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The lifecycle of a social media beauty trend: a case study of the Instagram body

Tokoni Uti 🆔 and Madeleine Marcella-Hood 🆔

Grays School of Art, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, Scotland

ABSTRACT
This article explores the evolution of the Instagram body as an example of a social media beauty trend and theorises an updated lifecycle model to convey this phenomenon. The advent and evolution of social media has led to an online beauty culture and ecosystem, with new influential creators, and consumers driving trends and standards in online spaces. Lifecycle models exist across a range of contexts, with the fashion lifecycle being the most relevant to the current study. However, these models have not been adapted to reflect the phenomenon of social media and the current study aims to address that gap. The current research consists of a qualitative case study of the Instagram body as an example of a social media beauty trend. Interviews were carried out with influential stakeholders (fitness professionals, content creators and a cosmetic surgeon) who could observe and provide insights into changing behaviour and beauty ideals. Archival data were collected through an analysis of song lyrics and music videos to underpin the timing of specific stages in the lifecycle. A six-stage life-cycle model is proposed, consisting of emergence, mainstreaming, normalisation/ peak, criticism/fatigue, discard and retrospective phases. Themes around gender disparity in the production and consumption of contemporary beauty trends were uncovered, providing direction for future research in this area. This research has implications for future research in body image, fashion, media and cultural studies.

1. Introduction

Beauty standards or ideals can be defined as the individual or collective physical attributes that are glorified and aspired to within society (Yan & Bissell, 2014). These have existed for centuries and evolved throughout that time. The toned and athletic supermodel body of the 1980s (Wang, 2016), the emaciated Heroin chic look of the 1990s (Wallerstein, 1998) and the buff or yoga body of the 2000s (Harrington, 2022) all serve as examples of contemporary beauty ideals and these can also be observed as trends that have cycled out of popularity to be replaced with a new ideal. Social media and visual platforms like Instagram have had a significant influence over contemporary beauty standards (Kolsquare, 2021). As social media users increasingly share and interact with beauty-related content (Traackr, 2024), an online beauty culture and ecosystem have emerged, comprising visual, written and video-based content, new influential creators and consumers - all of whom are driving new beauty trends and standards in digital spaces.

The aim of the current research was to explore the lifecycle of a social media beauty trend and develop a lifecycle model that is illustrative of how these trends evolve. Social media are recognised for their profound impact on beauty and body ideals (Fadavi et al., 2020; Ramphul and Mejias, 2018). The relationship between social media and beauty standards or definitions has attracted interest from researchers in the fields of fashion, business, marketing and psychology. Existing studies tend to explore this quite broadly, observing some of the ways in which social media have impacted perceptions and

beauty ideals relating to the self (see for example Henriques & Patnaik, 2020). Other studies centre on specific aspects of social media and their effects on beauty standards, such as celebrity and influencer culture (see for example Eggerstedt et al., 2020). Finally, much of this research considers the effects of social media on its users rather than from the perspective of those who are actively engaged in their production (see for example Xie, 2024).

The current research takes an open and exploratory approach and, although it can be situated in the field of arts, humanities and social sciences, there are cross-disciplinary implications for fields such as psychology and gender studies. The current research adopts the term beauty 'trend' as opposed a beauty standard or ideal, in recognition that social media and particularly visual platforms have revolutionised aesthetic culture (Leaver et al., 2020) and accelerated the fashion system (Kovacevek, 2018), resulting in more trends and a wider set of influences surrounding these (Bendoni, 2017). The current research consists of a case study of the Instagram body as a specific example of a social media beauty trend, where phases are identified and explored alongside key influences and effects.

1.1. Background, context and rationale

Trend behaviour on social media is found to be distinct from traditional platforms.

Instagram is recognised as one of the first social media platforms that was distinctly image-based, where the name Instagram itself is a portmanteau of the words 'instant camera' and 'telegram' (Lang, 2015, np). It was founded in 2010 as a photo and video-sharing social media platform and is predicted to reach 1.44 billion monthly active users by 2025, which equates to almost a third of internet users globally (Dixon, 2024). It is recognised as one of the most influential digital platforms today, particularly for the beauty and fashion sectors (Traackr, 2024).

Instagram is recognised for its significant impact in shaping aesthetics and visual culture (Leaver et al., 2020). The popularity of Instagram and subsequent visual platforms have played a significant role in the acceleration of the trend lifecycle. Haenlein et al. (2020), for example, found that trends can have a lifespan of as little as a few weeks, suggesting that social media users are constantly exposed to and engaging with new beauty-related content and ideals.

A key post-millennium development is the advent of independent experts in the form of social influencers/content creators on these platforms. Enke and Borchers (2019) define these as 'third-party actors who have established a significant number of relevant relationships with a specific quality to influence organisational stakeholders through content production, content distribution, interaction, and personal appearance on the social web'. They represent a new style of fashion and beauty criticism, which in its earliest phases was acknowledged to have made fashion more democratic and accessible to consumers (Allen, 2009).

Characterised by its small waist, thick thighs and large backside, the Instagram body came to prominence in the 2010s – brought to the fore by social media and popularised by iconic celebrities, such as Nicki Minaj and the Kardashians (Brown, 2022). The effects of the Instagram body are visible across western society, for example through the rise of complimentary clothing styles and aesthetics, the emergence of fitness regimes that focus on enhancing the physique (Fashion Quarterly, 2017) and, perhaps most significantly, the popularity of the Brazillian Butt Lift (BBL), which is now one of the most requested surgical procedures in the world despite its unusually high mortality rate (Frame 2018; Del Vecchio & Dayan, 2019; Del Vecchio et al. 2021). The use of surgery to obtain the Instagram body, despite the well-documented dangers of doing so, shows the significant lengths that may be pursued in achieving a body ideal.

