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Between Platforms and Habits: A Qualitative Study of Cultural Consumption in the Digital Age

Noemi Crescentini[a]

Abstract

This article explores the transformations of cultural consumption practices in the era of platformisation, analysing the role of algorithmic recommendation systems in shaping users' cultural repertoires, emotions and identity trajectories. The present contribution is situated within the theoretical framework of Science and Technology Studies and is based on a qualitative survey conducted through elicitive interviews with a sample of 50 Users in Italy. The results demonstrate how platforms such as YouTube and TikTok mediate everyday cultural consumption through distinct logics: YouTube is configured as a space for reflective and in-depth consumption, while TikTok favours practices of rapid emotional engagement and continuous immersion. The text discusses the tensions between situated agency, pragmatic adaptation and forms of resignation, highlighting how users oscillate between attempts at reappropriation and passive acceptance of algorithmic dynamics. Furthermore, the study documents how platforms do not merely select content, but act as active agents in the construction of new forms of digital subjectivity, shaping emotions, preferences and patterns of meaning.

In a context characterised by multiple temporalities and pervasive, though often unacknowledged, surveillance, this work aims to contribute to a more articulated understanding of human-algorithm interaction. It offers theoretical and political implications for the contemporary sociological debate on platform society.

Keywords: human-algorithm interaction, cultural consumption, qualitative research.

[a] University of Naples Federico II, Naples, Italy.

Corresponding author:
noemi crescentini
E-mail: noemi.crescentini@unina.it

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1. Introduction

The process of cultural consumption has become increasingly platformised, leading to the emergence of a novel socio-technical mediation system. This system has profoundly transformed the manner in which cultural goods are accessed, appreciated, and evaluated. It has introduced sophisticated evaluation, review, and recommendation systems that can effectively guide consumption on a global scale in ways that were previously unimaginable (Belleflamme & Peitz, 2020).

In this context, cultural consumption is no longer considered to be autonomous; rather, it is a practice heavily mediated by algorithmic devices. These devices are not neutral tools; rather, they actively participate in the co-production of individual preferences, the structuring of daily routines and the formation of social identities (Beer, 2017). It is within this theoretical framework that the interaction between human subjects and algorithmic technologies in online environments is situated, thus giving rise to significant inquiries concerning individual autonomy, the restructuring of social dynamics and the modification of consumer behaviour (Lewandowsky et al., 2024). Adopting a perspective informed by Science and Technology Studies (STS) has the potential to transcend the conventional dichotomy between human agency and technological agency, thereby underscoring the integration of algorithms into complex socio-material networks. In these networks, algorithms function not only as determinants of social practices but also as subjects of renegotiation and transformation through interaction with human actors and the material contexts that surround them (Orlikowski, 2007). Recommendation algorithms, in particular, do not merely reflect pre-existing preferences but actively contribute to shaping them through feedback loop mechanisms, dynamically redefining the available repertoires of action (Willson, 2019). This integration of human and algorithmic processes is not without consequences, as iterative processes have been shown to reduce access to diverse information, thereby narrowing the range of knowledge opportunities (Nasraoui & Shafto, 2016). Moreover, the operational opacity and perceived authority of algorithmic systems have a profound impact on consumer culture at the individual, collective and market levels, contributing to the formation of new forms of invisible governance (Airoldi & Rokka, 2022).

Digital platforms offer personalised and simplified consumption pathways; however, they also present significant challenges related to pervasive surveillance and the erosion of personal autonomy (Onsrud & Campbell, 2020). An illustration of this phenomenon can be observed in the realm of algorithmic production of social currents, which has the capacity to reconfigure the mechanisms of collective action and knowledge circulation (Ramos, 2019). This

process of reconfiguration can be seen to redefine the models of trust and authority that structure digital societies, leading to a process of mutual constitution between computational logics and cultural interpretations (Suchman, 2007). Indeed, as Risi and Pronzato (2022) have demonstrated, users are both the recipients and the contributors of algorithmic media, perpetuating a cyclical relationship. The practices of meaning creation that users engage in are embedded within the design and functionality of the platforms themselves, as Pronzato (2024) have shown. While users operate within the confines of predetermined technological scripts (Akrich, 1991), they nevertheless exercise generative agency. This enables them to critically revisit these structures and contribute to the evolution of the algorithms themselves (Bucher, 2018). In this context, it is imperative for the social sciences to eschew deterministic perspectives and adopt approaches that recognise the relational, contextual and dynamic nature of agency, considering how humans and non-humans co-evolve within asymmetrical power configurations (Latour, 2005) that are open to negotiation.

In this perspective, after outlining the theoretical framework, with particular attention to the debate on platformisation and algorithmic mediation of cultural consumption, the methodological approach adopted will be presented, based on a qualitative approach using elicitive interviews. Subsequently, the main results emerging from the analysis will be illustrated, organised into six interpretative dimensions that reflect everyday practices of interaction with algorithms. The work concludes with a critical discussion of the results, connecting them to the theoretical issues outlined at the beginning, and with some final reflections on possible future developments of the research.

