

Addictive and habitual cycles of social media use

Self-regulation and prosumption in everyday platform cultures

Lauren Steckles-Young

University of Sunderland, United Kingdom

✉ lauren.steckles-young@sunderland.ac.uk

Abstract

Ground in a critical realist framework, this article examines the habitual and addictive cycles through which social media engagement is produced, sustained, and transformed. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 22 social media users, the study explores how participants experienced and negotiated their relationships with social media across roles as consumers, producers, and prosumers of content. Findings reveal that engagement is shaped not only by individual motivations but also by the interaction of algorithmic recommendation systems, platform business models, visibility cultures, and influencer economies that encourage ongoing participation. Through retroductive analysis, two conceptual models - the *habitual cycle* and *addictive cycle* of social media use - are developed to explain movement between routine and compulsive forms of engagement. The models demonstrate that users shift between these modes under changing social, cultural, and platform conditions rather than occupying fixed categories of either habitual or addictive use. The article further shows how experiences commonly described as addiction emerge from underlying structural and cultural mechanisms that encourage continual engagement whilst simultaneously individualising responsibility for its regulation. It argues that understanding social media harms requires attention to the relationship between user agency and platform structures, shifting analysis beyond individual behavioural explanations towards broader questions of platform governance, prosumption, and social harm.

Keywords: social media; critical realism; prosumption; platform governance; algorithmic culture; self-regulation; social harm

1. Introduction

Social media use has become embedded within everyday life, shaping how people access information, maintain relationships, engage with communities, and represent themselves online. Alongside the expansion of social media use has been growing concern regarding the effects of prolonged engagement

with platform environments, particularly in relation to wellbeing, self-perception, social comparison, and social connection (D'Arienzo *et al.*, 2019; Ford *et al.*, 2019; Hou *et al.*, 2019; Tullett-Prado *et al.*, 2023). At the same time, social media platforms continue to function as important spaces for communication, identity construction, validation, and belonging (Bishop, 2020; 2025; Dhingra & Parashar, 2022; Williams & Burnap, 2016; Toma & Hancock, 2013). The coexistence of benefits and harms has generated increasing academic interest in understanding how individuals engage with and experience social media in their everyday lives. This reflects the fundamentally ambivalent nature of social media use, whereby platforms simultaneously provide opportunities for connection, belonging and self-expression while also exposing users to experiences of comparison, compulsion, and emotional strain (Bengtsson & Johansson, 2022; Lupinacci, 2021).

Research has examined these experiences through a variety of concepts, including social media addiction, problematic social media use, digital dependency, and compulsive engagement (Andreassen & Pallesen, 2014; Andreassen, 2015; Hou *et al.*, 2019; Morris *et al.*, 2023). Within these debates, social media-related harms have frequently been conceptualised through individualised frameworks that focus on behavioural symptoms, psychological traits, and users' capacities for self-regulation (Andreassen *et al.*, 2016; Andreassen *et al.*, 2017). While these approaches have generated important insights, scholars have increasingly questioned the tendency to locate responsibility primarily within the individual user, arguing instead for greater attention to the social, cultural and technological conditions in which engagement takes place (Starcevic *et al.*, 2018; Lupinacci, 2021; Coyne & Woodruff, 2023).

Given the established harms of excessive social media use, abstinence or intentional reduction in usage may serve as a restorative strategy. Radtke *et al.* (2022: 192) refer to this practice as a “digital detox,” which involves “abstinence, break, disconnection, detox, time-out, and unplugging” from digital platforms. This detox can range from complete withdrawal to a deliberate reduction in time spent on social media or digital devices (Radtke *et al.*, 2022). However, implementing such practices can be challenging, particularly when social media is deeply embedded in an individual's daily routine (Coyne & Woodruff, 2023). Nonetheless, digital detoxing aims to facilitate feelings of enjoyment, relief, and disconnection. For some users, social media offers the opportunity to foster a “community-at-a-distance” (Williams & Burnap, 2016: 15), which enables the creation of social connectivity or a sense of belonging at times where they may feel less connected to people in their ‘offline’ lives.

Contemporary social media engagement unfolds within platform environments structured by algorithmic recommendation systems, engagement metrics, targeted advertising models, and data-driven forms of commercial governance (Turow, 2011; Zuboff, 2019; Crocco *et al.*, 2020). These systems do not simply facilitate communication but actively shape what content users encounter, how visibility is distributed, and how participation is encouraged (Goodyear *et al.*, 2018; Bishop, 2020; Riemer & Peter, 2021). Through notifications, personalised feeds and recommendation algorithms, platforms create conditions that encourage repeated interaction and prolonged engagement (Lanier, 2018; Bishop, 2025). Consequently, understanding experiences described as habitual, compulsive or addictive requires attention not only to individual behaviours but also to the structural conditions through which those behaviours emerge.

These developments have simultaneously blurred distinctions between media producers and consumers. Building upon Toffler's (1990) original concept, scholars have argued that digital platforms increasingly position users as “prosumers” who both consume and produce content within the same environment (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Gibbs, 2023). Alongside the growth of influencer culture and self-branding practices, users are encouraged not only to consume content but also to participate in its circulation through posting, sharing, reacting, commenting and curating online identities (Yar, 2012; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Abidin, 2016; Hund, 2023; Bishop, 2025). Even where users do not identify themselves as influencers or content creators (Leary & Tangney, 2012), participation increasingly involves forms of visibility labour and affective labour that require ongoing management of self-presentation, engagement and emotional investment (Duffy & Meisner, 2022; Duffy & Hund, 2015).

While existing research has examined addictive, problematic and habitual social media use, less attention has been devoted to identifying the underlying structural and cultural mechanisms through which these forms of engagement are produced and sustained.

Drawing upon qualitative interviews and a critical realist (CR) framework, this article examines how social media users experience and negotiate their relationships with social media as consumers, producers and prosumers of content. The article develops two conceptual models - the *habitual cycle* and *addictive cycle of social media use* - to demonstrate how engagement is produced, sustained and transformed through interactions between individual agency, cultural expectations and platform structures. Rather than viewing addiction and habitual use as fixed categories, the models conceptualise social media engagement as a dynamic and cyclical process that shifts under particular social, cultural and technological conditions. The findings further highlight the role of algorithmic systems, visibility cultures and platform business models in shaping experiences of self-regulation and harm.

2. The addictive nature of social media: Algorithmics and push notifications

Social media addiction is commonly defined in terms of compulsive engagement and loss of control over use (Andreassen, 2015). While some studies apply behavioural addiction criteria (Griffiths, 1995), these frameworks have been widely critiqued and are not universally accepted. Not all frequent use constitutes addiction; everyday engagement often operates as routine, embedded practice. These practices reflect shifting relationships with platforms rather than fixed behavioural categories. This article distinguishes between *habitual engagement* (routine, taken-for-granted use) and *addictive engagement* (compulsion and loss of control), understood as fluid modes that users move between under different conditions.

