in May 2023 exploring the normalisation of online hate, diet culture and filtered imagery.** |
| **Up to 5 keywords (**keywords can be multiple word phrases) | **Harm, social media, hate, diet culture, regulation** |
| **Brief biographical note of yourself (25-50 words)** | **Lauren is a Lecturer in Social Studies at the University of Sunderland; teaching across modules that encompass social harms, the pathologisation of crime and disability studies. She is currently at the later stages of her PhD, attempting to apply the concept of 'harms' to 'diet culture'.** |
| **Have you included links to relevant sites?** | **https://www.sunderland.ac.uk/about/staff/social-sciences/laurendoyle/** |

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L.Doyle — 01/06/2023

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**Insert the body of the blog article below**:

Social media and the digital space are now a part of the daily lives of so many across the world; in place to enhance global communication, the sharing of information and the growth of diet culture and influencer culture [online cultural spaces]. With this, the sharing of information is not always authentic, nor is the imagery that we consume and base offline health and lifestyle goals around. This blog will discuss ongoing doctoral work that explores the lived experience of the normalisation of hostile self-talk and trolling across social media platforms. Alongside the impact that filtered lifestyles, that underpin influencer culture, can hold over a young person's self-esteem, in the offline world.

When working in supporting roles within the third sector, across health and justice, between 2014 and 2021, I met individuals from so many walks of life, at different stages

of their lives. Yet I found there was a common denominator in the key reasons that they struggled with their self-esteem: social media. This was not just teens and adolescents who were attempting to navigate social media and their identity in the social space. This was also adults across the life course, young men that I worked with in custody, and, individuals from all walks of life sectioned under the Mental Health Act (2007) residing in psychiatric hospitals at the time, who were concerned with their access to the online space [i.e. digital literacy]. And, for the most part, concerned with how they looked online, how many followers/likes they would receive across their social media platforms, and how to look/live like the 'influencers' they follow across their social media accounts. Although this research by no means discredits the experiences of individuals across the life course, as a young woman who also has previous experience of a 'disordered' relationship with food and my body, which was impacted by my use of social media, this was an area I felt passionately about bringing into academic discussions. And later, into education programmes for young people, parents/caregivers, and educators, across the UK. With a focus on harms [both online, and offline], the medicalisation of self-esteem, and the concept that has continued to grow in popularity across the online space: diet culture.

The literary backdrop of the connection between self-esteem and social media remains heavily conceptualized within the discipline of psychology, with little to no attempt in criminology to conceptualising self-esteem under a 'harms' framework [i.e. zemiology]. The existing focus of youth self-image, when cross-examined against social media engagement pre-dominantly quantifies the relationship between a young person, and their body (see Santarossa & Woodruff, 2017). Studies by the likes of Veldhuis et al.

(2020) have explored the intersection between the behaviours that young people demonstrate online and offline behaviours; finding there to be a connection between high body dissatisfaction and the number of ‘selfies’ young women post on social media.

Body image and online ‘harms’ have been explored, however, in relation to ‘trends’ online which could cause damage to young people when advertising pro-anorexia [‘pro-ana’] content on platforms such as Twitter and Tumblr (see Branley & Covey, 2017; Boero & Pascoe, 2012), and image-based platforms like Instagram and TikTok (see Price et al., 2022). Achilles (2022) looks at the ‘meanspo’ trend found on Tumblr that provides a space for Tumblr users to post their images and request hateful responses based upon their weight, physical appearance, and nutrition/training regime to ‘inspire’ them through ‘mean’ commentary, to diet. Spaces such as this promote ‘fat-shaming’ and the narrative that those who appear outside of the ‘ideal’ body type are ‘bad citizens’ (Spratt, 2011). Thus, providing a space for the normalisation of online hate in the online public domain.