2. Human-algorithm interaction dynamics: adaptation practices and meaning production

In recent decades, feedback loop algorithms, initially developed to optimise the performance of adaptive neural networks (Nerrand et al., 1993; Dreyfus et al., 1992), have also found widespread application in the field of digital consumption, significantly redefining the relationship between users and platforms.

These algorithms operate according to a circular and adaptive principle: they collect information on user behaviour and use it to modify the content they offer continuously, thus creating a dynamic, mutually influential relationship between individuals and technologies. At an analytical level, this mechanism can be broken down into three distinct dimensions, as shown in

Figure 1: the ways in which users interact with platforms (e.g. scrolling and filtering content).

Feedback loop processes: automated algorithmic mechanisms (e.g. real-time decisions and integrated persuasive techniques).

Feedback loop awareness: users' understanding of, and reflection on, their relationship with the algorithms themselves.

This conceptual deconstruction reveals the various ways in which technology becomes embedded in everyday life, creating a constant alignment between user expectations and algorithmic offerings. However, it also highlights vulnerabilities that are comparable to those found in technical control systems, such as potential distortions arising from incorrect adjustments or suboptimal selection of optimisation parameters (Khosravani, 2011; Nerrand et al., 1993).

Digital platforms, which have now become part of everyday life (van Dijck et al., 2018), are not just neutral intermediaries: the algorithmic models that underpin them are genuine socio-technical artefacts that contribute to the reproduction of existing values, cultural biases and power structures (Aragona & Felaco, 2020; Seaver, 2022; Vicari & Kirby, 2023). They also assume the role of active social agents, participating in the configuration of social practices (Airoldi, 2021). As Bucher (2018) points out, users' activities play a generative role in shaping the algorithms themselves, influencing the mechanisms that in turn directed these activities in the first place.

The unique relationship between users, platforms and algorithms is therefore a dynamic system of data co-production, in which technology and human actions influence each other, producing situated and contextual effects (Marres, 2017). In this context, recommendation mechanisms play a central role in guiding cultural consumption practices, actively intervening in the processes of content selection, exposure and enhancement (Airoldi, 2021). However, the perception of and interaction with algorithms is not homogeneous: it is shaped by social, cultural and cognitive factors that determine their differentiated reception (Felaco, 2022).

Self-directed algorithmic curation practices – from the intentional regulation of "likes" to passive selection through scrolling – therefore reflect a dual logic: on the one hand, the tactical appropriation of interfaces to refine algorithmic output (Cheney-Lippold, 2017); on the other, the recognition of constraints imposed by platform architectures, which limit individual action to a predefined menu of possibilities (van Dijck et al., 2018). The tension between user autonomy and technological determinism translates into a dichotomy between content perceived as "relevant" and content considered "random", reflecting the dynamics of opacity and information asymmetry theorised by Pasquale (2015) in Black Box Society.

A notable manifestation of these dynamics emerges through a juxtaposition of two emblematic digital ecosystems: YouTube and TikTok. These platforms employ divergent algorithmic models, reflecting markedly distinct operational logics. YouTube has been configured as an environment oriented towards intentional search and layered cognitive consumption (Burgess & Green, 2018), characterised by extended temporalities and greater curatorial control by the user. In contrast, TikTok presents itself as an immersive and highly performative environment, dominated by fragmented temporalities (Abidin, 2021), continuous scrolling and strong emotional involvement (Papacharissi, 2015). These technical and infrastructural differences are not neutral; they produce distinct effects in digital subjectivation processes (Airoldi, 2021). While YouTube supports self-construction characterised by reflexivity and informal learning, TikTok encourages performative, emotionally charged interaction, resulting in situated, fragmented subjectivities. Both platforms therefore contribute to the formation of distinct algorithmic habitus, which are the embodied and learned dispositions that determine how users engage with digital spaces, influencing attention economies (Williams, 2018) and semantic and relational repertoires (Couldry & Hepp, 2018).

Ultimately, algorithmic interaction should be understood as a dynamic of social and technological co-evolution in which individual preferences are constantly anticipated, oriented, and transformed rather than simply reflected. This process profoundly redefines modes of cultural consumption, identity trajectories, and mechanisms of symbolic reproduction within platform society.

Ultimately, algorithmic interaction in contemporary digital contexts must be understood as a dynamic of social and technological co-evolution, in which individual preferences are not simply reflected, but simultaneously anticipated, oriented and transformed, profoundly redefining the processes of consumption, identity construction and cultural reproduction.

3. Methodology

This work is part of the PRIN 2022 project "Feedback Culture: Assessing the Effects of Algorithmic Recommendations on Platformised Consumption – ALGOFEED[1]", funded by the European Union – Next Generation EU, and aims to contribute empirically to the study of cultural consumption in the Italian context by examining the socio-cultural implications of algorithmic feedback

[1] https://algofeed.unimi.it/

loops in digital platforms, with a particular focus on TikTok and YouTube[2], both characterised by algorithmic content personalisation systems. The study adopts a mixed methodological approach (Creswell et al., 2003; Amaturo & Punziano, 2016) aimed at exploring the interaction between algorithmic systems and cultural consumption practices[3].