The research provides insights into how social media beauty trends emerge and evolve over time and the influences that feed into these. The Instagram body serves as an example of a contemporary beauty trend that has experienced prolonged popularity over a period of around a decade, perhaps therefore contributing a more lasting effect on beauty culture and body image throughout this period. The Instagram body is a beauty trend that emerged on social media, through its namesake platform Instagram,

and that has begun to transition out of popularity, making it possible to study its evolution and effects more holistically.

2. Literature review

The current research is underpinned theoretically by two areas of literature: firstly, social media and beauty, where previous research recognises that social media have had a direct impact on beauty ideals in terms of how these impact users' body image and self-esteem; and secondly the fashion lifecycle, where it is understood that beauty ideals transition through cyclical phases but where existing lifecycle models are not reflective of contemporary digital society and visual culture. The current study aims to understand better how social media beauty trends are produced and how these evolve throughout time, observing their influences and implications for society.

2.1. Social media and beauty

Social media are recognised for their significant impact on users' self-esteem and phycological wellbeing (Henriques & Patnaik, 2020). In the context of the current study, this can be linked to the effects of increased exposure to image-based media on platforms like Instagram (Dixon, 2024). Instagram is recognised as a space for aspirational fashion and lifestyle content, where user groups (eg celebrities, influencers, individuals and brands) tend to adopt a highly curated approach to content creation fixating on the best bits (Hund, 2017).

Body dysmorphic disorder is a recognised psychiatric condition in which an individual is consistently preoccupied and dissatisfied with the appearance of one part of their body or their body in general (Veale, 2004). While body dysmorphic disorder was first identified in 1886 (Holliday et al., 2015), social media dysmorphia and other associated disorders emerged in the 2010s (Ramphul and Mejias, 2018; Fadavi et al., 2020). Though not yet a recognised psychiatric disorder, social media dysmorphia refers to the increased bodily dissatisfaction that results from the frequent use of social media. Ramphul and Mejias (2018) observe the phenomenon of 'Snapchat Dysmorphia', which refers to dissatisfaction with one's face following frequent use of Snapchat filters to alter its appearance. Fadavi et al. (2020) found that these practices were most prominent on visual social media platforms, such as Instagram and Snapchat, and that they were burgeoning sources of inspiration for cosmetic surgery due to the nature of their content and the accessibility of image-altering tools, known as 'filters'.

It is argued that feelings of dissatisfaction with one's own appearance are exacerbated in digital spaces, where many users spend hours every day viewing content and scrutinising their own and other people's appearance consciously and unconsciously (Sulistyo et al., 2022; Fioravanti et al., 2022). Social media, by their very nature, encourage behaviours that could lead to increased forms of body dysmorphia. These include self-surveillance in the form of comparing one's appearance to others (Fardouly et al., 2015; Henriques & Patnaik, 2020), quantifying beauty through metrics (likes, comments, etc), the use of image-altering tools (Rajanala et al., 2018) and engaging in community discussions about body types (Hazlehurst, 2021). In this way, visual platforms like Instagram have been linked to narcissism (Moon et al., 2016; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016).

This behaviour has extended into the workplace and Graber and Kourosh (2020) found that the accelerated and frequent use of video conferencing software and the associated and unnatural viewing of our own faces, had led to increased self-consciousness and dissatisfaction, heightening existing and creating new insecurities. Fadavi et al. (2020) found that individuals with social media dysmorphia had not only a distorted sense of self-image but were also more likely to undergo potentially harmful behaviour in the pursuit of their 'ideal' body, where the risk-to-reward ratio became skewed, leading to a potential disregard for the risks involved in the pursuit of idealised beauty.

It should be noted that younger generations have been found to undertake more plastic surgery procedures in recent times (Heron-Langton, 2019) and have been found to be less risk-averse than older generations (Albert and Duffy, 2012). It can be argued that the prevalence of technology-related body

dysmorphia, combined with the extreme body trends promoted on social media, could lead to adverse effects on users' mental and physical health. Fadavi et al. (2020, p. 1636) recommend that the identification of patients with a history of or who currently suffer from body dysmorphia or social media dysmorphia should be incorporated into the pre-surgery process.

The emergence of new actors in digital spaces is another area of academic attention and that researchers have found has a direct and at times profound impact on body image. This is recognised most powerfully in existing literature that explores influencer culture, where social media influencers are found to be increasingly powerful in shaping beauty, fashion, lifestyle and other behavioural trends often in aspirational and unrealistic ways (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). Some researchers have attempted to measure beauty ideals through quantitative measurements of facial proportions in popular influencer content (Eggerstedt et al., 2020), in what Loucas et al. (2024, np) term 'the ideal influencer face'. These studies suggest some of the ways in which social media and particularly Instagram, are shaping further standardisation of beauty ideals.

It has been established in the literature that social media beauty trends tend to be directed towards women, which suggests that women may bear the brunt of the scrutiny that is attached to these trends (Bonell et al., 2021). Mockery of extreme beauty and body trends existed prior to the advent of social media, for example the Yoga body of the later 1990s and 2000s, which typically featured a small waist and large breasts and where female celebrity icons, who aligned most strongly with this beauty ideal, were deemed icons of that time (Humayun, 2022). As that body type faded out of fashion, the public pedestalisation of former icons evolved into public mockery and lampooning in print and television media (Loomes, 2018). With criticism amplified and often exacerbated on social media (Siddiqui & Singh, 2016), there may be a heightened risk of misogyny and harassment directed at women.

2.2. Fashion and beauty trend lifecycles

The cyclical nature of fashion and beauty trends is recognised throughout history and much of the work in the emerging field of fashion studies has focused on the various influences that feed into these trends. However, the fashion lifecycle, as an industry-recognised term, is often applied in a vague and ambiguous manner (Sproles, 1981), with little attention and some ambiguity around its theoretical origins. Nystrom (1928) has been identified as the earliest known author and, as such, is credited for the lifecycle model within the present study. The fashion lifecycle (Figure 1) highlights five distinct phases in which a fashion enters and exits the market: (1) introduction; (2) growth; (3) peak; (4) decline; and (5) obsolescence. Through these stages, a fashion is believed to be introduced to the market by a fashion leader, attains growth within the market, reaches a peak of popularity and financial viability, experiences a decline in popularity due to market saturation, and finally exits the market and becomes obsolete after being discarded by consumers.