Bishop (2025) uses the term *optimisation* to describe the process individuals (particularly women, and marginalised content creators) go through to adjust their online behaviours, self-representation and the content that they produce to align with the demands of platform algorithms, trends across influencer culture(s), and commercial visibility. In this work, Bishop shows that the rise of algorithmics experts in the field of influencers is not a peripheral phenomenon but are central to the cultural system that incentivises constant engagement, the growing monetisation of influencer culture, and adaptation to suit the needs of commercial popularity online (ibid). 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, drives performance and the continuous production of content that aligns with the evolving norms of cultural spaces online. It is evidenced in both studies that the 'dependency' on social media that is experienced by 'prosumers' further drives the strategic engagement and building of the branding (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Hund, 2023) – or in the case of this research, the 'self-brand' that underpins *influencer culture*.

Non-professional (i.e., every day, non-monetised) users' online visibility work increasingly resembles self-branding, because the affective labour they perform - managing positivity, authenticity, responsiveness, and emotional tone - feeds directly into the strategic self-curation demanded by platform logics. Scholars of affective labour argue that users generate value for platforms by producing emotional connection and constant engagement, while research on visibility labour shows that staying "seen" requires continuous calibration of one's persona to audience expectations and algorithmic pressures (Duffy & Meisner, 2022; Abidin 2016). This emotional and curatorial work pushes ordinary users toward maintaining a coherent, recognisable identity that aligns with platform norms of authenticity, productivity, and consistency, effectively transforming everyday self-presentation into a form of self-branding (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Coleman (2018; 2020) similarly argues that digital media increasingly organise experiences of immediacy, visibility and participation within the present moment. The continual management of attention, responsiveness and self-presentation required by social media therefore extends beyond content production alone, involving ongoing affective engagement with

platform cultures and audiences. In this sense, the labour of being visible online, once framed as casual participation, now mirrors the professionalised practice.

A push towards strategic engagement from intermittent/fewer formal interactions with social media is an exploitative practice conducted by the platforms who are financially profiteering (see Bishop, 2025). The notion of strategic engagement with social media supports the work of Yar (2012) whereby contemporary content creators are continuing to feed the neoliberal needs of social media markets, where individuals who do not identify as *influencers* become prosumers due to feelings of pressure to optimise their online presence for visibility, credibility and at times professional viability. At times this occurs with little consideration for the impact that the algorithmic design of social media platforms will have on its' users (Bishop, 2020), whether they be producers, consumers, or 'prosumers'.

Social media business models are often justified through the logic of marketisation, particularly in the development of targeted advertising (Turow, 2011; Crocco *et al.*, 2020). The use of algorithmically generated suggested content (Goodyear *et al.*, 2018) forms part of what Zuboff (2019) terms a capitalist mechanism of social control, designed to drive consumerism in the digital age. Lanier (2018) highlights the role of digital technicians employed to analyse user data and engineer engagement through algorithmic design, further encouraging the rise of the 'prosumer'. With technicians employed to work specifically on the manufacturing of attention-grabbing platforms that frequently engage their users, the conditions of social media consumption are manipulated to encourage prolonged usage. As Riemer & Peter (2021) note, this facilitates algorithmic prompting over intentional user interaction (a causal mechanism experiences described as addictive social media) - for example, via smartphone notifications that draw users back during predicted high-engagement periods (Lanier, 2018). These interactions further shape users' content feeds, reinforcing algorithmic influence (Goodyear *et al.*, 2018). Rifkin (2022) emphasises the psychological resilience required to meet the demands of such engagement-driven platforms, resonating with Sandford & Quarmby's (2018) findings on the pressures faced by young people in digital environments. Without this resilience, 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). This perspective aligns with Turow (2011), who highlights the pursuit of financial gain at the expense of user well-being, particularly using potentially addictive algorithms. These concerns have become increasingly significant within contemporary regulatory debates. In the UK, the Online Safety Act (2023) introduces new duties for platforms to assess and mitigate risks associated with online harms, with specific focus on harms being emotional, physical and psychological in permeation. While this study examines user experiences prior to the implementation of the Act, the findings speak directly to the kinds of platform dynamics that regulation seeks to address, particularly the role of recommendation systems, engagement-driven business models, and the governance of harmful content.

Existing research fails to address the underlying mechanisms that shape *addictive* and *habitual* relationships with social media content consumption and production. This research investigates lived experiences relating to the relationship between social media users and the platforms to contribute to this gap in empirical knowledge. Further, this article identifies the challenges faced by social media users and the harms they are exposed to in the process of regulating their engagement with online platforms.

3. Methods

This article draws upon lived experiences of social media in relation to how social media use may influence a person's relationship with their body, their lifestyle and their perception of how they use social media. This was achieved using semi-structured interviews that comprised of experiential narratives from 22 interview participants who reflected on retrospective and current usage of social media providing enriched qualitative data. Data for this study was collected prior to the implementation of the UK Online

Safety Act (2023). This reflects platform conditions before the introduction of formal regulatory frameworks addressing online harms.

Participants were recruited in the United Kingdom using a self-selection snowball sampling approach. Recruitment advertisements were distributed through social media platforms including LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram, alongside postgraduate researcher mailing lists and Microsoft Teams channels at the researcher's university. Eligible participants were required to be aged between 18 and 30 years and resident in the UK. This age range was selected to capture the experiences of young adults who had engaged with social media throughout adolescence and could therefore retrospectively reflect on the development of their social media use over time. Interviews were conducted between April and July 2022 by the researcher. Participants were given the option of taking part either online via Microsoft Teams or Google Meet, or in person at a location of their choosing. The mode of interview was determined by participant preference. Interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes on average and were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The sample included 20 individuals who identified as female and 2 as male; 1 female participant identified as disabled, and 4 disclosed diagnoses related to eating disorders or mental health conditions. Each interviewee was anonymised using the provision of a pseudonym ahead of the transcription process to ensure that at no stage of the research was identifiable information recorded. This study was approved by the university ethics committee.

A critical realist (CR) approach informed the analytic process by emphasising the identification of underlying generative mechanisms rather than solely describing observable (empirical) experiences. Following transcription and initial inductive coding, a process of retroduction was employed to move from these empirical accounts (participant experiences) to theorising the structural and cultural mechanisms shaping the way social media content is consumed and produced. Retroduction acted as a mode of inference here that allowed the researcher to move from participants' empirical accounts of social media use towards theorising the underlying structural, cultural and platform-based mechanisms that may generate these experiences. Thus, enabling the researcher to look back over empirical accounts shared by participants to identify the causal powers underpinning observed patterns (Stutchbury, 2022).