This contribution focuses specifically on the qualitative phase, dedicated to deepening users' awareness of the recommendation, filtering and classification activities carried out by online algorithmic systems, as well as interpreting their implications in everyday cultural consumption.

To this end, we used qualitative elicitive interviews (Barton, 2015; Kahlke et al., 2024), an innovative dialogue technique that integrates multimodal stimuli (e.g., visual, textual or audiovisual) to activate critical reflection and encourage the articulation of implicit or layered knowledge. This approach was chosen because of the need to overcome the limitations of traditional semi-structured interviews, which are often characterised by superficial or socially desirable narratives, especially in research contexts involving technologies perceived as opaque (e.g., recommendation algorithms). Through targeted stimuli, it was possible to elicit active involvement from participants, facilitating the emergence of subjective experiences and perceived critical issues.

The sample consists of 50 users, aged between 18 and 40, residing in the Italian regions of Campania and Lombardy, selected as they represent the first and second regions in terms of youth-adult population at national level. The gender composition of the sample includes 34 women and 16 men.

Participants were selected through the utilisation of quota sampling[4] based on socio-demographic criteria such as geographical distribution, age group and level of education (Trezza, 2026). All subjects had previously participated in a

[2] TikTok and YouTube, central platforms in the Italian digital landscape (We Are Social, 2021 Digital 2021 – I dati italiani.), are based on algorithmic recommendation systems that profoundly influence consumption practices, behaviours and identity constructions (Airoldi, 2021; Schellewald, 2021).

[3] The first phase of the research involved administering a preliminary survey to a total of 240 participants with the aim of identifying subjective perceptions about the influence exerted by algorithmic systems on cultural consumption choices. This survey was accompanied by individual self-monitoring of the recommendation paths actually experienced, as well as user profiles generated based on interaction with the platforms. This paper focuses specifically on the third phase, the qualitative phase.

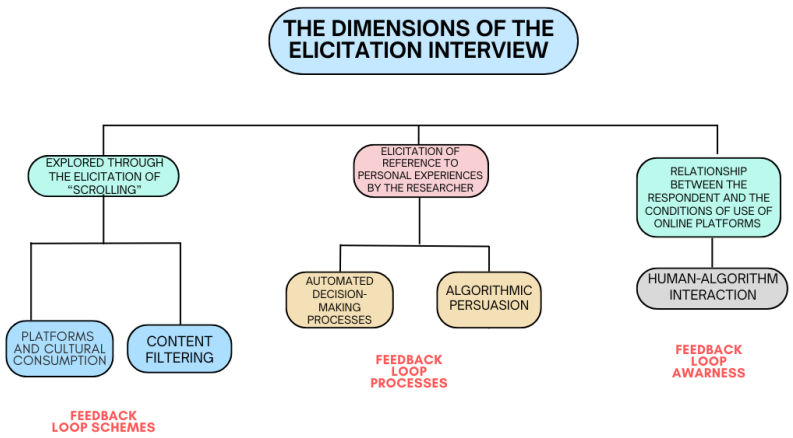
[4] Quota sampling is a type of non-probability sampling in which the interviewer chooses the units to be interviewed but must respect pre-established quotas representing certain characteristics of the population. In practice, the population is divided into homogeneous strata, and the interviewer must ensure that the sample reflects the proportions of these strata in the total population (Corbetta, 1999).

preliminary exploratory phase dedicated to individualised monitoring of algorithmic recommendation pathways.

The interviews were conducted between September 2024 and January 2025.

The interview outline was structured around five central analytical dimensions. The following five points are to be considered in this study: firstly, digital platforms and cultural consumption practices; secondly, algorithmic filtering and selection of content; thirdly, awareness of automated decision-making processes; fourthly, algorithmic persuasion, understood as the critical perception of the effects of algorithms on the modulation of users' choices and cultural consumption patterns; and finally, fifthly, human-algorithm interaction, understood as the exploration of emerging relational dynamics between individuals and algorithmic systems (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Visual model of interview dimensions and the chosen elicitation. Source: own elaboration



The analysis was conducted through an iterative process of thematic coding, integrating an inductive approach oriented towards the enhancement of emerging narratives with a theoretical perspective inspired by critical studies on algorithms (Seaver, 2017). This combination made it possible to maintain a balance between openness to the meanings attributed by the interviewees and the interpretative framework of the power dynamics implicit in algorithmic mediation processes.

The employment of digital tools for qualitative analysis, notably NVivo 15 Software, contributed to the maintenance of methodological rigour and transparency in the tracking of analytical processes. This facilitated systematic

management of coding and enabled the identification of interpretative patterns that emerged during the analysis.

4. Analysis and discussion

The analysis of the interviews identified six dimensions of meaning (as illustrated in Figure 2), which will be explored in greater depth in the following section: The following aspects must be given consideration: Daily Use and Digital Routine; Critical Awareness and Algorithmic Agency; Emotional Resonance; Cultural Preferences and Consumption; Sociality and Sharing Practices; and finally, Digital Habits and Algorithmic Mediation. Each of these dimensions constitutes a primary analytical category, with further sub-nodes organised into hierarchies that facilitate comprehension and exploration of the intricate interactions between users and algorithmically mediated digital platforms.