This model is useful in illustrating the cyclical nature of fashion in terms of how trends are adopted by consumers. However much has changed since its publication almost 100 years ago, in terms of communication media and society. At the time of the model's creation, media were dominated by a one-way
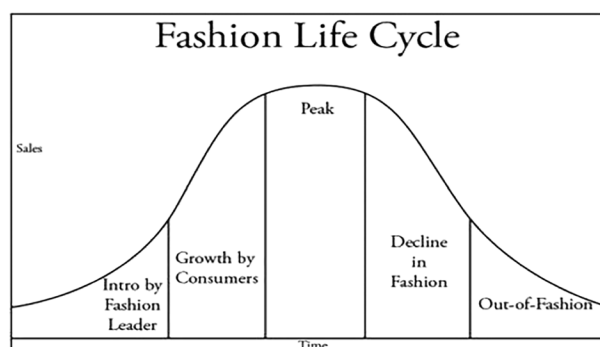

Figure 1. The Fashion Lifecycle (Nystrom, 1928).

flow of communication where tastemakers and gatekeepers (ie upper classes and industry elite) fed fashion information to the general public who had limited means to respond (Apuke, 2017). Today, social media are at the forefront of communication and the fashion system is multidirectional, where consumers have significant power in creating, influencing, accepting and rejecting trends (Jensen & Helles, 2017). In addition, new gatekeepers and influential forces are recognised to be shaping and giving access to fashion and beauty-related trends and information in digital spaces.

The current study contributes an updated lifecycle model, which is underpinned theoretically by the original Nystrom (1928) model. In developing their social media beauty trend lifecycle model, the authors sought to address the following research questions:

1. What are the stages in the lifecycle of a social media beauty trend?
2. What are the key influences in the lifecycle of a social media beauty trend?

3. Method

The research is underpinned by pragmatism as a philosophical stance (Morgan, 2007) and was guided by the case study enquiry approach, which typically seeks to combine a variety of perspectives and methods to further understand an issue or phenomenon (Yin, 2009). As is appropriate in case study enquiry, the data were gathered in an open and unassuming manner. Qualitative data were collected from three stakeholder groups who are recognised as influential, whether in terms of enabling access to the body type through fitness, surgery or online content creation. The authors argue that accessibility and widening of access through social media content are key features of contemporary beauty trends more generally, which again reinforces the benefits of involving a mix of stakeholder groups who can give access to the trend. Qualitative data were underpinned with archival data, which were collected using a web-based approach, where song lyrics and online videos were analysed for references to the Instagram body over a ten-year period, helping map the trajectory of the Instagram body alongside interviewees' narratives.

3.1. Interviews

Interviews were conducted with eight fitness professionals, one cosmetic surgeon, and six content creators to gain deep and nuanced insights into the manifestations of the Instagram body as a beauty trend, as well as to position aspects and events within specific stages of the lifecycle. The research was situated within the small geographic context of Scotland, which meant that interviewees were operating within the same parameters and with similar points of reference. This is a strength in case study research, where parameters are needed to ensure that suitable depth can be obtained (Njie & Asimiran, 2014). However, it is also a limitation in the study, which resulted in a disproportionate response rate from the stakeholder groups, with a particularly low response from cosmetic surgeons.

A purposive, stratified sampling technique was employed to target interviewees and snowball sampling was used to help identify further research participants (Robinson, 2014). While seeking out fitness professionals to interview, contact information was sourced from the websites of fitness organisations, which operate in Scotland while cosmetic surgeons were sourced through public directories of medical professionals in the UK. While seeking interviewees, greater difficulty was encountered in sampling cosmetic professionals. Names were found on websites but there was difficulty in obtaining contact information for surgeons as most sites list general hospital contacts. It should also be noted that Scotland has a small number of practicing cosmetic surgeons with only 53 consultants recognised by the British Association of Plastic Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgeons (BAPRAS) in 2019. As the interviews were qualitative and drew on individual perspectives across the three distinct stakeholder groups as part of a case study inquiry, even a single interviewee was deemed useful in providing insights into the research phenomenon. Content creators were sampled using Scottish-related hashtags such as #ScottishBlogger and #ScottishCreator on Instagram and contacted via private message on the platform.

This resulted in a total of 15 interviewees across the stakeholder groups (eight fitness professionals, one cosmetic surgeon and six content creators). Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were conducted face-to-face in-person or facilitated by video call. The interviews were semi-structured, comprising a combination of pre-determined and evolving questions (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The interviews were audio recorded and the data analysed thematically, in keeping with Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. To allow for the easy identification of themes and patterns, findings report documents were created for each participant group. This allowed independent analysis of each participant's response but also enabled comparison across the data as a set, where participants' and stakeholder group responses could be compared and contrasted.

The process of sampling interview participants revealed a gender dimension to the research, where it was observed that most fitness professionals listed as staff on company websites were men. This is consistent with findings from gym chains in the UK, which report that the majority of signups for Level 3 Personal Training qualification are men (OriGym, 2021). Of the eight interviewees, three women were purposively sampled and interviewed. A similar pattern was observed when sampling cosmetic surgeons, which is supported by BAPRAS (2019) data confirming that only 20% of its workforce are female. Interestingly, the opposite pattern was uncovered when sampling content creators, where the majority were found to be women, despite the researcher exploring open hashtags that were not female focused. All six content creators interviewed for the study were women, consistent with current data which suggests that a majority of social media content creators publishing sponsored content are female (Statista, 2018). This puts a gender slant on the research findings as it shows that men make up the majority in the two 'professional' groups that were interviewed, whereas women make up the entirety of the 'non-professional' group. Given that the Instagram body is largely a female-beauty aesthetic, these findings suggest that men are in the majority of those who are profiting from the body trend.