CR distinguishes between empirical experiences, the events that generate those experiences, and the underlying mechanisms that make such events possible (Bhaskar, 1978; Sayer, 2000). Consistent with this approach, retroduction was used as an analytical strategy to move beyond participants' accounts of social media use and consider the structural, cultural, and platform-based mechanisms that may explain the patterns identified within the data.

Sayer's (2000) representation of CR alongside Bhaskar's (1978) visual depiction of the levels of empirical reality to theorise individual experiential accounts were used to inform the development of the models of *addictive* and *habitual* cycles presented in the following section. The researcher operationalises Lawson's (1998) conceptualisation of *demi-regularities* to position the commonalities in lived experience shared by participants in this research, that may not be *as* common as other shared experiences but are equally as important to one's lived experience. This approach enabled the analysis to move between empirical data, interpreted meanings, and broader structural explanations, consistent with Bhaskar's stratified ontology.

While contemporary literature increasingly adopts the term "problematic social media use" to avoid pathologising everyday engagement (e.g., Starcevic *et al.*, 2018), the term "addictive" is retained in this study to reflect the language used by participants themselves. Participants frequently described their experiences using terms such as "addiction", "urges", and "loss of control", which were analytically treated as meaningful expressions of how they understood and narrated their own engagement. In line with a critical realist (CR) approach, these accounts are not taken at face value as clinical categories, but as empirically grounded descriptions that point towards underlying social, cultural, and platform-specific mechanisms shaping engagement.

4. Consumer behaviours in self-management of social media use

To contextualise participants' experiences, it is important to first consider the range of platforms through which social media engagement occurred. Participants reported engagement across multiple platforms, with most using several concurrently (see Table 1). This reflects the multi-platform nature of contemporary social media use, in which different platforms offer distinct forms of interaction, visibility, and content circulation. These environments form the structural conditions within which participants' experiences of *habitual* and *addictive* engagement emerge. During interviews, the researcher was therefore able to identify 'what' social media is perceived to be, and which platforms were most popular amongst participants, finding:

Table 1. Participant social media use

Table outlining the platforms participants identified with using (or having previously used)

<i>Social media platform</i>	<i>Number of participants that use/have used these platforms</i>
<i>Facebook</i>	100% [n=22]
<i>Instagram</i>	95.45% [n=21]
<i>X (Twitter at the time of data collection)</i>	86.36% [n=19]
<i>TikTok</i>	77.27% [n=17]
<i>Snapchat</i>	72.73% [n=16]
<i>YouTube</i>	63.63% [n=14]
<i>LinkedIn</i>	18.18% [n=4]
<i>Reddit</i>	9.09% [n=2]
<i>Bebo (previously used)</i>	9.09% [n=2]
<i>Twitch</i>	4.55% [n=1]

The initial section of the qualitative interviews was guided by participants' social media experience, where they were invited to reflect on their recollections of when they first began using social media, which platforms they currently use or have previously used, and the purposes underlying their engagement with these platforms. Notably, highly visual and algorithm-driven platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X and TikTok were among the most widely used, of which rely heavily on personalised content feeds and engagement metrics. These platform features were frequently referenced by participants when describing experiences of prolonged scrolling, comparison, and difficulty disengaging. Participants described diverse motivations for social media use, including continued engagement despite recognising negative impacts on wellbeing. These accounts demonstrate differentiated motivations for continuing to engage with social media. These distinctions shaped how participants attempted to regulate their engagement.

Within these conditions, participants described a range of relationships with social media, shaped by their motivations for use, their patterns of engagement, and their capacities for self-regulation. Although participants rarely identified themselves as content creators, many described practices associated with prosumption, including content curation, selective self-presentation, monitoring engagement metrics and strategic participation in platform cultures. While some engaged as active content producers or 'prosumers', others positioned themselves as passive consumers, often describing themselves as 'silent observers'. Rather than occupying distinct categories of producer and consumer, participants frequently moved between these positions, engaging in varying forms of prosumption depending on platform context, visibility demands and personal motivations. Participants occupied shifting positions along a continuum of prosumption rather than discrete categories of consumer and producer. Across accounts,

social media use was embedded within everyday routines, often operating as a habitual background practice. At the same time, participants demonstrated awareness of the potential harms associated with their engagement, including impacts on mood, self-perception, and offline relationships. As *Anya* explained:

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'.

18 participants reported noticeable impacts on mood, relationships and self-perception. Participants described routine co-present but disconnected behaviours, such as scrolling alongside partners with minimal interaction. These practices were often unchallenged, having become normalised habits.

More specifically, 14 participants described platform-specific effects, with visual and short-form content often intensifying comparison and prolonged use. For example, image-based content consumed via Instagram, language-based statuses consumed via Facebook, or 30-second videos on TikTok. Findings from this study infer there is no single content type that consistently drives engagement online, reflecting the personalised nature of algorithmic feeds. The diversity of platforms used further reinforces the absence of a single, uniformed mode of engagement, highlighting the fragmented and highly individualised nature of social media practices.

Participants described a range of self-regulation strategies grounded in a perceived responsibility to manage their own use. This responsibility was frequently individualised rather than attributed to platforms. Therefore, participants may be able to form a relationship with social media that feels beneficial to their lifestyle with hopes that this either does not impact their relationship with their 'offline self' or has a positive effect on this relationship. Common strategies included curating feeds (e.g., unfollowing harmful content) to improve wellbeing. Participants stated that they could see, or had seen, a positive impact on their self-esteem and their engagement with social media simply due to shifting the 'type' of content that they were exposed to. For *Bekki*, this involved following 'normal people' who were 'more positive' and would represent different types of bodies and marginalised communities. For *Christie*, this required a conscious effort to 'avoid following reality stars', naming shows such as Love Island as a programme she believed to promote body modifications, beauty enhancement surgery and therefore make 'young women in their 20s feel shit about themselves'. In this, *Christie*, acknowledged that had reality television been produced and 'modified' in the way that it is in contemporary society, she believed it would have 'hugely disadvantaged' her in her teenage years and 20s due to the lack of representation of different bodies, backgrounds and abilities that it represents. Participants such as *Christie* and *Ivy* reflected on the self-management of social media as being intertwined with their consumption of wider mass media, and this having an impact on the way that they engaged with social media. Thereby, whether they felt 'addicted' to using social media/following a particular programme or series, or whether this became a 'habit' in everyday practices. These accounts reflect the ambivalent nature of social media use, whereby participants recognised platforms as both sources of connection and validation and sites of frustration, comparison, and unwanted engagement (Bengtsson & Johansson, 2022; Lupinacci, 2021; Sundar & Limperos, 2013).