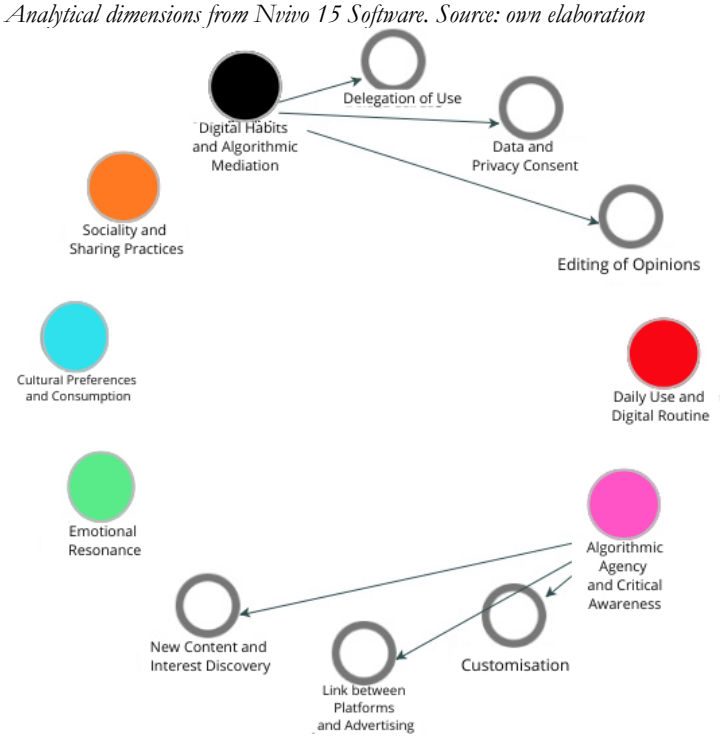
For instance, the Digital Habits and Algorithmic Mediation dimension is further sub-divided into three sub-nodes: The delegation of use, consent to data and privacy, and modification of opinion. This hierarchical organisation facilitates a more profound comprehension of users' digital practices, commencing with their implicit trust in technology (Delegation of Use), progressing to a contemplation on forms of consent and privacy management (Data Consent and Privacy), and culminating in an examination of the influence, or absence thereof, of algorithms on the formation and transformation of users' opinions (Opinion Modification).

In a similar way, the Critical Awareness and Algorithmic Agency dimension comprises four child nodes: The following factors must be considered when analysing the phenomenon: the discovery of new content and interests; the link between platforms and advertising; personalisation; and, once again, opinion modification. This hierarchical structure underscores the manner in which users' critical awareness is cultivated through direct experiences with the algorithm (Personalisation and Content Discovery), perceptions concerning commercial logic (Link between platforms and advertising), and the impact on their decision-making autonomy (Opinion Modification). This enables us to explore how critical awareness is not static, but evolves through different levels of interaction and reflection on one's digital practices.

The remaining dimensions (Daily Use and Digital Routine, Emotional Resonance, Cultural Preferences and Consumption, and Sociality and Sharing Practices) were presented without further specific hierarchical subcategories, perhaps indicating a degree of homogeneity and internal consistency sufficient not to require further subdivision at this stage of the analysis.

This hierarchical configuration is not merely descriptive; it also facilitates a more in-depth analysis of digital practices, thereby highlighting the different levels through which users construct, negotiate and interpret their relationship with digital content and algorithms.

Figure 2 Analytical dimensions from Nvivo 15 Software. Source: own elaboration



Going into detail, the first analytical dimension that emerged from the thematic coding process, conceptualised as "*Daily Use and Digital Routine*", highlights the pervasive integration of technological devices— in particular smartphones, tablets and computers— into the daily lives of the users interviewed.

This dimension takes the form of a set of recurring practices that structure time, space and social interactions, redefining the boundaries between the productive, reproductive and recreational spheres (Lie & Sørensen, 1996). As noted by Zeuner et al. (2022), morning routines take on a performative value in which interaction with digital devices acts both as a ritual of community connection and as a tool for acquiring information, consolidating a shared technological habitus. Similarly, the spread of smartphones in particular affects

daily temporalities through the hybridisation of synchronous communication (e.g. instant messaging) and asynchronous content consumption (De Reuver et al., 2016).

The analysis reveals a functional differentiation between devices: PCs maintain an operational centrality in work or research contexts, geared towards cognitively demanding tasks (e.g. reading news or using professional platforms), while smartphones emerge as liminal devices (Humphreys, 2012), enabling micro-communicative interactions (e.g. WhatsApp), entertainment and leisure, especially when waiting or travelling on public transport.

Furthermore, applications such as WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok are constantly present in the daily lives of participants, being frequently used during work breaks, in the evening or before going to sleep. Finally, mobile devices are also used for online shopping and periodically checking email notifications. The findings of this study indicate that digital technologies are not merely ancillary tools, but rather constitute substantial components of users' daily practices, particularly during moments dedicated to leisure and breaks at the end of the day.