When reflecting on the gender disparity in participant groups, it is also relevant to note that fitness and cosmetic surgery stakeholder group participants all rejected a role in the beauty industry and preferred to identify as a part of the health industry. Historically, it has been observed that beauty is frivolous and unserious (Cohen et al., 1996; Lieu, 2000), particularly compared to medical interventions that are designed to cure or rehabilitate illness (Barone et al., 2017). Content creator interviewees, on the other hand, were more cognisant of their role in the beauty industry.

The authors designed the data collection with reference to the Scottish Government's ethical guidance for social research (Scottish Government, 2024). Ethical approval was sought and granted by their institution at the outset of the study. Informed consent was gathered from each interview participant, who were given full disclosure of research intent before agreeing to take part in the study. Participants were made aware of how their data would be handled and used within the research and the decision was made to keep interviewees anonymous throughout the study. Due to the nature of the research, specifically ethical considerations, supporting data is not available.

3.2. Contextual data

A content analysis of song lyrics from the official UK year-end charts from 2010 to 2019 was carried out to help underpin the trajectory of the Instagram body and its visibility through song lyrics as an example of popular media. Lyrics were sourced through the website Genius.com and references to the Instagram body were tallied numerically within each song. Before beginning the analysis, a determination was made regarding words that constitute a reference to the 'Instagram body'. Culturally, the Instagram body is described as one featuring a slim waist, large backside, and thick thighs (Betz & Ramsey, 2017) and terms, slang, euphemisms, and direct references to these features were used to retrieve data in the form of references to the Instagram body (eg 'booty', 'ass', and 'fatty') (Gottschild, 2005). The lyrics of each song were examined and counted manually and the findings recorded in a table, which was then converted to a bar chart, which illustrates the trajectory of the trend's popularity over a ten-year period, showing a spike in references to the Instagram body in 2017. Although the number of references per year is small, it should be highlighted that the data were sources from year-end charts, which are illustrative of the most popular songs from the whole year (representative of many more songs that did not achieve that level of mass recognition in the UK).

As the Instagram body is a visual phenomenon, an analysis of YouTube content was also carried out, using the titles of videos from 2010 to 2019. YouTube is one of the most popular social media platforms and one that is closely connected to Instagram (Stevens, 2021). It has a helpful indexing function, which enables content to be analysed by date, whereas the application programming interface (API) of Instagram is not accessible to the public. For each year of analysis, the range input followed the format 1/1/20 to 31/12/20. The title for each video, its meta description, and the account that it was published on was extracted and converted to a table. By extracting and tabulating this data, the progression of content published using the phrase 'big butt' over a decade could be mapped and analysed alongside the song lyrics data.

4. Results

The findings informed the development of a six-stage lifecycle model (Figure 2), which although built on the phenomenon of the Instagram body, can be applied to social media beauty trends more generally and the authors invite its exploration in new contexts.
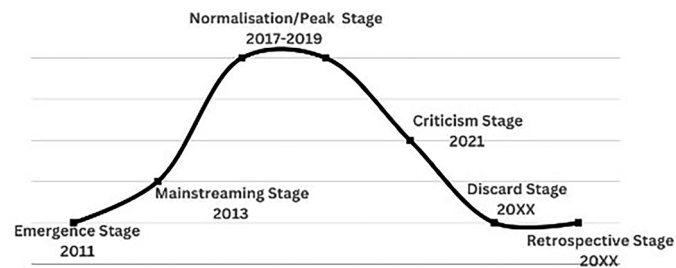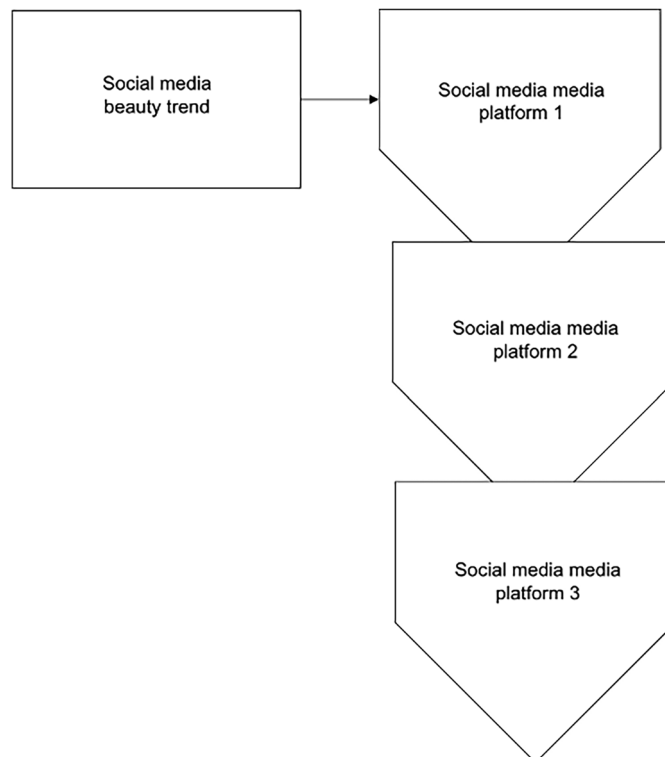

Figure 2. Lifecycle of a social media beauty trend.

Figure 3. The emergence stage.

4.1. Phase 1: the emergence stage

The emergence phase marks the beginning of the social media beauty trend lifecycle and refers to the period where it first appears in the public consciousness. In the case of the Instagram body, the emergence stage can be identified as beginning in 2011. Despite attribution to its namesake platform, cross-platform migration of content across different platforms (eg between Instagram, Youtube and Facebook) are significant in the emergence of the Instagram body (see Figure 3). By 2012, Instagram had gained significant popularity (Blystone, 2022), which perhaps goes some way towards explaining why the body ideal and the platform appear inextricably connected.