Participants highlighted the influence of 'for you' algorithms in shaping exposure beyond their control. The algorithm that underpins the suggested content that is generated for each individual social media user is made up of content that social media users regularly consume, hover over for more than 5 seconds, or if personal information would suggest they may be interested in a particular trend, TV show, or genre of influencer. This limited participants' ability to regulate content exposure, even when attempting to do so. As *Charlotte* described, despite not intentionally following influencer content that affected her self-esteem, such posts still appeared in her Instagram 'recommended for you' stream:

... 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.

Katie and Grace shared similar experiences, opting to delete social media apps from their phones, while Kayla removed shortcut links to reduce the temptation of overuse. These forms of self-regulation, and the shift from habitual to potentially addictive use, are explored further in the addictive cycle section. Participants' efforts to filter, avoid, or curate unwanted content illustrate the affective work involved in managing platform participation. Rather than simply consuming content, users engaged in ongoing emotional and visibility management to negotiate algorithmically curated environments, reflecting broader discussions of affective labour and everyday social media use (Coleman, 2018; Coleman, 2020; Bengtsson & Johansson, 2022).

Regardless of whether participants identified as having the ability to regulate their social media consumption, a changing condition increasing social media reliance were the Covid-19 lockdowns in the UK, between March 2020 and June 2021. According to Sam, the Covid-19 lockdown(s) ‘took away [feelings of] control’ from a vast number of people, and for Caitlin, this saw a significant rise in her average screen time from 4 hours a day, to 10 hours a day. This came as a direct consequence of the removal of her usual daily routine due to pandemic restrictions imposed by the U.K. Government. Lucy believes there has been a cultural change in the online space, specifically social media, since the initial Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020. This saw heightened engagement with social media and more people wanting to share more of their lives publicly on social media. All participants identified the pandemic as a turning point in their relationship with social media. For the majority (n=14), this impact was long-term, while for others (n=8) it was short-term, but altered their broader perception of social media.

The findings presented thus far highlight the variability and fluidity of participants’ relationships with social media, shaped by individual motivations, platform environments, and changing social conditions. While these experiences differ in form, recurring patterns can be identified across accounts, particularly in relation to routine engagement, difficulties disengaging, and ongoing efforts at self-regulation. From a CR perspective, these recurring patterns are treated as demi-regularities (see Lawson, 1990): observable but non-universal tendencies that point towards underlying generative mechanisms. Across participant narratives, these demi-regularities coalesced around two broad modes of engagement: habitual use, characterised by routine and embedded everyday practices, and addictive use, marked by compulsion, loss of control, and persistent return to platforms despite recognised harms. The following section will explore how these individualised perspectives and experiences (demi regularities) (Lawson, 1998) can be theorised into the addictive and habitual cycles of social media use. To capture this dynamic relationship, the following section develops two conceptual models - the habitual cycle and the addictive cycle of social media use - grounded in participants’ accounts and interpreted through a critical realist analytical lens. In doing so, the cyclic models provide a means of moving beyond descriptive accounts of social media use to theorise the mechanisms through which habitual and addictive engagement are produced and sustained.

5. Addictive and habitual cycles of social media use: Understanding social media relationships

Participant frequently described their experiences using the language of “habit” and “addiction”, which informed the analytical distinction developed here. This was an experience personalised to the individual, and something that could shift over time depending on the conditions in which social media was being used. Habitual engagement refers to routine, often low-level interaction with social media, embedded within everyday practices and frequently operating in the background of daily life. Whereas addictive engagement, as described by participants, refers to experiences of compulsion, difficulty disengaging, and a perceived loss of control over time spent of platforms. These modes were not discrete but fluid, with users moving between them under different conditions. From a CR perspective, these modes (cycles)

of engagement are understood as empirically observable expressions of underlying generative mechanisms, including algorithmic prompting, social comparison, and platform-specific rewards. The following conceptual models illustrate how these modes of engagement operate as cyclical processes rather than static states.

Participants described their habitual use in different ways. For example, *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?’ Some participants linked habitual use to generational norms of constant connectivity.

Participants described the Covid-19 lockdowns as intensifying engagement, blurring the distinction between habitual and compulsive use. In this context, ‘boredom scrolling’ often shifted into ‘doomscrolling’. In Figure 1 and 2, a visual map of the cyclical nature of *addictive* and *habitual* use(s) of social media is presented.