> *«[...] I spend time on YouTube and TikTok whenever I have some free time to relax, so during work breaks or study breaks, throughout the day. I use YouTube after work to watch informative videos, then in the afternoon/evening, and TikTok more after dinner for entertainment»;*

> *« [...] I use them when travelling on public transport, in the evening before going to sleep if I can't find a programme I like on TV, and when I'm waiting, such as at the post office or when waiting for a hospital appointment»;*

> *« [...] During breaks, I sometimes turn on my mobile phone: maybe I reply to a message, check a notification, or look for something I need. If I'm on public transport or waiting, I might open YouTube or TikTok. However, I would say that after dinner, especially on the sofa or before going to bed, is when I use my mobile phone the most and watch videos on TikTok, YouTube, check various social media, send messages... a bit of everything, really».*

The second analytical dimension, conceptualised as "*Critical awareness and algorithmic agency*", reveals a dialectic between the perception of algorithmic influence and active adaptation strategies by users in their interaction with digital platforms. The respondents exhibited a reflective awareness (Giddens, 1991) of the socio-technical functionality of algorithms, acknowledging the active contribution of their preferences and interactions — such as likes, comments or search histories — to the shaping of content proposals received on platforms.

Within this dimension, a first sub-dimension emerges relating to "*Personalisation*", which reflects a polarisation of attitudes among users. On the one hand, certain individuals have expressed a favourable opinion of the predictive ability of algorithms in deciphering personal tastes, interpreting profiling as a service that optimises the digital experience. This position exemplifies the internalisation of a pragmatic trade-off (Turow et al., 2015), in which the surrender of personal data is perceived as an acceptable price to pay for efficient access to tailored content.

On the other hand, there is a position of passive resignation attributable to the concept of resigned privacy, developed by Draper and Turow (2019), in which users, while recognising the influence of algorithms in shaping cultural consumption patterns, do not develop strategies of resistance or conscious negotiation. Finally, a third group expresses a more critical awareness, recognising the theoretical possibility of interrupting or limiting algorithmic surveillance processes, but without being able to identify concrete effective tools or strategies.

A second sub-dimension concerns the "*Connection between platforms and advertising*". Users describe how they often encounter products they have previously searched for online through banner ads, interpreting this phenomenon not as random but as the result of algorithmic channelling of preferences based on browsing data. The lack of surprise at this dynamic reflects an internalised acceptance of "datafication" (van Dijck, 2014), in which digital tracking is now normalised as an inevitable corollary of the online experience. However, reactions differ significantly: some users express annoyance; others adopt an attitude, as in the previous dimension, of pragmatic resignation (Draper & Turow, 2019); still others show interest, perceiving advertising content as potentially interesting.

This plurality of reactions can be conceptualised as a *continuum of agency* (Ragnedda et al., 2020), in which the degree of critical activism varies according to the perception of individual control and trust in platforms.

Finally, a third sub-dimension concerns the "*Discovery of new content and interests*" and shows how algorithms do not merely reproduce existing preferences but also act as agents of serendipity, suggesting new content based on previous interests or cultural consumption behaviour.

This analytical framework therefore highlights the complexity of user agency, suspended between adaptation, resistance and critical reappropriation in algorithmic surveillance economies.

> *«[...] For me, the advertising that is shown is based on the person, obviously, based on their interests, such as the content you see, and for me, at the moment, the mechanism is useful, It's valid, so I see things that interest me»;*

« [...] There is association on platforms because there is an algorithm, and then maybe things I'm looking for come up, and I find them while scrolling through other things, and it says, "Hey, remember you were looking for me? Won't you buy me?" »;

«[...] There's a mechanism that shows you things you're interested in, and to prevent this from happening, you could break the algorithm by searching for videos other than the ones you usually watch»;

«[...] Yes, it's an algorithm that is applied to platforms, so the ones we search for, in reality, have an internal memory that stores the searches we make. So every time I search for cats, the platform suggests a video of cats or something related to cats, because it tries to show you content that you usually watch»;

«[...] I often use Spotify, and thanks to the suggestions it gives me based on what I listen to, I always discover new artists or songs that I then save to my playlists [...] On TikTok, for example, I discovered a passion for some Japanese skincare products, and now I'm an expert!»

The third dimension that emerged from the analysis, entitled *"Emotional Resonance*", demonstrates how video content, particularly content related to social, geopolitical, or personal narratives, has the capacity to provoke profound emotional responses among users. The respondents reported experiencing a wide range of emotions, including anger, sadness and contempt, following the consumption of particular content types. It has been demonstrated that videos depicting intergenerational relationships (e.g. grandparents and grandchildren) or narratives of social injustice elicit a strong emotional response. The algorithmic logic of emotional amplification is thus shown to fit into the dynamics of selective attention and virality, which contribute to the structuring of users' affective experience online (Kearney, 2019). Another critical aspect pertains to emotional selectivity in the face of tragic or controversial events, including natural disasters, international conflicts (for example, the Israeli-Palestinian and Russian-Ukrainian conflicts) or episodes of violence, hate speech and animal abuse. Such content has been shown to evoke profound emotional responses, including contempt and indignation, thereby underscoring the pivotal role that the emotional domain plays in the context of digital platforms as a catalyst for interpretation and social mobilisation (Papacharissi, 2015).

