Keep me coming back for more:

Understanding the cyclical nature of social media engagement and its' wider implications on everyday practices.

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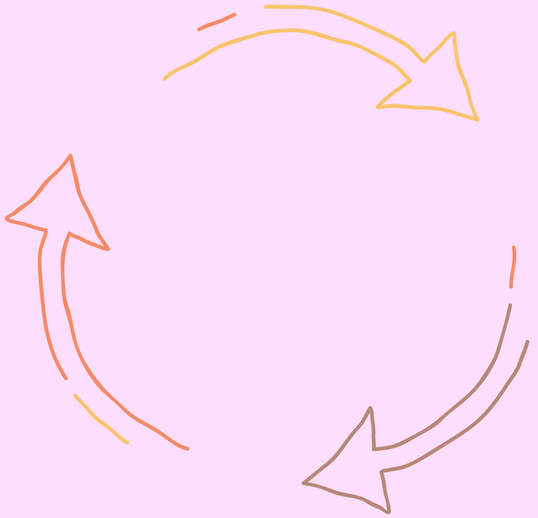


Research Context

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 and filtered lifestyles over this.

Research Objectives:

·To investigate the impact of ‘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.

Social media ‘addiction’

The relationship between social media and addiction has been widely discussed in psychological ‘addictive behaviours’ studies over recent years (see Andreassen & Pallesen, 2014; 2016; 2017; D’Arienzo et al., 2019; Zivnuska et al., 2019; Tullet-Prado et al., 2023).

Social media addiction is a behaviour based around becoming **compulsive** over checking the attention that your social media profile(s) is receiving, and the **need** to check on your friends, family or public figures that you follow online (Hou et al., 2020).

Behavioural addictions (Griffiths, 1995) adapted by D’Arienzo et al. (2019):

1. Salience (social media is most important thing to the person),
2. Mood modification (reliant on social media to support mood),
3. Tolerance (builds up tolerance towards significant time on social media),
4. Withdrawal symptoms (psychological/physiological symptoms),
5. Conflict (compromising or damaging relations encouraged by social media that they bring into offline world),
6. Relapse (following abstinence, old behaviours re-emerge).

Regular (i.e., daily) engagement with social media does not automatically qualify as overuse or addiction to social media... **the embodiment of social media identity can see a shift from using social media as a habit/a general mode of communication or blogging to a *need* to check social media/for a sense of belonging.**

^^^^^^^ usually reflects a shift in identity from *consumer* to *prosumer* (see Gibbs, 2023; Barnes, 2025).

By focusing on qualitative, experiential accounts of social media use, **this research aimed to move away from quantified understandings of social media addiction** and focus more closely on the behaviours and mechanisms that underpin the occurrence of social media addiction.

The ‘Prosumer’

Toffler (1980) used the term ‘prosumer’ to describe a fusion of producer and consumer — someone who both creates and consumes goods or services.

Toffler predicted that prosumers would challenge traditional market systems, reshape industries, and alter power relations between corporations and individuals.

In his view, this would create a hybrid economy — part capitalist, part self-producing.

Barnes (2025) argues that digital platforms have blurred traditional boundaries between producers, sellers, and consumers - **self-sustaining system of production and consumption.**

Alike work of Gibbs (2023) recognising the rise of the role of the ‘prosumer’ in contemporary, online consumer markets.

Process of “prosumption” — where production and consumption merge and the roles of each become indistinct (Beer & Burrows, 2010; Hall & Antonopoulos, 2016).

Participants are not merely passive consumers but active creators, curators, and distributors of beauty knowledge and ideals (Barnes, 2025).

Identity online

Identity shifts can include an adjustment of self-representation and behaviour online - ‘optimisation’ (Bishop, 2025) - *meet the demands of platform algorithms, trends on social media and/or commercial visibility.*

Hund (2023) similarly found that platform rewards (growing communities, likes, comments and wider sharing of one’s content), and visibility due to following online trends feed into the commodification of the content creator.

Continuous production of content that aligns with the evolving norms of cultural spaces online - **demonstrating the rise of an identity shift online through the expansion of online consumer markets monetising content creation.**

Conditions this occurs within (CR analysis) = social media platforms are set up to encourage the production and consumption of content in conjunction with one another.