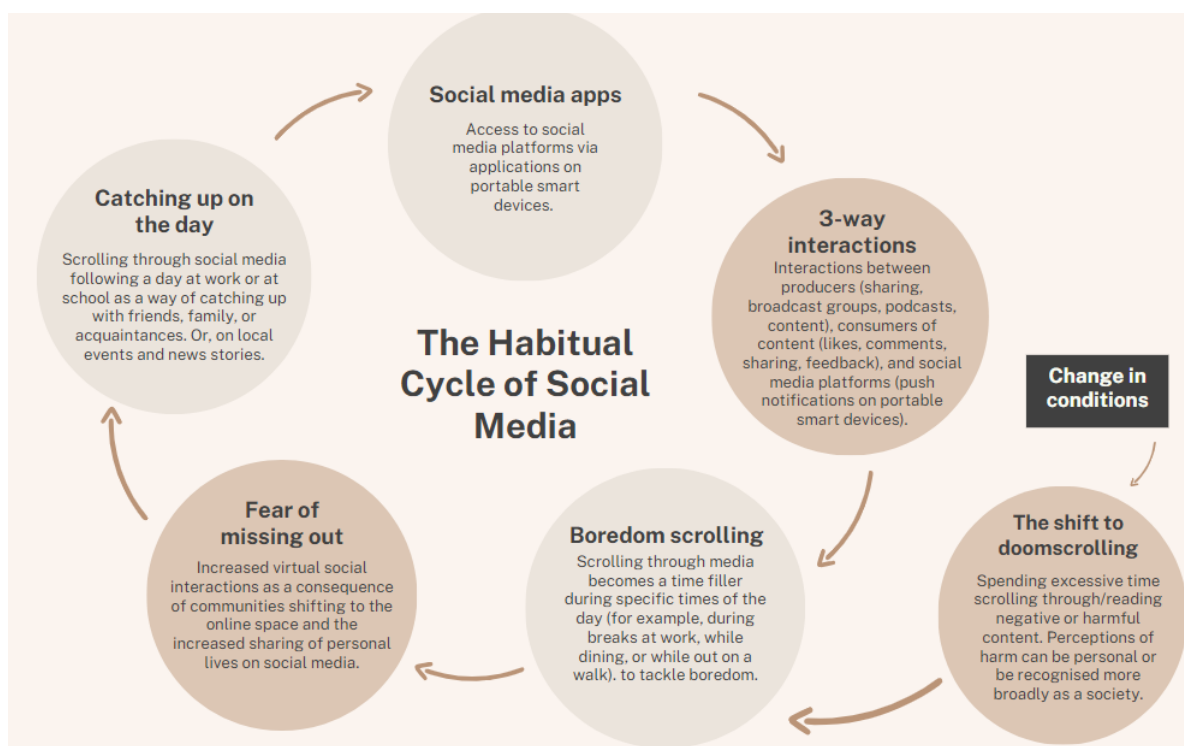


Figure 1. The Habitual Cycle of Social Media

The *habitual cycle* (Figure 1) begins with routine access to platforms, followed by ongoing interaction between users, content, and platform systems. When actively using the social media app, a 3-way interaction is initiated between social media producers, consumers, and the platform. Platform mechanisms (e.g., notifications, personal feeds) sustain repeated engagement and continue to draw in user attention. The 3-way interaction that initiates both the *addictive* and *habitual cycles of social media use* acts as structure of social media engagement. The making of the *habitual cycle of social media use* sits within steps 3 and 5 of the cycle shown in Figure 1: the use of ‘scrolling’ as opposed to ‘urge’ to check social media that can be seen in step 3 of the *addictive cycle* in Figure 2.

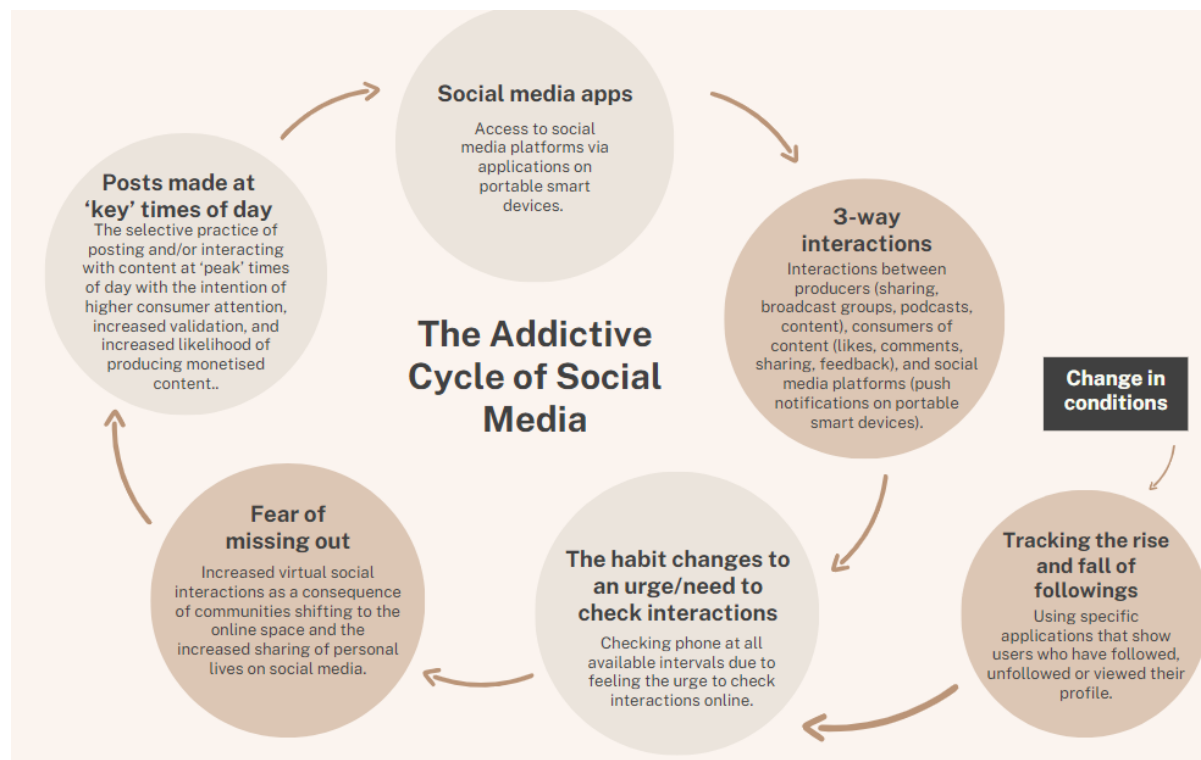


Figure 2. The Addictive Cycle of Social Media

Importantly, habitual engagement is not necessarily benign and should not be understood as inherently less harmful than addictive engagement. Rather, each mode reflects different patterns of interaction, the impacts of which depend on the nature of content, duration of engagement, and individual context (demi-regularities). *Zak* relayed experiences of ‘scrolling for hours’ whilst on nightshift, and his experience was negative; he viewed this as ‘so bad, [as] this is what they [social media platforms] wants... but I don’t have anything to do, [and] it keeps you awake’.

A key distinction between cycles concerns the extent of content production. Participants in this research exhibited patterns of engagement consistent with prosumption, despite also recognising that prosumption can intensify the likelihood of addictive engagement, particularly where visibility and monetisation are prioritised. Engagement metrics reinforce continued participation through cycles of feedback and visibility. Social media prosumers are more likely than consumers (or, ‘silent observers’) of social media to track the rise and fall of their following and are more likely to experience a changing mindset towards their social media use – from the ‘habit’ of checking their social media following and the urge to check social media interactions (see Figure 3).

The use of a tracking app to observe the rise and fall of followers could indicate 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 cause (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/individualised experience) within the findings of this article. Although it was not an experience shared by many participants, this was a practice identified by *Zak* as a significant shift in how he used social media. The monitoring of follower metrics further illustrates the affective dimension of platform participation, whereby fluctuations in visibility become emotionally significant and encourage ongoing surveillance of one’s own performance.

The *addictive cycle of social media* is not just experienced by those producing social media content but also shared by consumers. Experiences described as FOMO can be understood as empirically observable manifestations of deeper mechanisms associated with algorithmic visibility, social

connectivity and platform-rewards (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). This sense of disconnection reinforces the compulsion to check online interactions, ultimately increasing time spent on social media. This ‘fear of missing out’ was identified as the deciding factor for whether *Alice* or *Annabelle* would use or delete social media. *Annabelle* identifies 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*, 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 must be a story, or a post – is that a personality type, or a habit that you can’t break?

The overarching aim of social media platforms is to encourage frequent engagement with social media, achieved through the algorithms that underpin their business models to maximise engagement and enhance the popularity of their platforms in the current consumer market. Therefore, FOMO is fuelled by the delivery of push notifications to smart devices at different times of day and increased exposure to virtual social interactions due to communities shifting to online spaces, and the use of digital technologies to facilitate conversations (including in the workplace, educational spaces, and in a variety of network spaces) (Brown & Kuss, 2020).