«[...] Some videos are very moving because they tell real-life stories and I often identify with them, or I get emotional because I empathise with the people and they enrich me greatly. Then there are days when I am particularly sensitive and other days less so, but I really like life stories, I try to empathise».

> *«[...] I was very struck by the videos of the floods in Spain because I have friends there, so seeing these videos had a negative impact on me, in the sense that I felt a little regret, a little sadness to see the situation there. On the other hand, comedy videos make me laugh and evoke positive emotions, like seeing videos of children laughing, which are positive feelings».*

> *«[...] I was outraged, for example, by the Roccaraso issue, just the other morning, I saw the rubbish left behind from those days and then all the comments, "Neapolitans are all like that", these things are annoying because incidents happen but they take it out on the whole group [...] On social media, people show the worst of themselves when they have to comment, when they have to write, I sometimes see content involving animals, perhaps those who post it, then there are those who hurt dogs rather than cats, then there are those who cheer, those who criticise, in short, there is a spiral of hatred that never ends, these things are quite annoying for me».*

The fourth analytical dimension, defined as *"Cultural Preferences and Consumption"*, outlines a reconfiguration of cultural consumption practices in the digital ecosystem, characterised by the predominance of streaming platforms (for films and TV series) and audio-visual services (Spotify, YouTube, Prime Music) as the main mediators of contemporary cultural experience. This phenomenon reflects a transition towards on-demand consumption models that redefine the traditional boundaries between high and popular culture, in line with Bourdieu's (1979) theories on the reconversion of cultural capital in fluid media contexts, as well as Jenkins' studies (2006) in which the participatory and distributive dynamics of platforms redefine access to and the valorisation of cultural products.

This analytical dimension reveals a polarisation of choices: It is evident that there is a prevalence of standardised serial and musical content, which is consumed through the utilisation of algorithmic interfaces that normalise practices of "background" listening and viewing (Couldry, 2020). These practices are mediated by market logic (Hesmondhalgh, 2019). In contrast, the advent of thematic niches on digital platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, accompanied by the proliferation of micro-genres – ranging from True Crime to BookTok, from practical tutorials (e.g., repairs or cooking) to scientific and historical dissemination – signifies a fragmentation of cultural repertoires. This phenomenon aligns with the findings of Arvidsson and Bonini (2015) concerning value creation in algorithmic economies. The analysis also highlights a ritualisation of digital cultural consumption: short, hyper-narrative content (e.g. TikTok) dominates moments of "dead time" (Lefebvre, 1992), while long formats (TV series, podcasts) are incorporated into evening or relaxation routines, configuring a layered temporality that intersects emotional, cognitive and social needs. The results therefore reflect the increasingly central role of

digital platforms in shaping personalised and diversified cultural consumption, within a context characterised by a growing dependence on algorithmic dynamics (Seaver, 2019; Bucher, 2018).

> *«[...] I use Spotify practically all the time, both in the car and with headphones. It's convenient, I can find what I want straight away, and I can also save soundtracks that I discover in films or series»;*

> *«[...] I use Sky, Netflix, Disney Plus and Amazon Prime Video. I don't go to the cinema that much, maybe two or three times a year, if I'm lucky, because it depends on what's showing. Obviously, I find out about new releases either through random sponsored ads on TikTok, word of mouth or TV commercials»;*

> *«[...] I really like true crime videos, so I usually search for those, or current affairs videos and especially booktubers. I don't like pages that are just funny videos»;*

> *«[...] On YouTube, I watch content related to music and then mainly sports. Sports and videos about technology, while on TikTok I don't really look for anything. I scroll, then after a while the algorithm usually sets what I want to see».*

The fifth analytical dimension that emerged from the analysis of the interviews was designated *"Sociality and Sharing Practices"*. The data collected demonstrate how users engage in complex sharing practices that extend beyond the simple exchange of content, encompassing metacommunicative reflections on the functioning of algorithms and advertising strategies (Couldry & Hepp, 2018). Many interviewees reported that such discussions frequently arise in informal contexts, revealing widespread concern about being monitored or "listened to by their digital devices". Episodes such as the appearance of advertisements that are relevant to recent conversations have been shown to engender a sense of unease about the processes of personal data collection and use. This suggests an awareness, albeit fragmentary and not always systematic, of the invisible surveillance logic that characterises the contemporary digital ecosystem (Andrejevic, 2007). Furthermore, content is disseminated through digital word-of-mouth practices: a significant proportion of users claim to disseminate content via social networks, thereby encouraging the exchange of opinions. However, within the context of this relational scenario, there is also a tendency for conspiracy thinking, with some participants expressing beliefs about hidden control exerted by platforms. While these experiences are a cause for concern, they seldom result in significant alterations to digital habits, a phenomenon that Partin and Marwick (2020) have termed the "paradox of inert awareness".

«[...] With friends, we send each other videos, or we find ourselves talking about something we've seen online and maybe we have different opinions. It's a way to compare notes, laugh together or even reflect. Often, something we see by chance sparks interesting discussions»;

«[...] We've often talked about the algorithms of various platforms, not so much about their effect on everyday life but more about the fact that we are constantly being monitored and targeted»;

«[...] Having Alexa at home, we've sometimes said, "Damn, we never searched for that, so why is this ad coming up on our phone? And so we linked it to the fact that Alexa is probably always listening to you and so we're not really in control of our searches because they're heavily influenced"»;

«[...] Yes, I often find myself talking about how social media shapes our thoughts and how we're controlled in everything we do through a device».