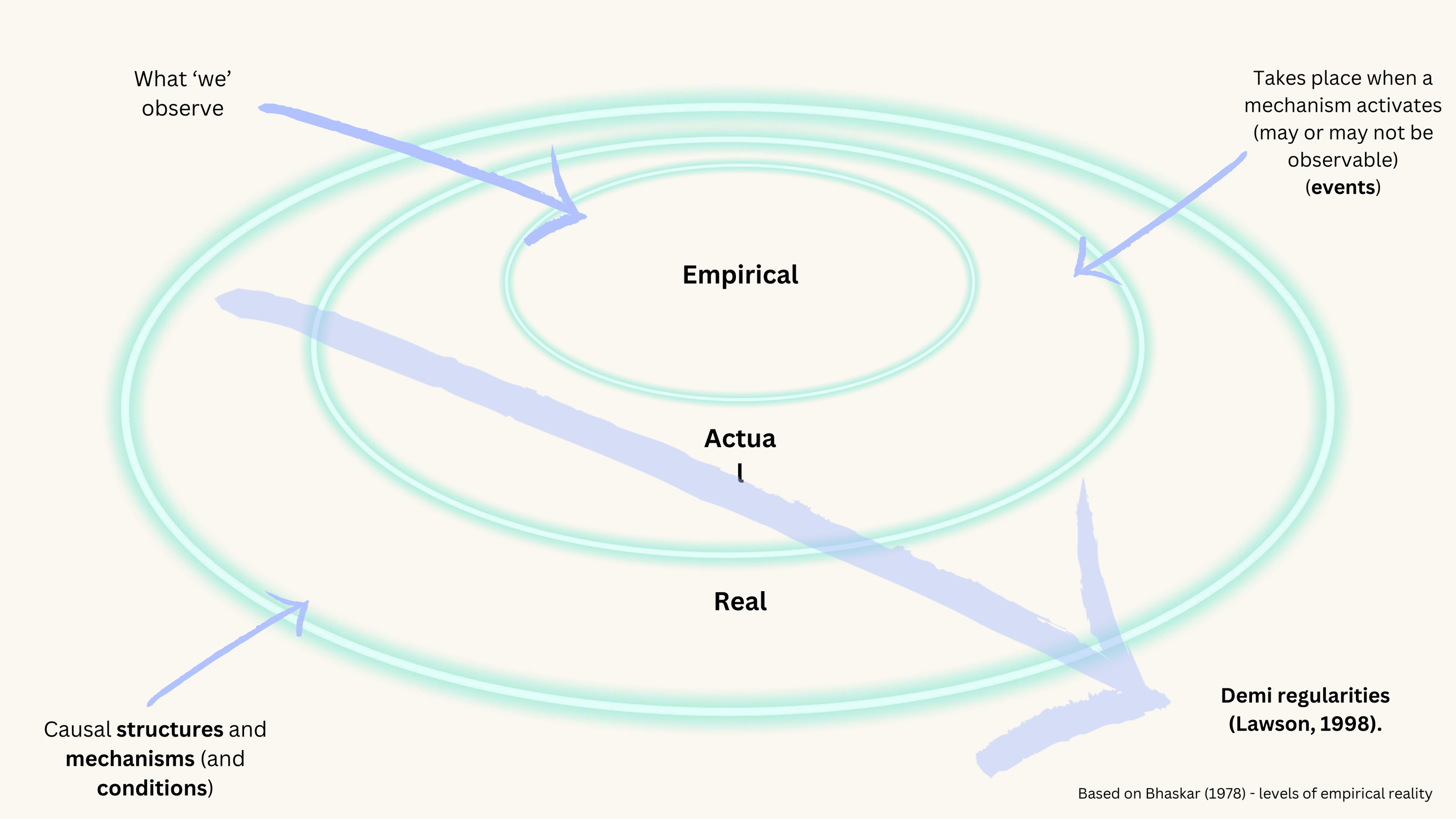
- Yar (2012) notion of ‘will-to-representation’ is influenced by social media as usage is orchestrated towards **the neoliberal needs of digital consumerism.**

- Rifkin (2022) emphasises the psychological resilience required to meet the demands of such engagement-driven platforms. Without this, users risk losing agency and identity (Rifkin, 2022), highlighting the need for stronger regulation around influencer culture, algorithmic design, and digital consumerism (Sharp & Gerrard, 2022).

Methodology

- A series of **22 semi-structured interviews;**
  - 20 female participants, 2 male participants,
  - 14 interviews took place via MS Teams, 1 via Google Meet and, 7 in face-to-face settings chosen by the participant,
  - 1 participant identified as disabled, a further 4 participants disclosed having medical diagnoses of eating disorders or mental health conditions.