Algorithmic curation was widely recognised as shaping user experience. Social media algorithms curate content based on individual behavioural data, creating highly personalised feeds that reinforce user preferences and extend screen time. These systems reinforce feedback loops that extend engagement (Livingstone, 2018; Hund, 2023). Due to the lack of transparency in how algorithms function, users - particularly influencers - engage in speculative practices to maintain visibility, leading to cycles of trial, error, and overuse (Livingstone, 2018; Bishop, 2019). This uncertainty encourages compulsive platform interaction. Influencer practices shaped by *algorithmic gossip* and communal speculation demonstrate how platform design pressures users to remain constantly active and responsive. These conditions mirror the habitual behaviours exhibited by everyday users (Bishop, 2019). The algorithm can be identified as creating harms acting as a causal mechanism in the production of cultural, embedded and structural harms experienced by social media users who engage with media platforms for prolonged periods of time, such as body-related anxiety, low self-esteem, and their description of feelings addicted to social media and normalised unregulated diet markets.

FOMO can prompt individuals to transition from passive consumers to active ‘prosumers’ of social media. Notably, 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). Fergie *et al.* (2016) outline a 3-fold typology of social media users related to the level of online engagement with user-generated content: *non-engagers*, *tacit consumers* and *prosumers*. In this research, *non-engagers* involving the same behaviours as the ‘silent observer’ termed in this research with *non-engagers* being least likely to become ‘prosumers’ and being most likely to be habitual scrollers. Whereas *tacit consumers* do not assert expertise as a producer of content nor use social media to generate financial incentives, but as more likely than a *non-engager* to become a ‘prosumer’.

Participants’ accounts reveal the ambivalent nature of social media use, whereby platforms were simultaneously experienced as sources of connection, belonging and validation, whilst also contributing to comparison, compulsion and emotional strain. As content producers, individuals engage in selective posting practices - choosing what to share, when to share it, and on which platform - to maximise engagement. *Alice* described the strategic use of ‘peak times’ by influencers and prosumers to increase likes, shares, and potential revenue through brand deals or advertisements. However, monetisation is not essential; the *addictive* cycle is fuelled by the satisfaction derived from engagement metrics alone. 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. *Alice's* account highlights how participation increasingly involves forms of visibility labour, requiring users to monitor audience engagement, anticipate platform preferences, and strategically manage self-presentation (alike Hund, 2023; Bishop, 2025). 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). Participants' experience of FOMO evidence that remaining socially visible and emotionally connected requires ongoing affective work.

5. Discussion: Harms of the contemporary consumer (social media) market

The key contribution of this article is the development of the *habitual* and *addictive* cycles as a means of conceptualising movement between modes of engagement, rather than treating habitual or 'addictive' use as fixed categories. The findings indicate that harms associated with social media are not incidental, but produced through the marketisation of platform cultures, including influencer and diet culture spaces. It is important to note that the data informing this study were collected prior to the implementation of the Online Safety Act (2023). As such, participants' experiences reflect platform conditions in the absence of formalised regulatory interventions targeting online harms. This positions the findings as indicative of how harm is produced and normalised under relatively unregulated platform conditions, highlighting the structural dynamics that regulation now seeks to address.

Participants retained capacities for agency and self-regulation, but these efforts occurred within platform environments specifically designed to encourage continued engagement. Self-regulation enables individuals to potentially overcome the addictive attributes of social media to use it in a habitual fashion, without the need to fully remove themselves from the platforms altogether. While users adopt strategies of self-regulation, these operate within conditions that structurally constrain their effectiveness. Sadly, platforms economies prioritise engagement and monetisation (Zuboff, 2019) often at the expense of user wellbeing. Within this study, presumption emerges as a key mechanism linking platform economies to cyclical patterns of engagement. Participants' accounts suggest that experiences of harm differ depending on whether engagement is primarily consumptive or productive. Figure 4 draw on Sayer's (2000) model of causation to illustrate how these dynamics operate as generative mechanisms.

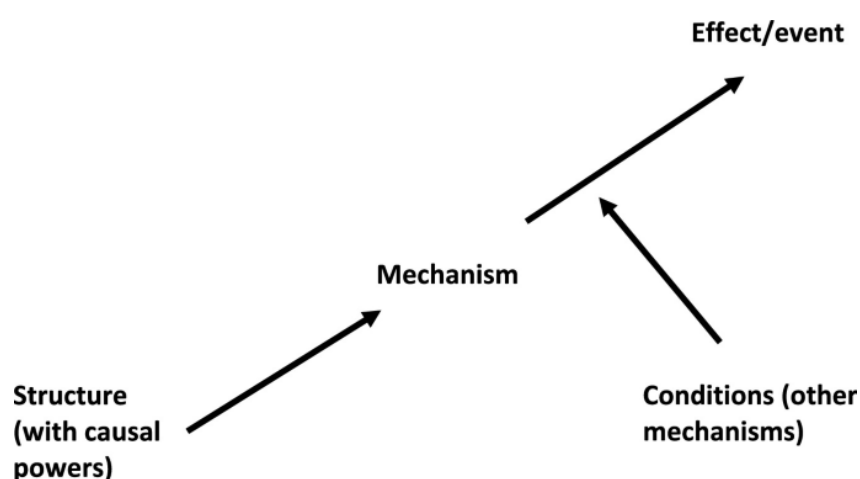


Figure 3. Andrew Sayer's (2000) diagram of critical realism

A visual representation of Andrew Sayer's (2000) conceptualisation of how knowledge is understood using critical realism.

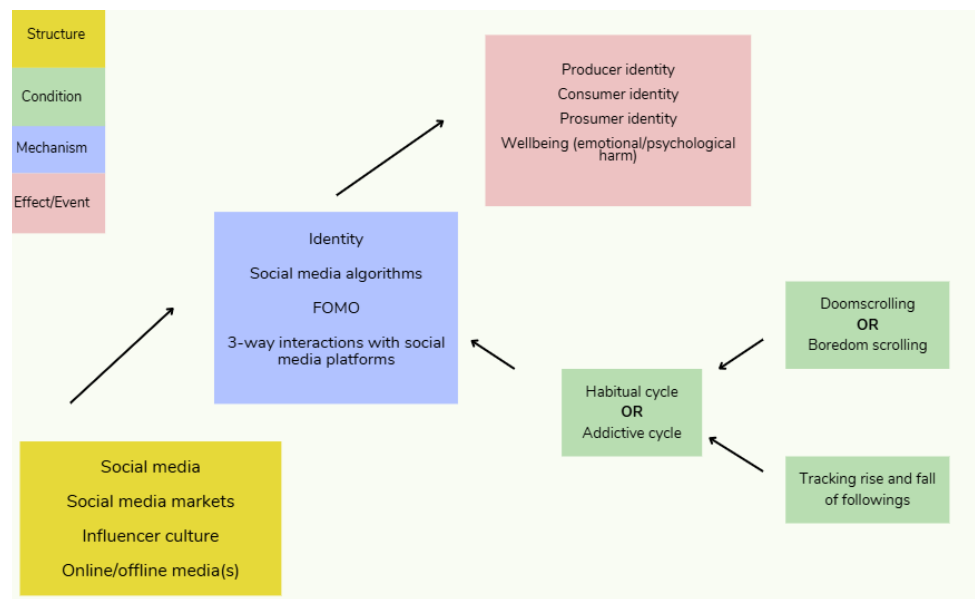


Figure 4. Lauren Steckles-Young's conceptualisation of critical realism

Adapted from Sayer's (2000) mapping of CR to demonstrate CR analysis of social media participation in this study