The sixth and final analytical dimension that emerged, entitled "*Digital habits and algorithmic mediation"*, focuses on the impact that platforms such as TikTok and YouTube have on shaping users' decision-making processes, value orientations and individual preferences.

One element that emerged in the course of the study concerned the widespread use of online reviews and feedback as primary sources of information in the pre-purchase phase, especially for expensive or newly launched products. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a growing reliance on a form of algorithmic crowd wisdom (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013), where aggregated user judgements – frequently filtered, sorted and amplified according to platform logic – emerge as a criterion of reliability.

Within this dimension, a first sub-dimension, entitled "*Consent to data and privacy"*, emerges, relating to a lack of knowledge of terms of service (ToS). The data collected indicate that the vast majority of respondents have never perused these documents in their entirety. Instead, they have either consulted them in a cursory manner or in a limited and selective way, without developing a comprehensive understanding of their implications. Nevertheless, users evince a certain degree of cognisance that Terms of Service (ToS) are legal instruments that legitimise the aggregation and extensive utilisation of personal data by platforms. This dynamic reflects a broader crisis of the informed consent model in the digital age, where the length, linguistic inaccessibility and contractual ambiguity of the terms of use undermine their effective protective function (Lippi et al., 2020).

«[...] I have only read a small part of the terms of use for the platforms I am registered with, but only in part because they are often a bit complicated to read and, above all, so long that I lose focus»;

«[...] To be honest, I don't read the terms of service; I'm not interested in them».

Another sub-dimension concerns "*Delegating the use of platforms*", which is particularly noticeable among some of the women and mothers interviewed. In these cases, users report temporarily handing over their mobile devices to their children, mainly for entertainment purposes. Although this practice appears, at first glance, to be a normal part of managing daily family needs, it has significant effects on the algorithmic configuration of content. In particular, there is a hybridisation of personalised feeds, where interactions, searches and views made by minors progressively influence the algorithmic profile associated with the adult user. Temporary delegation to children introduces contamination into recommendation models, highlighting how digital identity is not a static individual entity, but rather the result of situated and shared practices (Marwick & Boyd, 2014) often shaped by family and relational dynamics.

«[...] Children also use the phone, and obviously they don't have the same interests as me. For example, my daughter watches videos on YouTube and sometimes even likes them, so they keep popping up because I think the social network suggests them!»;

«[...] On YouTube, I've noticed a lot of music videos and content related to children because I have two young children and they often watch videos by YouTubers they like».

The final sub-dimension analysed, entitled "*Opinion Modification*", examines the influence exerted by digital content on the redefinition of attitudes, habits and evaluations relating to social situations, everyday practices or public figures. The data collected indicates the non-neutral role of digital platforms in the construction of social reality (Gillespie, 2018), emphasising the notion that they do not merely convey information. Indeed, a considerable proportion of respondents have reported a shift in their opinions or behaviours subsequent to exposure to content on platforms such as YouTube and TikTok. This evidence lends further support to the notion that recommendation systems function as unseen architects of social representation, shaping not only what users perceive but also the manner in which they interpret it (Couldry & Hepp, 2018). However, alongside these dynamics of influence, a position of resistance also emerges: some users claim to be immune to the impact of digital content, asserting stability in their opinions and an autonomous capacity for critical evaluation. This sub-dimension confirms that the impact of algorithms on

opinions is neither uniform nor inevitable, but rather contingent on a complex interplay of technical, cognitive and social factors.

> *«[...] When I first saw Pilates videos on YouTube, I changed my mind about physical activity. To be honest, I've never loved exercising, but since I saw these videos, I've become passionate about it»;*
>
> «*[...] No, I've never changed my mind, but certain content reinforced what I already thought. This makes me think that the algorithm doesn't try to challenge you, but rather confirms your ideas. It offers you content that makes you feel "comfortable"»;*
>
> *«[...] Yes, I have changed my mind after seeing content on YouTube. For example, I used to be against nuclear power, but then I continued to learn more about it, intrigued by the first video, until I completely changed my mind»;*
>
> *«[...] I watched some videos about global warming and they made me think about some of my actions, which I then changed over time to respect the environment»;*
>
> *«[...] I have never, ever changed my mind after seeing content. Maybe it makes me think, but it doesn't change my mind. I have my beliefs and I'm stubborn!»*

The qualitative analysis conducted reveals how users' everyday experiences lie at the intersection between situated agency and algorithmic governance, highlighting the growing incorporation of digital platforms into everyday life. The technological practices observed are not simply voluntary choices, but expressions of an *algorithmic habitus* (Airoldi, 2021), embedded within social and technological structures that orient, channel and partly predetermine the repertoires of action available. In this context, the use of platforms emerges as an ambivalent phenomenon: critical awareness of the mechanisms of personalisation and surveillance is accompanied by widespread adaptive inertia, marking the prevalence of forms of *resigned agency* (Draper & Turow, 2019) and *inert awareness* (Partin & Marwick, 2020).