Archival data reveals growing popularity of the beauty trend, where 2012 saw an even more pronounced increase, where 8/10 videos focused on helping viewers achieve this body type through a suggested fitness regime. During this time, video content was limited to fitness, with fitness-focused content creators recognised as early influencers in the body trend (Noonan, 2018). Fitness professionals were identified as a key stakeholder group, both online (with fitness videos being providing early evidence for the shift in body aesthetic towards Instagram body) and offline (in gyms). Many consumers, in their pursuit of specific body goals, turn to fitness professionals for guidance (Donaghue & Allen, 2016).

The fitness professional interviewees as a subgroup all had direct experience of personal training during the period being observed, ie working directly with clients to offer personalised programmes and guidance for the achievement of fitness goals (Melton et al., 2008). Interviewees ranged in their number of years' experience (from 3 to 18 years) but were all able to observe a change in the way women trained in the gym and their desired goals. Interviewees noted a shift in body aspirations among women towards strengthening and aspiration of a toned appearance, eg visible muscles around the thighs and abdominals – which is consistent with the Instagram body ideal. This runs contrary to previous fears among women of becoming bulky or muscular if they engaged in weight training (Sen, 2019). Interviewees tended to associate this change in attitude and behaviour amongst women with the prevalence of a more curvaceous body within the media. One participant explained:

> It's becoming a thing called 'strong is sexy'… so many girls now say, 'oh I'd like to work on a Kardashian bum'…
> They want to grow the bum and they want volume instead of getting bony and skinny.

These findings suggest a shift in mindset and fitness goals among female gym goers in the early 2010s, which was influenced by social media and celebrity icons. This is markedly different from the traditional fashion lifecycle (Nystrom, 1928), where the introductory phase signifies the planned introduction of a new fashion or style from the industry to the public.
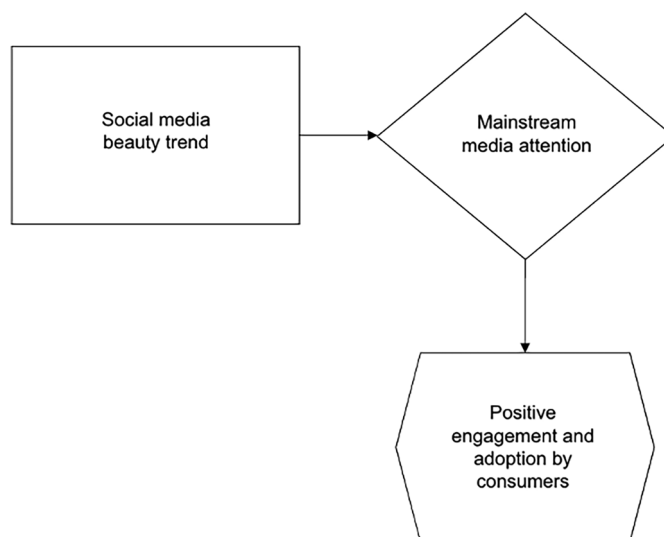

Figure 4. The mainstreaming stage.

4.2. Phase 2: the mainstreaming stage

The second stage identified in the lifecycle is the mainstreaming phase. This refers to the period after a trend first emerges in the online space and begins to see widespread acceptance outside of social media and positive engagement from the public (see Figure 4).

In the case of the Instagram body, mainstreaming is observed to have begun in 2013. This shift in driving factors and stakeholders marks the major change that can be seen from the emergence stage to mainstreaming phase. Among the 10 videos indexed for the period between 1/1/2013 to 31/12/2013, two are official audio of newly-released songs. This is illustrated further in 2014 where one of the indexed videos contains a feature from *the New York Post* focusing on the growing phenomenon of the BBL surgical procedure. Up until and during this time there remained a consistent presence of video content, primarily fitness-based, advising consumers on how to achieve this body type.

During this phase there was also: an increase in popularity of popular celebrities with this body type (Burns & Woods, 2019); a reduction in the stigma associated with cosmetic surgery (Bliss, 2017); increased prevalence of the body positivity movement (Cohen et al., 2019); and democratisation of trend creation through social media uptake and participation (Coco & Eckert, 2020).

The mainstreaming stage can be seen to continue into 2015 and 2016 when almost all indexed videos explicitly referenced the trend or advised viewers on how to attain this body ideal. In 2016, 2/10 indexed videos referenced Kim Kardashian showing how closely associated the celebrity had become with the Instagram body. Notably, celebrity influence has been cited as a factor in cosmetic surgery interest among consumers (Tijerina et al. 2019), specifically driving interest in certain procedures.

4.3. Phase 3: the normalisation/peak stage

The normalisation phase is observed to have occurred between 2017 and 2019. This can be defined as the peak at which a trend sees its height of public visibility and acceptance. It is also the most profitable time as the demand for goods and services used to attain a beauty trend appears at its highest (see Figure 5).

At this time, 25/30 videos were uncovered offering advice to viewers on how to attain the Instagram body. The fact that videos of this nature were popular for several years suggests that the body trend had become part of the mainstream beauty landscape. The song lyrics analysis chart, which shows that references to the Instagram body in UK chart topping songs had remained consistent until this point, illustrates a peak in references to the Instagram body in 2017 (Figure 6).
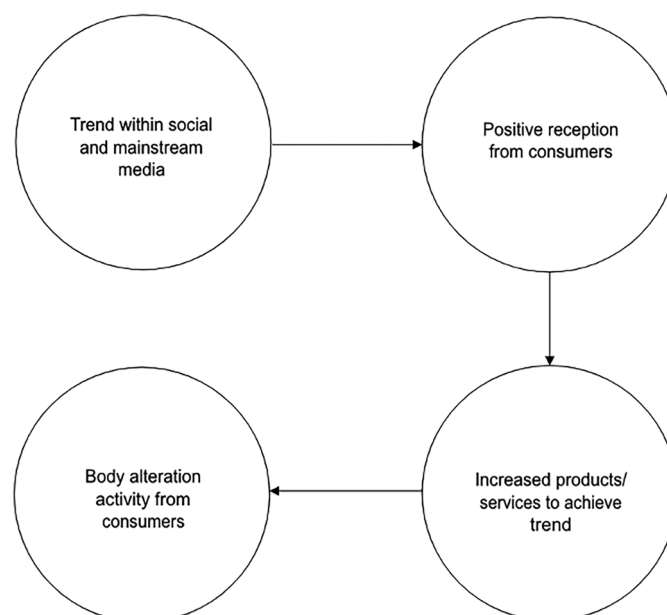

