

Exploring Algorithms and Personalized Social Media Through TikTok

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Algorithms and personalised social media

Abstract

In this chapter, I outline ways in which personalised social media, most prominently TikTok, are integrated into the domain of everyday life today. More specifically, I discuss how the algorithms of these apps shape self-identity formation, social networking, and wellbeing.

Keywords: algorithms, social media, everyday life, recommender systems, personalisation

Introduction

Over the past years, algorithms have become a common element of people's everyday experience. Consider the following example: a few days ago, I was scrolling through Instagram. There, I saw a video montage of various feel good clips (e.g., displays of kindness, heartwarming moments, breathtaking scenes of nature, and so on). Upon opening the comments section of this video, I found multiple messages such as "algorithm, please show me more of this" or "leaving a comment so the algorithm notices". Each of those comments had been liked by thousands of people. Today, people increasingly interact not just with other humans, like their friends, on social media platforms, but also non-human actors, such as algorithms. These non-human actors play a vital role in shaping how exactly people can engage with the world through media, and how that engagement informs their everyday experiences. In this chapter, I provide a brief discussion of this condition, as well as the emerging literature that seeks to make sense of it.

What are algorithms?

To begin with, we need to clarify the concept of the algorithm. In the context of social media, when people speak about algorithms, they usually refer to so-called recommender systems. Put simply, a recommender systems is a software that processes information about platform users and content to make recommendations, such as for products to buy, videos to watch, friends to add, and so on (Ricci et al. 2022). In the field of algorithm studies, scholars usually work with a slightly broader definition. They understand algorithms as complex socio-technical systems (Kitchin 2017). These systems manifest specific logics of structuring and ordering the world, for example in how it is represented through content displayed online (Gillespie 2014).

Some scholars thus argue that recommender systems have become powerful arbiters of culture. As such, they make commercially-oriented decisions about what is worthy of people's attention (Hallinan & Striphas 2016). Historically, recommender systems have been marketed as a solution to the problem of information overload (Cohn 2019). Older platforms, like Instagram, have only at later stages of their existence integrated such systems to "show the moments we believe you will care about the most" (Instagram 2016). Newer platforms, like TikTok, are essentially interfaces that have been built around such (Su 2023), promising people an experience "that feels personalized just for you" (TikTok 2022).

Personalisation can be seen as the most common logic underlying social media algorithms today (Kant 2020). This logic is, however, not just at the service of people and creating a more relevant experience for them (Lupinacci 2022). Rather, social media platforms like TikTok have an interest in constructing you as a profile that advertisers can target with personalised persuasive strategies (Turow 2012). Similarly, as leaked documents have confirmed, algorithms like that of TikTok are explicitly designed to keep you engaged. They attempt to do so by showing content that, according to computational models, is more likely to keep you watching, for example (see leaked documents in Smith 2021).

In short, we can understand algorithms as mechanisms of social media platforms that do two things. Firstly, they shape how people can engage with the world through social media. Secondly, they attempt to control and modulate the behaviour of individuals on these platforms for commercial purposes. As such, if we want to understand the power that social media hold today, as well as their appeal and meaningfulness, we need to look at their algorithms, and the ways in which people interact with them.

Algorithms in everyday life

In this section, I outline how social media algorithms are implicated in everyday life. More specifically, I focus on three areas: self-identity formation, social networking, and wellbeing. To do so, I draw on my own ethnographic research on TikTok, as well as related studies of the same and similar personalised social media platforms.

Self-identity formation

One of the most central ways in which algorithms impact people's lives is on the level of self-identity formation. As scholars like Giddens (1991) have argued, in modern societies, self-identities are a kind of story that people write. They continuously need to reflect on the question of who they are today, were yesterday, and want to be tomorrow. More so, they need to make sense of how their story fits within the collective lifeworlds they inhabit. Media have long, and continue to be theorised, in their role as helping people achieve this orientation of the self (see, for example, Silverstone 1994 or Markham 2020).

Today, algorithms, too, play a role in these processes. For example, in a study on music recommender algorithms, Karakayali et al. (2017) theorise them as technologies of the self. They argue that people interact with them as means to explore and develop their self-identity. With TikTok as a case, Bhandari and Bimo (2022) have taken this position one step further. They develop the concept of the algorithmized self, which they contrast to the networked self. Where identities were once constructed in the networks of friends on sites like Facebook, Bhandari and Bimo argue that on sites like TikTok it is the dialogue that people have with the algorithm which shapes their self-identify formation.

Lee et al. (2022) have, in a similar vein, developed the concept of the algorithmic crystal. As well drawing on TikTok as a case, they outline how algorithmically curated content feeds create a crystal like structure. Within this structure, people are able to see a fractured representation of their identity that functions as a resource for introspection and self-

reflection. Kant (2020) highlights that within such processes, epistemic uncertainties can arise. Within such, people struggle to align their sense of self with the algorithmic version of themselves that they are presented on their content feeds. The study of Simpson and Semaan (2021) provides empirical evidence for this.

Working with LGBTQ TikTok users, Simpson and Seeman (2021) report that some of them found that TikTok's algorithms were only representing some parts of their identity on the For You page, while hiding and not picking up others. In response to this, Simpson and Seeman found that their participants actively tried to correct this by nudging the algorithm, training it to deliver more accurate representations. Karizat et al. (2021) further theorise this in the notion of the algorithmic privilege, foregrounding that some can more easily realise the benefits of personalised social media for self-identity formation than others.