My ongoing doctoral research attempts to address this empirical gap through the production of a qualitative dataset that explores the lived experiences of 22 participants, between the ages of 18-30-years-old. This was conducted alongside a digital ethnographic exploration of Reddit and Tattle.Life; two gossip/conversation-led online communities infiltrated with ‘hate’ and potentially ‘harmful’ information. During interviews, participants reflected upon their use of multiple social media platforms [Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter and Snapchat, just to name a few]. Participants led the conversation that highlighted concepts such as the boundary between ‘harm’ and ‘hate’

that sits within diet culture online, the impact of filtered imagery on self-esteem, as well as the normalisation of hate and hostility online. Participants such as Lizzie stated that negativity on social media is not just an ‘accepted’ part of social media but is something that people with large followings are just ‘expected to receive’. This was supported by a finding from the Tattle.Life ethnography - on registering your details to create an account on Tattle.Life, a statement of terms and conditions must be signed: one rule being that this forum does not allow commentary about an individual who does not ‘put themselves in the public eye’ (Tattle.Life, 2022: unpaginated). This was further reinforced by Zara who disclosed her experience of being called 'fat' online and explained that "I just kind of laughed it off at the time and I think afterwards I was a bit like oh, oh, damn. But I think I did just kind of laughed it off”. Discussions across 81.82% [n=18] of participants highlighted Twitter to be the platform they were most likely to avoid due to 'hate', 'arguments online', 'politics' and/or was viewed as the 'most harmful' platform in relation to 'hate'.

Participants did not just voice concerns around potential trolling, and hateful language online, but of the ‘unrealistic goals’ set by online diet culture, social media ‘influencers’ and the filtered lifestyles they portray online. Anya recognised that ‘the fitness industry [and online diet culture] has always been like transformations and weight loss journeys, especially for women, and it’s all just that thing of how small can we get and why, like almost pitting women against each other’. Kayla resonated with this experience, stating in her interview that ‘trends’ online and beauty standards are forever changing ‘one minute we want to look like a Kardashian, and then when that’s no good we are expected

to just go along with the next new look, it's never ending'. Online 'influencer culture', as explored by the UK Government, is becoming increasingly influential in the consumption of social media, diet products, and cosmetic surgery in young people (Department for Digital Media, Culture and Sport 2022a; 2022b). Albeit acknowledged by the UK Government as a red flag, practical support is yet to be produced around how to navigate and regulate 'influencer culture'; specifically, around the advertising of weight loss supplements, dietary programmes, or the disclosure of filtered images posted on their social media feeds.

With this research I am aiming to conceptualise my findings within Sayers' (2000) model of critical realism (CR) (see *Figure 1*). Attempting to define CR is difficult as there is not a unified approach to applying CR to research. But CR has been used by a range of academics to investigate knowledge that goes beyond the observable; the knowledge that has been carved through historic perceptions, investigations and thus, socially constructed for us. CR scholars question whether traditional approaches to social research methodology, with the opposition of quantitative and qualitative methods, is productive in interdisciplinary scholarship (see Danermark et al., 2019). Thus, aiming to understand different levels of knowledge: the 'actual', the 'real', and the 'empirical'. To position this into policy and practice, CR allows researchers to acknowledge the transient nature of the online space, and the types of social media platforms that young people have access to as opposed to constructing new evidence bases around existing 'settled'

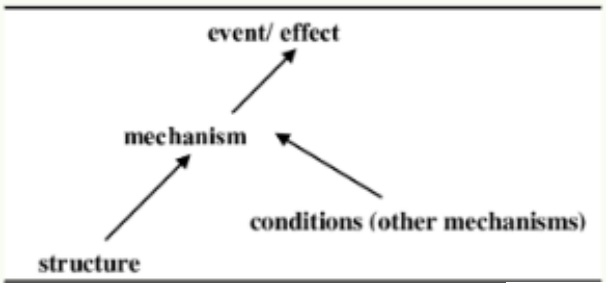

Figure 1

theoretical frameworks (see Haigh et al, 2019). Because of the continuing evolution of social media, and young people's engagement with it, any future policy recommendations should align with this. What I mean by this is that there is a constancy of change in what researchers, practitioners and young people view as the 'impact' of social media, and what is perceived as 'harmful'. These changes depend on the conditions that young people use social media under i.e., the platforms that they use, the amount of time that they use social media for, whether they are a consumer or a producer of content, or whether they view the content that they consume as harmful, or not.