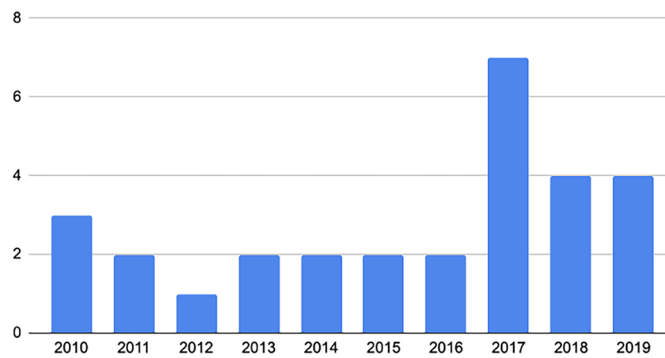**Figure 5.** The normalisation stage.

Figure 6. Number of references to Instagram body in UK Top 40 song lyrics by year.
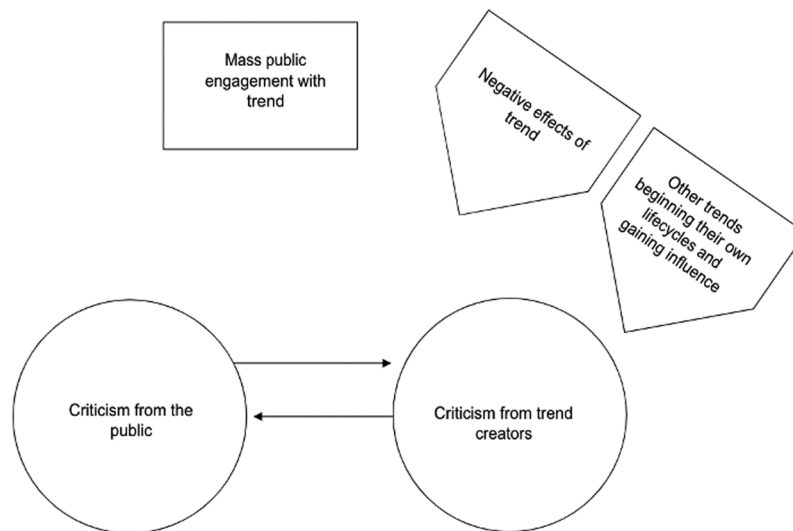

Figure 7. The criticism stage.

Interviewees from across all stakeholder groups observed the popularity of the Instagram body during this period and how that manifested within their own sphere of expertise. Several fitness professionals noted that female clients increasingly sought to enhance muscle around their buttocks and thigh areas around this time. However, this cultural shift was not always conscious amongst interviewees and most participants appeared not to have considered this shift until being asked to discuss it in the interview. This suggests that shifts in body trends might be more evident retrospectively rather than as they are happening in real-time.

The prevalence of music and video content, along with reports from fitness professionals, suggests that by 2017 the Instagram body had become accepted as a default beauty standard. This contrasts with the mainstreaming phase where the Instagram body was treated as a new and emerging concept; for example, in song lyrics it was compared to a slimmer physique, which was mainstream at the time. In the normalisation stage, however, the Instagram body is observed within society as a readily accepted beauty ideal, which in this case went on to become a decade-defining concept.

4.4. Phase 4: the criticism/fatigue stage

In a typical fashion lifecycle, the peak phase is followed by decline, where a trend fades in popularity (Wright, 2021). However, in the lifecycle of a social media beauty trend this is preceded by a criticism/fatigue stage.

While criticism of trends, both fashion and otherwise, is not a new phenomenon, it is more prominent and evident within social media circles, where social media has been referred to as the 'new public sphere' (Çela, 2015, p. 198), which fosters inter and intra-community communication and allows for easier access. The fact that social media users can share their opinions so easily and so publicly means that

criticism is amplified (Siddiqui & Singh, 2016) – perhaps even more so with a trend like the Instagram body, which emerged on social media (see Figure 7).

The criticism/fatigue phase is characterised by critical discussions, and, in the case of the Instagram body, heightened discussion began taking place around the unrealistic nature of its exaggerated proportions, the dangers of the BBL procedure, and the toxicity of such a dominant and exclusive beauty trend. The cosmetic surgeon interviewee spoke in detail around BAAPS withdrawal of support for the BBL procedure around 2018 due to a number of fatalities, which fueled further negative attention surrounding the Instagram body.

Recent years have seen the rise of a specific sub-genre of online creators, known as commentary YouTubers and, more recently, Tik Tokers (Nguyen, 2022). These commentary-style videos typically involve dissection and critique of social phenomena, such as pop culture events, fashion styles and societal practices (Day, 2022). Oftentimes, commentary videos delve into historical and sociological aspects of these phenomena and highlight potentially problematic aspects (Bailey, 2021; Knight, 2021). The increase in popularity of this style of content has further amplified the dissection and critique of beauty trends (Nguyen, 2022), especially towards the end of their lifecycle. However, these trends are not simply reviewed and discussed but are often subject to harsh critique and even mockery, with users being encouraged to actively discard these trends.

It could be argued that the Instagram body remains, at present, in its critique/fatigue stage and is transitioning towards its discard phase. In 2022, 30 videos (with a combined view count of over two million) critiquing the Instagram body were identified. More specifically, these videos declared the trend to be 'over' or otherwise undesirable. The driving factors of this phase have been identified as online content creators, professional bodies, and social media users.