- Demographics were relevant to the analysis due to the research's consideration for *actual* and *real* experiences of social media (CR analysis)



Based on Bhaskar (1978) - levels of empirical reality

Self-managing consumerism online

NOT EVERYONE HAS THE SAME ‘WHY’

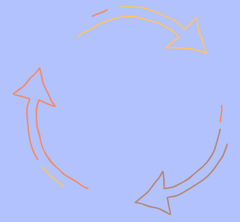
18 participants identified a range of strategies they used to manage their time on social media, and manage the way consumption could make them feel.

“SILENT OBSERVER” ⇄ “I CAN’T GET ENOUGH...”

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’ (Anya)

Self-managing consumerism online

Habitual and Addictive Cycles of Social Media Use



Katie shared that social media use had become a part of daily life, not just for her, but others around her, and was very much normalised in contemporary society.

Zara emphasised that scrolling could be a task that takes ‘around 5 minutes… [but then] 3 hours later it’s like what?... I’ve done it before where I’ll say oh, I’ll scroll for 10 minutes, then it’s not just 10’.

Not intending to spend prolonged time, but ‘loses track’

Habitual cycle of social media begins with routine access to platforms and is sustained by constant three-way interactions between users, producers, and the platform itself. These interactions, such as notifications and content sharing, reinforce repeated engagement and scrolling behaviours that can easily become part of daily habits.

Addictive cycle of social media deepens this engagement through emotional drivers like fear of missing out (FOMO) and reward mechanisms tied to social validation (likes, followers, comments). Content creators or “prosumers” are especially vulnerable, as tracking engagement metrics and striving for visibility can transform habitual use into compulsive, addictive behaviour.

The Habitual Cycle of Social Media

Social media apps

Access to social media platforms via applications on portable smart devices.

3-way interactions

Interactions between producers (sharing, broadcast groups, podcasts, content), consumers of content (likes, comments, sharing, feedback), and social media platforms (push notifications on portable smart devices).

Change in conditions

The shift to doomscrolling

Spending excessive time scrolling through/reading negative or harmful content. Perceptions of harm can be personal or be recognised more broadly as a society.

Boredom scrolling

Scrolling through media becomes a time filler during specific times of the day (for example, during breaks at work, while dining, or while out on a walk). to tackle boredom.

Part of daily routine

This could be relating to this being part of a job, something that is embedded in communication with family/friends/peers etc.

Fear of missing out

Increased virtual social interactions as a consequence of communities shifting to the online space and the increased sharing of personal lives on social media.

Demi-regularity

Catching up on the day

Scrolling through social media following a day at work or at school as a way of catching up with friends, family, or acquaintances. Or, on local events and news stories.

The Addictive Cycle of Social Media

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Change in conditions

Tracking the rise and fall of followings

Using specific applications that show users who have followed, unfollowed or viewed their profile.

The habit changes to an urge/need to check interactions

Checking phone at all available intervals due to feeling the urge to check interactions online.

Fear of missing out

Increased virtual social interactions as a consequence of communities shifting to the online space and the increased sharing of personal lives on social media.

Posts made at ‘key’ times of day

The selective practice of posting and/or interacting with content at ‘peak’ times of day with the intention of higher consumer attention, increased validation, and increased likelihood of producing monetised content..

Keep me coming back for more: FOMO and Algorithms

The ‘addictive’ attribute disclosed by Annabelle and Alice outlined a sense of the ‘fear of missing out’ (FOMO); FOMO, as explored by Brown and Kuss (2020), arises more from a fear of social isolation and a desire for connection rather than fear of missing specific content.

FOMO operates as a key mechanism within the cyclic nature of social media use, shifting motivations from casual browsing to intentional monitoring of specific events or individuals.

This shift can influence experiences of identity and embodiment, echoing Piran’s (2017) notion that embodiment is shaped by desire - whether for connection, visibility, or validation. A *lack of desire* may intensify FOMO, compelling individuals to remain visibly ‘present’ online despite feeling disconnected, thereby reinforcing addictive patterns of social media use.