The changing nature of 'online harm' is one of the complexities faced by policymakers in attempting to regulate social media. Hence the amendment to the Malicious Communications Act 1988 to include hostile communications spread through online communications, under the Criminal Justice and Police Act of 2001 (section 43), now needing to be further addressed by the in draft UK Online Safety Bill to recognise the more current concerns around criminal, and non-criminal but harmful behaviours online. Behaviours and potential 'harms' online are evolving along with the capacity of the online space. I believe CR is a great tool in being able to recognise individual and transient experiences of online harm and behaviours that sit outside of existing criminal legislation. This can be used as an evidence-based framework that reflects the flexible approach taken by practitioners, in supporting roles, that captures the changing conditions around a young person that may alter the level of support they require, their perceptions of harm, and how open they are to engaging with support. Thus, acknowledging that a one-size-fits-all approach to regulating the online space and supporting young people in staying safe online is not appropriate. Nor can 'freedom of speech', or the regulation of assessing authenticity in information-sharing online be handled with a simple, blanket approach.

For me, Sayers' model of CR provides a visual for how collecting 'actual' knowledge can be achieved. It does this by recognizing there to be structures within society that underpin mechanisms [in my research, social media as a structure that underpins and influences online behaviours/online content consumption, see *Figure 2*].

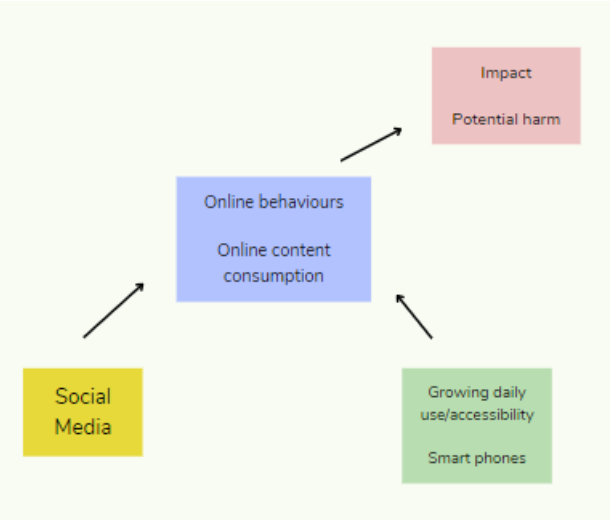


Figure 2

Mechanisms can be altered under different conditions, which could create 'other mechanisms', or as Lawson (1997) suggests, influence 'demi-regularities' in a dataset. 'Demi-regularities' can also be seen as "rough trends" in data that may be evident under some conditions, or the experience of some participants, but not others. For example, in my research, the changing condition of which young people engaged with social media during the Covid-19 lockdown, how this impacted their relationship with online diet culture, compared to pre- and post-lockdown periods, and the perceptions of both 'harms' and 'hate' within the online space because of this [event/effects]. This will bring together the lived experiences of my participants and conversations observed across Reddit and Tattle.Life. From here I will take a harms-based approach to position my findings within existing, and future, social policy surrounding the protection of young people and educating them on the parameters of the online space.

The normalisation of online hate is just one key area of the findings within my wider doctoral research that aims to address the statement of: 'Applying the Concept of 'Harms'

to ‘Diet Culture’. It remains evident after presenting these findings to the BSC Hate Crime Network discussion group in May 2023 that ‘harms’ and ‘hate’ in the online space – more broadly than just social media – is an area of concern for practitioners, academics, parents/caregivers, social media users and young people themselves. The outcome of this research is hopeful in being able to contribute to a springboard in effective and realistic support mechanisms being introduced in both the education around the effects of/the parameters of the online space and the tackling of online ‘harms’ surrounding trolling, diet culture and filtered lifestyles.