4.5. Phase 5: the discard stage

The discard phase is characterised by the public and other stakeholders consciously or subconsciously discarding the trend (see Figure 8). In the case of the Instagram body, this appears to be in its early stages, with only minimal evidence of an active discarding of the trend by the public. Although ongoing, evidence of the discard stage includes social media speculation that Instagram body icons and celebrity influencers have undergone revisions to remove or reduce their alleged BBL procedures (Atlanta, 2022; Bendavid, 2022). According to speculation, the desire is for a more natural look, shifting away from the exaggerated proportions of the Instagram body. The shift towards a more natural aesthetic is consistent with the rejection of beauty standards and ideals more generally (Wang, 2016).
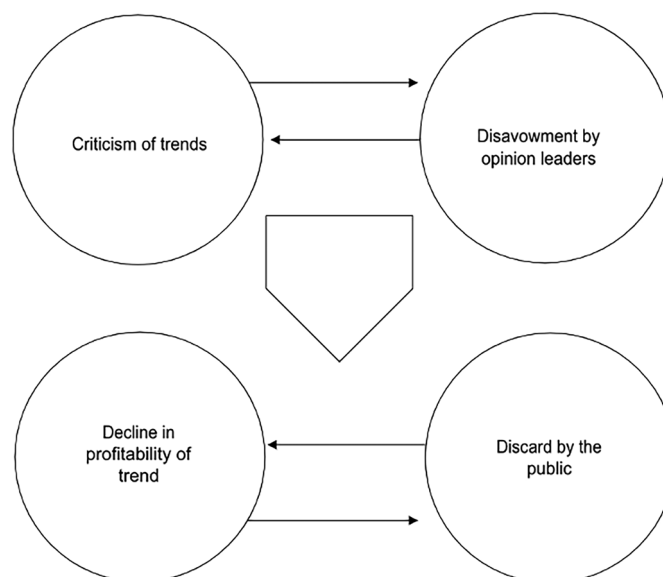

Figure 8. The discard stage.

Trend lifecycles generally and the social media beauty trend lifecycle specifically are observed to overlap, where different stages can occur simultaneously and where the end of one is often obscured by the beginning of another. There appears to be a cross-over between the criticism and discard phases, where commentary is a crucial part of the decline of social media trends in that these do not simply fade into obscurity but are first dissected and discussed by the online communities that uplifted them initially. This contrasts with the traditional fashion lifecycle, in which a trend adheres more closely to defined fashion seasons and may disappear in a quieter and less public manner (Diantari, 2021).

While the lifecycle of the Instagram body cannot be said to have ended, its discard phase is marked by the emergence of new trends (Jana, 2022). This was a key point of discussion amongst content creator interviewees who noted that the Instagram body had not exactly been discarded but that new aesthetics were fast gaining popularity. When asked about these emerging trends they all observed that a more minimalistic and natural look was becoming fashionable - for bodies, makeup and design in general. According to one participant, there is a growing interest in content that feels less 'manufactured' and that is more relatable to the audience. It can be theorised that body trends (particularly those that are led by the public on social media) begin as natural and inclusive but become progressively more exaggerated as they evolve in their lifecycles, with leaders and icons striving to achieve the 'best' version. In the case of the Instagram body, there was more emphasis during the emergence stage on celebrities with the body type and workouts that could help people attain it. However, as it progressed through its lifecycle, with greater popularity and visibility of BBL surgery and greater accessibility, it became associated with more exaggerated and less natural proportions.

This trajectory could also be the result of consumer fatigue following years of popularity where people simply want to see something new. Lang (2000), in his limited capacity model, observes that individuals have a finite mental capacity for processing information. Social media platforms are known to transmit an overwhelming volume of content, eg 65,000 photos are shared on Instagram every minute (Domo, 2021). With the average internet user spending around 143 minutes on social media every day (Dixon, 2024), the likelihood of social media fatigue is perhaps increased. This is amplified further by users being exposed to the same type of content due to computer algorithms (Bright et al., 2015). Combined, these factors influence a constant demand for new trends and content, which is thought to be linked to the increase of shorter micro-trend lifecycles.

4.6. Phase 6: the retrospective stage

A sixth and final phase in the social media beauty trend lifecycle is observed and theorised to take place many months or years after a trend has faded from public consciousness. During this phase, a discussion is had about a specific trend or cultural period, whether it is remembered fondly by the community or not. The retrospective phase is not explicitly a revival of that trend but rather a period where it is far
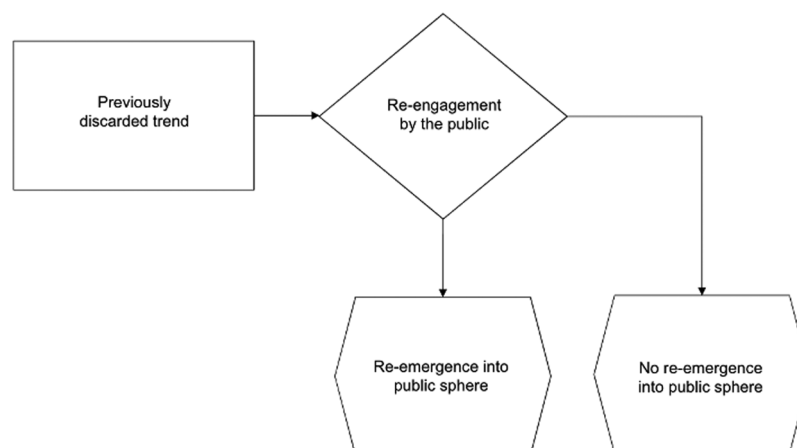
Figure 9. The retrospective stage.

enough past that it is remembered in a reflective and perhaps even nostalgic manner (see Figure 9). In order to reach this stage a trend must be memorable, at least amongst a particular community of group social media users collectively.

Sproles (1981) puts forward the 20-year rule for fashion, which theorises that styles come back into fashion after roughly 20 years. Becker-Leifhold and Heuer (2018) found that fashion cycles have become shorter due to the rise of social media and fast fashion, where micro-trends may last for months or even weeks. From observations surrounding the communication of other trends from 2010 on social media, it appears that this might occur within a shorter timeframe (Diantari, 2021).