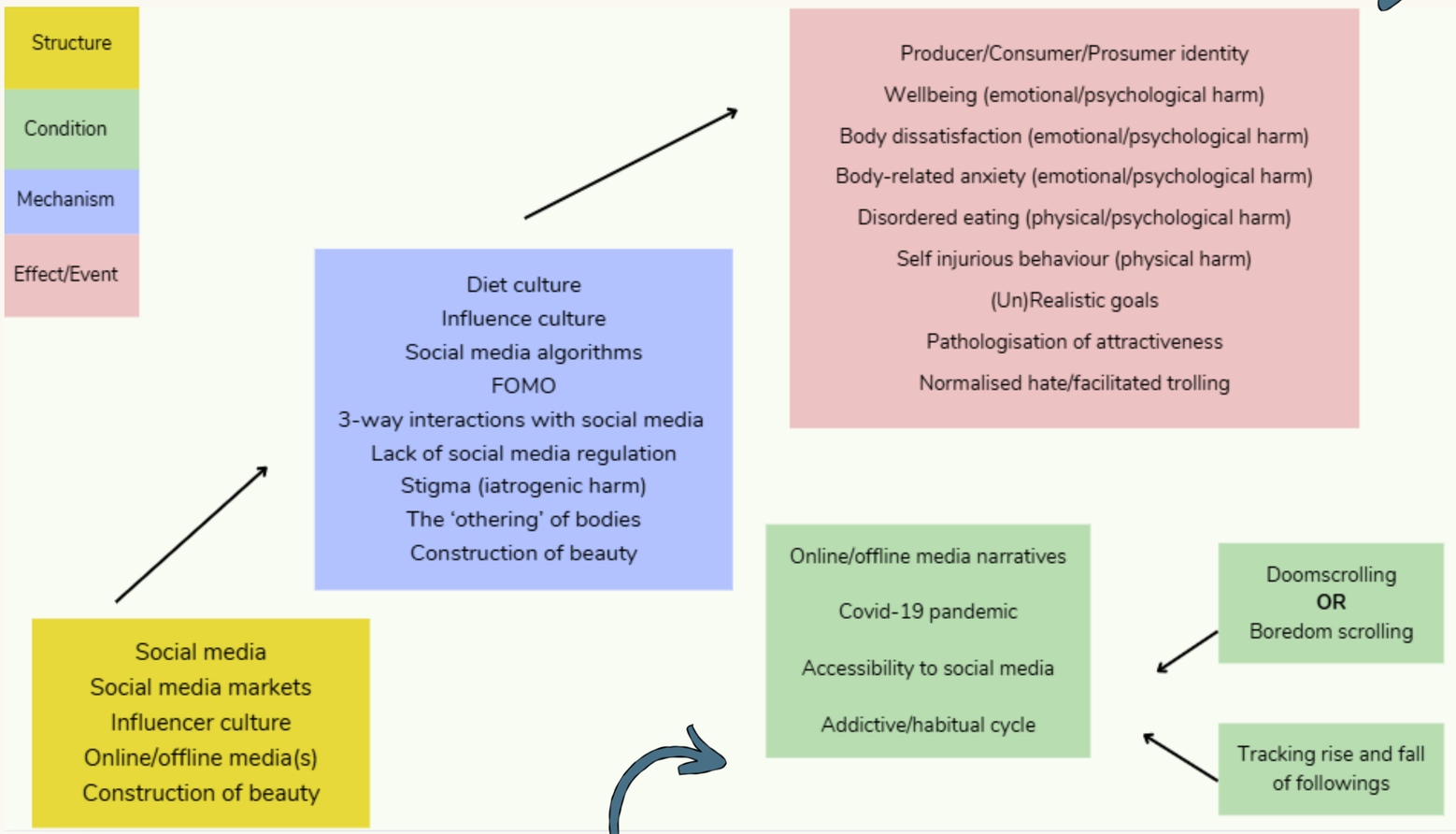
Social media frequently became a habitual background and an integral part of everyday practices (Livingstone, 2018), in cases of all participants but when FOMO or external variables, such as a shift to ‘prosumer’ status or a change in algorithmic pull, could see a shift from a habitual relationship, to an addictive relationship with social media.

Relating to self-discipline, and managing expectations of not feeling “involved”, **Alice** stated:

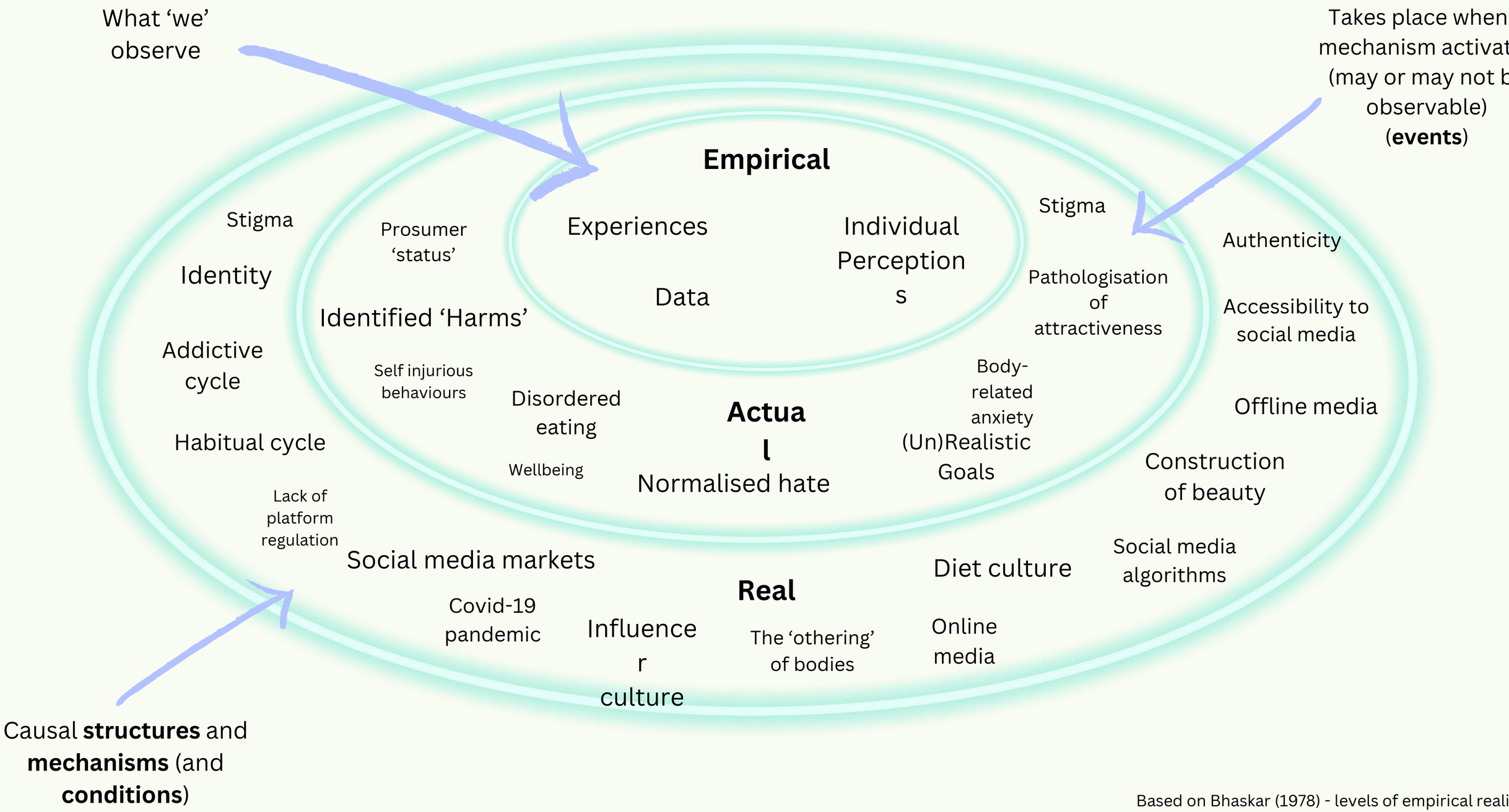
> It is **fear of missing out,** but it is not fear of getting a phone that you urgently need to take – it is **understanding what this life-or-death feeling is of being on or off social media**. It is a form of **addiction**, yeah. Where everything must be a story, or a post – **is that a personality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

Harms of Contemporary Social Media Markets: A CR Analysis

And there are an array of outcomes (events/effects) caused as a result of a person engaging with social media cultures and as a result of lacking regulation of varying online spaces.



The conditions under which social media is used can directly influence the cyclical nature of a person's social media relationship.



Based on Bhaskar (1978) - levels of empirical reality

Concluding Thoughts

- Engagement with social media does not reach a definitive endpoint (unless a person chooses to full opt away from using social media), rather it evolves through cycles.

- The cycles of social media use designed as part of this research can be interchangeable depending on the conditions under which they are used - our positions as consumers, producers and prosumers may shift depending on time, circumstances or life experience.

- The visual representations of the **addictive and habitual cycles of social media use** presented in this lecture offer a contribution to the field of study by illustrating that the relationship between the social media user (as producer, consumer, and ‘prosumer’), the platform, and the cultural frameworks underpinning these interactions is ongoing and recursive.

- This lecture argues that there are wider patterns of harm that operate at a macro level, perpetuating social media user’s exposure to structural and cultural mechanisms that have the potential to be detrimental to their general wellbeing, their relationship with social media and their offline livelihood.

Thank You

Questions

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