The model illustrates how mechanisms such as FOMO and perceived isolation trigger cycles of engagement that expose users to emotional and psychological harms. These harms are embedded within platform structures that normalise and reproduce them as part of everyday engagement. These harms emerge within platform environments structured around engagement and monetisation, where user participation is continually incentivised through algorithmic recommendation systems, visibility cultures, and commercial platform logics (Zuboff, 2019; Lanier, 2018; Bishop, 2025).

Prosumption is further driven by platform cultures that incentivise visibility, participation, and content production, including opportunities for monetisation (Bishop, 2025) and forms of social recognition (Hund, 2023). Such pressures were identified by *Alice* where she disclosed sharing her health and fitness 'journey' to uphold accountability to their aesthetic goal. These dynamics intensify movement between *habitual* and *addictive* modes of engagement; social media users can move between obtaining an experience described as addictive in their use of social media and scrolling social media being an everyday practice that is a habit. It is not the case that once the *addictive cycle of social media* has been initiated, that it cannot return to a habitual relationship. Both modes emerge from the same underlying interaction between users, content, and platform systems. Which mode emerges depends on the interaction between user motivation, platform design, and contextual conditions. Experiences of compulsion and anxiety are associated with shifts towards addictive engagement, whereas routine or instrumental use reflects habitual engagement. Alternatively, if the user is using social media as a behaviour to pass time or has scheduled in social media content creation/posting as part of their job (for example), they are entering into a *habitual cycle*.

6. Conclusion

Engagement with social media does not reach a definitive endpoint; rather, it evolves through cycles. At different points, a user's relationship with social media may shift - from one characterised by addiction to one shaped by habit - depending on their self-perceived identity and orientation toward platform use (Leary & Tangney, 2012). These cycles function as generative mechanisms, with emergent properties shaped by contextual conditions such as the accessibility of social media, the absence of platform regulation, the presence of stigma within online spaces, and transitions in user identity. These dynamics are reinforced by algorithmic platform economies that promote continuous engagement, structured

around users' daily routines. This ongoing cycle fosters and sustains both *habitual* and *addictive* relationships with social media, as reflected in the findings of this research. The visual representations of the *addictive* and *habitual cycles of social media use* presented in this article offer a significant 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. The neoliberal market that underpins social media platforms is intrinsically linked to the harms experienced by users, with the prioritisation of organisational profiteering over the individualised and often invisible harms encountered through platform engagement and content exposure.

This article demonstrates that harms operate at a structural level shaped by platform economies and cultural norms rather than solely individual behaviours. Addressing these harms requires interventions that move beyond individual responsibility toward structural regulation. As this study captures user experiences prior to the implementation of the Online Safety Act (2023), it provides a baseline for understanding how engagement cycles and associated harms may be reshaped under emerging regulatory conditions. This includes reconsidering how 'harm' is defined within regulatory frameworks such as the Online Safety Act (2023). Attention should be paid to algorithmic recommendation systems that sustain engagement cycles, both *habitual* and *addictive*. Further, this should involve wider consultation using lived experiences and existing evidence bases to consult on how social media platforms can improve their algorithmic designs to support users in regulating their own consumption and production of content.

References

- Andreassen, C. S. (2015). Online Social Network Site Addiction: A Comprehensive Review. *Technology and Addiction*, 2: 175-184. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40429-015-0056-9>
- Andreassen, C. S., & Pallesen, S. (2014). Social network site addiction: An overview. *Current Pharmaceutical Design*, 20: 4053-4061. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2174/13816128113199990616>
- Andreassen, C. S., Billieux, J., Griffiths, M. D., Kuss, D. J., Demetrovics, Z., Mazzoni, E., & Pallesen, S. (2016). The relationship between addictive use of social media and video games and symptoms of psychiatric disorders: A large-scale cross-sectional study. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 30(2): 252-262. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037/adb0000160>
- Andreassen, C. S., Pallesen, S. & Griffiths, M. D. (2017). The relationship between addictive use of social media, narcissism and self-esteem: Findings from a large national survey. *Addictive Behaviour*. 64: 287-293. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2016.03.006>
- Bengtsson, S. & Johansson, S. (2022). The Meanings of Social Media Use in Everyday Life: Filling Empty Slots, Everyday Transformations and Mood Management. *Social Media + Society*, 8(4). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221130292>
- Bhaskar, R. (1978). *A Realist Theory of Science* (eds). Routledge: Abingdon.
- Bishop, S. (2025). Influencer creep: How artists strategically navigate the platformisation of art worlds. *New Media & Society*, 27(4): 2109-2126. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231206090>
- Bishop, S. (2020). Algorithmic experts: selling algorithmic lore on YouTube. *Social Media + Society*. 6(1): 2056305119897323. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119897323>
- Bishop, S. (2019). 'Managing visibility on YouTube through algorithmic gossip', *New Media & Society*, 21(11-12): 2589-2606. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819854731>
- Brown, L., & Kuss, D. J. (2020). Fear of missing out, mental wellbeing, and social connectedness: A seven-day social media abstinence trial. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(12): 4566. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17124566>
- Canning, V. & Tombs, S. (2021). *From Social Harm to Zemiology: A Critical Introduction*. (eds). London: Routledge. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429430497>
- Coleman, R. (2018). Social media and the materialisation of the affective present. In, T. D. Sampson, D. Ellis, and S. Maddison. (eds) *Affect and Social Media*. London: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Coleman, R. (2020). Making, Managing and Experiencing 'the now': Digital Media and the Compression and Policing of 'Real Time'. *New Media + Society*, 22(9): 1680-1698. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820914871>
- Coyne, P. & Woodruff, S. J. (2023). Taking a Break: The Effects of Partaking in a Two-Week Social Media Digital Detox on Problematic Smartphone and Social Media Use, and Other Health-Related Outcomes among Young Adults. *Behavioural Science (Basel)*, 13(12): 1004. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs13121004>