In terms of online content, retrospective commentary-style videos have been made on beauty trends and micro-trends from the 2010 to 2022 period, which took root within internet communities. While the retrospective phase for the Instagram body is likely years away, many of the online trends that appear to have begun their own retrospective phase around 2021 were first popular in the early to mid-2000s. A retrospective phase might therefore begin as little as 5 years after the trend has left public consciousness.

The retrospective stage of the social media beauty trend lifecycle can be characterised by a resurgence of discussion and interest around a previously discarded trend, a possible resurgence of demand for products and services relating to that trend, and corporations producing products and services to meet this demand.

5. Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the lifecycle of a social media beauty trend through an investigation of the Instagram body as an example. In doing so, it contributes to our evolving understanding of fashion and beauty trend lifecycles in contemporary society, where social media are significant facilitators of human connection. The research has theoretical implications for art, humanities and cultural studies. In particular, the work is of benefit to researchers in the fields of fashion studies, body image and media studies where new insights into the manifestation of human behaviour and the effects of social influence on platforms like Instagram are recognised. There are also implications for gender studies, which would benefit from further exploration.

5.1. Summary of key findings and their implications

An updated and extended lifecycle model has been presented that recognises new phases as a direct result of social media and particularly visual platforms like Instagram. As these visual platforms are closely connected to fashion and beauty, these findings have implications for these industries and for future research in these areas. It has already been established that social media have an impact on body image and standards and that this impact is often detrimental to users' wellbeing. The current study makes an original contribution to the body of knowledge exploring the relationship between social media and beauty and offers a model to help understand the effects of social media more holistically and the variety of influences that are shaping beauty culture and standards in online spaces.

It can be theorised that social media users' perceptions of beauty, both as an independent concept and with regards to their own appearance, will evolve alongside the trend lifecycle. In the emergence, mainstreaming, and normalisation phases, individuals could potentially have a positive relationship with their own body image and with the trend depending on how closely they conform to it. The latter stages of the lifecycle, such as the critique and discard stage, could result in more negative feelings among individuals. Equally the reverse could be true for those who do not conform to the ideal. It is proposed that social media users' increased understanding that beauty trends exist and will cycle in and out of popularity may ease pressure felt by individuals to conform to these often unattainable standards. Equally a more informed and conscious understanding of how we use social media and some of the ways in which these can impact our sense of wellbeing has societal benefits.

The updated lifecycle model consists of six distinct phases as an extension of previous lifecycle models, which, although useful, do not account for the extent to which social media have revolutionised the

communication landscape in terms of the way trends are consumed and how perceptions of body image evolve as a result. This is helpful for researchers in the fields of communication, media, fashion and beauty studies who seek to understand better how trends manifest and evolve in online spaces.

It is already established in the literature that most social media beauty trends are directed towards women, which suggests that women bear the brunt of the criticism that is inevitably attached to these trends (Bonell et al., 2021; Humayun, 2022; Loomes, 2018). Within the criticism/fatigue and discard phases of the social media beauty trend lifecycle, the Instagram body has been subject to critique and mockery. As the Instagram body is a manifestation of the female form, the women who possess the body ideal are also the subject of this, often harsh, online criticism.

Interviews with fitness professionals and the cosmetic surgeon suggest a tendency in male-dominated professions to disassociate with the beauty industry. When viewed through the lens of gender, a dynamic emerges in which men, who make up the majority of cosmetic surgeons and fitness professionals, are the biggest financial beneficiaries of beauty standards that affect women. However, these men also feel a need to distance themselves from female-coded concepts for concern of seeming frivolous or less serious by extension. Those women, on the other hand, who pay for and receive these services, are often subject to harsh scrutiny, critique and at times even ridicule, suggesting an unfair gender disparity.

The findings of the current research suggest that women are not only overrepresented within and impacted by beauty trends but that they are also potential targets of criticism within the latter stages of these trend lifecycles. This is noted as an emerging finding and, due to the low sample, would further research is needed and would be beneficial to explore this gender dimension further.

5.2. Limitations and recommendations for future research

The current study is qualitative and sought to explore the lifecycle of a social media beauty trend with stakeholders in Scotland as a geographic context and using the Instagram body as a case study example. This is acknowledged as a strength but also as a limitation of the research, where it should be noted that the findings are not representative of a wider population. Broader contextual data were incorporated to help inform the lifecycle in terms of its specific phases, their timing and evolution, making this more illustrative of the UK generally and can perhaps be extended to western contexts more broadly. However, further research is needed and would be beneficial to explore the social media beauty trend lifecycle in non-western contexts where social media are less accessible and at times restricted.

Social media are dynamic entities and new platforms continue to emerge, which are significant in the sphere of fashion and beauty and in influencing trends and behaviour amongst users. Equally, these platforms do not exist in isolation and content is shared in, outside and across specific networks, in what the authors term cross-platform migration, which supports the idea of an online beauty culture and ecosystem. The current research has uncovered some of the key aspects and influences within each of the lifecycle phases but future work might seek to explore these further. Future research might also involve talking to social media users around their own engagement with beauty and body trends and how social media platforms, like Instagram, influence this.

Disclosure statement

About the authors

Tokoni Uti is a PhD student at Gray's School of Art, Robert Gordon University. Her research interests include digital communication, consumer behaviour, and the beauty industry. Her work has explored the use of digital communications platforms like Instagram for trend creation and proliferation, and the impacts of the changing social media landscape on consumers' online and offline realities.

Madeleine Marcella-Hood is a senior lecturer at Gray's School of Art, Robert Gordon University. She is head of year 1 for the BA (Hons) Fashion Management and teaches a range of subjects including fashion business, research methods and creative project management. Her main research interests are Scottish fashion, visual media and identity. Much of her published work focuses on Instagram, which she recognises for its significance in shaping visual culture and its impact on human behaviour.

ORCID

Tokoni Uti http://orcid.org/0009-0008-3597-3159
Madeleine Marcella-Hood http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5920-4049

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