Social networking

Apps like TikTok are a common target of criticism in popular debates. The form and ephemeral nature of the short-video content consumed on TikTok are often portrayed as being shallow. Similarly, with this content distributed on personalised, algorithmic feeds, some fear that people are being isolated when they use apps like TikTok. However, the opposite is the case, the available research demonstrates and I was able to observe myself during fieldwork. That is to say, algorithmic content feeds are not just technologies of the self, but also can be vital resources for social networking. They can be so in a phatic nature, by creating, to draw on Malinowski (1923, p. 315), an "atmosphere of sociability".

There are many ways in which people connect with like-minded others on TikTok through its creative affordances. Studies have here looked, for example, at how during the COVID-19 pandemic people connect with one another through app and expressed solidarity in a condition of lockdown (Nouwen & Duflos 2022). Similarly, Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin

(2022) have studied the dance and music challenges that TikTok is widely known for. They outline how people use these challenges as a way to build communities in the algorithmically mediated space of TikTok, turning the For You page into a For Us network. Furthermore, that TikTok plays a vital role in youth and popular culture has been established early on in scholarly debates (Boffone 2021) and public debates (Stokel-Walker 2021).

However, people do not just network by creating content. The more common social practice we can find in relation to personalised social media such as TikTok, instead, is that of content sharing. Such is by no means an affordance unique to TikTok (Scharlach & Hallinan 2023), nor necessarily new to the realm of social media (John 2012). Yet, it is precisely in this mundane practice that the social significance of TikTok rests for most people.

During my own fieldwork, participants told me that at least every other day they share a TikTok video with a close social tie, such as a good friend or sibling. The range of videos shared was wide. Some shared content specifically tailored to the receiver's sense of humour, personality, or relating to a recent conversation or inside joke. On the other side, other participants just shared generally funny content, often as a way to communicate, on a meta-communicate level, the message of "thinking about you" (see a more extensive discussion Schellewald 2024).

Other studies, such as that of McLean et al. (2023) confirm this social vitality emerging from content sharing practices – opening, for example, mediated spaces where friends can connect as friends by sharing inside jokes. The role of algorithms within these discourse is interesting. That is because the content people share comes from their personalised feeds on apps like TikTok. In a foundational book to these debates, Siles (2023) has theorised such as a process of conversion. He argues that by sharing content, people transform "algorithmic recommendations for many into singular suggestion for some" (Siles 2023, p. 136). It is

through this transformative work of sharing that apps like TikTok are woven into the fabric of everyday social life – rendering sharing practices a crucial area of future research.

Wellbeing

In my work, I found that the concept of ontological security provided an effective angle to make sense of TikTok as an everyday technology. We can define ontological security as the reassuring feeling that the world is still in order and that I still make sense in it (Giddens 1991). Media have prominently been theorised through this concept, for example in helping people give structure to their daily life and surrounding oneself with familiar symbols, narratives, and other cultural fixture points (Silverstone 1994).

A key way in which this role of TikTok emerged in my fieldwork was around how participants commonly engaged with the app to take breaks and slow down the pace of their daily routines. They described TikTok as a kind of true escape, a semantic that resonates with the findings of similar studies where people described TikTok as “my oasis” (Siles and Meléndez-Moran 2021, p. 3) or “private little space” (Kang and Lou 2022, p. 5).

Personalisation played a key role in enacting these private oases.

What my participants enjoyed about TikTok was how the app was for them, not a site from which to check on their friends, the news, or the life of celebrities. One of the young adults I met described scrolling through TikTok as “seeing what your friends are up to if your friends were all kind of cool, and you didn’t have any obligation to them”. They enjoyed how their feeds showed relatable content that felt “close to home”, as some said (see Schellewald 2023 for more detailed discussion).

Because of that, many tended to be very protective about their For You page, and the TikTok algorithm helping them shape it. Some would, for example, be very conscious about what

content they like on the app, reserving that action for the sole purpose of communicating with the TikTok algorithm about the kind of content they want to see more of. At the same time, many of my participants did also struggle with the TikTok algorithm in different ways.

It was a common experience for my participants to see a video on their For You page that felt too close to home, making them reflect on the surveillant nature of personalisation systems (see Schellewald 2022). Similarly, some found themselves stuck in feedback loops of content negatively affecting their wellbeing (e.g., being shown videos of happy couples while going through a breakup). Furthermore, others simply found themselves bored by the app, yet having a hard time to leave. For them, using the app had, for example, become a convenient distraction from unpleasant feelings, and simply a habitualised response to fill the empty time of gaps in daily schedules.

Conclusion

Personalisation is a dominant logic structuring the everyday experience of social media users today. The algorithmic systems materialising this logic are both enabling and constraining everyday social life. Algorithms can be vital resources to self-identity formation, social networking practices, or managing ones wellbeing. At the same time, algorithmic structures introduce friction to these process of everyday living, as well as an element of intrusive corporate surveillance. These can have constraining effects that people need to negotiate, and not everyone is affected by equally. In the future, it will thus be crucial for us as researchers to provide more empirical evidence on these ambivalent dynamics and how they materialise in different local cultural contexts. The pioneering work of Siles (2023) opens the gates for such research, inviting us to think about algorithms in terms of how they are enacted in people's practices of everyday living. For is it precisely within these enactments that both their meanings and politics materialise and come to impact the lives of ordinary people.

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