- Crocco, M. S., Segall, A., Halvorsen, A.-L., Stamm, A., & Jacobsen, R. (2020). "It's not like they're selling your data to dangerous people": Internet privacy, teens, and (non-) controversial public issues. *The Journal of Social Studies Research*, 44(1), 21-33. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jssr.2019.09.004>
- D'Arienzo, M.C., Boursier, V. & Griffiths, M.D. (2019). Addiction to Social Media and Attachment Styles: A Systematic Literature Review. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*. 17, 1094–1118. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-019-00082-5>
- Duffy, B. E., & Hund, E. (2015). "Having it all on Social Media": Entrepreneurial Femininity and Self-Branding Among Fashion Bloggers. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115604337>
- Duffy, B. E., & Meisner, C. (2022). Platform Governance at the Margins: Social Media Creators' Experiences with Algorithmic (in)Visibility. *Media, Culture & Society*: 1-20. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221111923>
- Dhingra, R. & Parashar, B. (2022). Validation of Social Media & Adolescents: A matter of self esteem. *Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers*: 13(4): 114-119. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47750/jett.2022.13.04.017>
- Fergie, G., Hunt, K. & Hilton, S. (2016). Social media as a space for support: Young adults' perspectives on producing and consuming user-generated content about diabetes and mental health. *Social Science & Medicine*. 170, 46-54.
- Ford, E., Curlew, K., Wongkoblap, A. & Curcin, V. (2019). Public Opinions on Using Social Media Content to Identify Users with Depression and Target Mental Health Care Advertising: Mixed Methods Survey. *JMIR Mental Health*, 6(11): e12942. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2196/12942>
- Gibbs, N. (2023). *The Muscle Trade: The Use and Supply of Image and Performance Enhancing Drugs*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Goodyear, V., Wood, H., & Armour, K. (2018). *Yaz: Suggested or recommended social media content*, in V. Goodyear & K. Armour 'Young People, Social Media and Health'. London: Routledge.
- Gov UK. (2023) Online Safety Act 2023, c. 50. (UK Public General Acts).
- Hall, A. (2019). Lifestyle Drugs and Late Capitalism: A Topography of Harm. In, T. Raymen & D. Smith (eds) *Deviant Leisure: Criminological Perspectives on Leisure and Harm*. Palgrave Studies in Crime, Media and Culture: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham: 161-186.
- Hund, E. (2023) *The Influencer Industry: The Quest for Authenticity on Social Media*. Princeton University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2v6pczn>
- Hou, Y., Xiong, D., Jiang, T., Song, L., & Wang, Q. (2019). Social media addiction: Its impact, mediation, and intervention. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 13(1), Article 4. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2019-1-4>
- Lanier, J. (2018). *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Right Now*. London: Bodley Head.
- Lawson, T. (1998). Economic science without experimentation. In, R. Bhaskar, M. Archer, A. Collier, T. Lawson & A. Norrie (eds) *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*. Critical Realism. Interventions. London: Routledge.
- Leary, M. R. & Tangney, J. P. (2012). *Handbook of Self and Identity*. (2nd eds). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Livingstone, S. (2018). 'Audiences in an age of datafication: Critical questions for media research', *Television & New Media*, 20(2), pp. 170–183. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476418811118>
- Lupinacci, L. (2021). 'Absentmindedly scrolling through nothing': Liveness and compulsory continuous connectedness in social media. *New Media + Society*, 43(2): 273-290. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720939454>
- Morris, R. III., Moretta, T. & Potenza, M. N. (2023). The psychobiology of problematic use of social media. *Current Behavioural Neuroscience Reports*, 10: 65-74. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40473-023-00261-8>
- Radtke, T., Apel, T., Schenkel, K., Keller, J. & von Lindern, E. (2022). Digital detox: an effective solution in the smartphone era? A systematic literature review. *Mobile, Media & Communications*. 10(2), 190-215. DOI: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/20501579211028647>
- Riener, K. & Peter, S. (2021). Algorithmic audiencing: Why we need to rethink free speech on social media. *Journal of Information Technology*. 36(4). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/02683962211013358>
- Rifkin, J. (2022). *The Age of Resilience: Reimagining Existing on Rewilding Earth*. (eds). London: Swift Press.
- Ritzer, G., & Jurgenson, N. (2010). Production, consumption, prosumption: The nature of capitalism in the age of the digital 'prosumer'. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 10(1), 13–36. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540509354673>
- Sandford, R. & Quarmby, T. (2018). Space, place, and identity: New pressures in the lives of young people, in V. Goodyear & K. Armour, *Young People, Social Media and Health*. London: Routledge. DOI:
- Sayer, A. (2000). *Realism and Social Science*. London: SAGE Publications. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446218730>
- Sharp, G., & Gerrard, Y. (2022). The Body Image "Problem" on Social Media: *Novel Directions for the Field*. *Body Image*, 41, 267–271. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2022.03.004>
- Starcevic, V., Billieux, J., Schimmenti, A. (2018). Selfitis and behavioural addiction: A plea for terminological and conceptual rigour. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 52(10): 919-920. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004867418797442>
- Stutchbury, K. (2022). Critical realism: an explanatory framework of small-scale qualitative studies or an 'unhelpful edifice'? *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 45(2): 113-128. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2021.1966623>

- Sundar, S. & Limperos, A. M. (2013). Use of grats 2.0: New gratifications for new media. *Journal of Broadcasting + Electronic Media*, 57(4): 504-525. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2013.845827>
- Toffler, A. (1990). *Powershift: Knowledge, wealth, and violence at the edge of the twenty-first century*. New York, NY: Bantam.
- Toma, C. L. & Hancock, J. T. (2013). Self-Affirmation Underlies Facebook Use. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 39(3): 321-331. DOI: <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1177/0146167212474694>
- Tullet-Prado, D., Stavropoulos, V., Gomez, R., & Doley, J. (2023). Social media use and abuse: Different profiles of users and their associations with addictive behaviours. *Addictive behaviors Reports*, 17, 100479. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.abrep.2023.100479>
- Turow, J. (2011). *The Daily You: How the New Advertising Industry is Defining Your Identity and Your Worth*. Yale: University Press.
- Williams, M. & Burnap, P. (2016). Cyberhate on social media in the aftermath of Woolwich: A case study in computational criminology and big data. *British Journal of Criminology*, 56: 211-238. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azv059>
- Yar, M. (2012). Crime, media and the will-to-representation: Reconsidering relationships in the new media age. *Crime, Media, Culture*. 0(0): 1-16. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659012443227>
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. Profile Books.