In terms of usage practices, there is a clear distinction between YouTube and TikTok. YouTube can be considered a digital environment for intentional research practices (Burgess & Green, 2018), geared towards stratified cultural consumption and informal learning. In contrast, TikTok emerges as a space for affective performativity (Paasonen, 2018), characterised by infinite scrolling, micro-temporal narratives (Abidin, 2021), and intensified emotional modulation. This dichotomy reflects the temporal heterogeneity of contemporary media ecology (Keightley, 2012), marking the transition from modes comparable to what Giddens (1991) once termed "reflective consumption" to logics of continuous attention capture (Williams, 2018).

From a sociological perspective, data demonstrates that platforms do not merely structure content selection; rather, they function as instruments for constructing social reality, intervening in the definition and interpretation of emotions, values, and processes of subjectivation. The pervasiveness of a form of soft subjection (Deleuze, 1990) is indicated by adaptation practices, dependence on recommendation mechanisms and the difficulty of changing one's repertoire of use, despite awareness of the risks of datafication and surveillance. In this form of soft subjection, power is no longer exercised through direct imposition, but through the organisation of spaces of possibility and desirability.

The contemporary digital experience can be conceptualised as a terrain of perpetual negotiation between individual agency and algorithmic architectures of governance. Within media ecologies that shape, normalise and institutionalise new forms of algorithmic subjectivity, everyday life is redefined.

5. Concluding remarks

This study has highlighted how the platformisation of cultural consumption contributes to the formation of a socio-technical ecology in which the distinction between human agency and algorithmic agency tends to dissolve, giving rise to hybrid and dynamic configurations. It is important to note that recommendation algorithms do not merely mediate access to content; rather, they actively co-produce cultural preferences, shape emotional trajectories and redefine identity-building processes by becoming part of the fabric of everyday life. In this scenario, contemporary cultural consumption is therefore configured as an algorithmically mediated practice, in which the apparent autonomy of users' decisions is intertwined with pervasive logics of opaque governance.

The concept of algorithmic habitus (Airoldi, 2021), which has emerged from empirical evidence and is rooted in a sociological theoretical perspective, provides a useful interpretative key for exploring and analysing the tension between individual action and the algorithmic infrastructures that regulate the digital experience. This concept enables us to transcend simplistic dichotomies, encapsulating the embedded, routinised and situated nature with which users adapt, internalise or resist the logic of platforms.

Algorithmic habitus manifests itself in at least three interrelated dimensions:

1. Internalised logics of platform use: Users develop routine practices (e.g., morning scrolling rituals, family delegation of devices) that naturalise

algorithmic mediation, blurring the boundary between conscious choice and technologically predetermined behaviour.

2. Structured improvisation within constraints: Although participants showed critical awareness of surveillance and personalisation, their adaptive strategies (e.g. pragmatic resignation, tactical reappropriation of "likes") reveal a negotiated agency bounded by platform architectures.

3. Embedded temporalities: The dichotomy between YouTube's "reflective consumption" and TikTok's "affective performativity" highlights how algorithmic infrastructures segment daily rhythms, shaping attention economies and emotional cadences.

This habitus is neither deterministic nor static: it is the result of a continuous dialectic between algorithmic structures – which include feedback loop mechanisms, predictive logics and opaque optimisation parameters – and users' generative practices, such as selective content sharing or metacommunications on algorithmic dynamics. In line with the Bourdieusian tradition (Bourdieu, 1979), habitus operates in a pre-reflective space that explains the persistence of certain repertoires of action even in subjects with critical awareness, who often struggle to escape the frames of use established by platforms.

From this perspective, the aim of this paper is to further theorise the debate on algorithmic subjectivity by offering an analytical tool that can be used to understand how digital infrastructures participate in the social production of meaning, the orientation of emotions, and the construction of identity.

Methodologically, elicitive interviews have enabled us to explore the embedded practices and discursive trajectories of users in depth, revealing the relational and material nature of algorithmic subjectivity. These practices manifest in rituals of implicit consent to data collection, emotional co-regulation with proposed content and narratives about perceived control. The observed dynamics – ranging from resigned agency (Draper & Turow, 2019) to inert awareness (Partin & Marwick, 2020) – do not indicate passivity, but rather the embedding of algorithmic regimes within the habitus.

The distinction that has emerged between YouTube, which can be defined as a reflective consumption environment, and TikTok, which is characterised by rapid emotional engagement, reveals different algorithmic logics of content delivery and the presence of an unequal distribution of attention, affective labour, and meaning production. The results confirm the hypothesis that algorithmic platforms operate as devices of subtle governance, capable of influencing not only what is seen, but also modes of perception, memory, and action.

In summary, the research highlights that platforms are active agents in the constitution of digital subjectivities, co-producing the algorithmic habitus with

users. Future research could investigate how this habitus is articulated in relation to socio-cultural capital, contributing to the reproduction or reconfiguration of inequalities within digital societies. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for addressing the regulatory, political, and cultural implications of contemporary algorithmic mediation.

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