Italian Sociological Review
ISSN 2239-8589
DOI: 10.13136/isr.v16i16S.978 2026, 16(16S), pp. 495-515

Youth Experiencing the Algorithmic Flow: The Shared Understanding of Contemporary Social Media Consumption

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Abstract

This article investigates how young people experience and cope with the algorithmically curated streams of content that characterise platforms such as TikTok. The study aims to expand current understandings of adolescents' practical engagement with social media, introducing new nuances to what it means to be "competent" in such environments as defined by their own perspectives and practices. In doing so, it moves beyond deficit narratives of youth as passive consumers, instead emphasising their situated agency in navigating algorithmically shaped spaces.

The article builds on theoretical frameworks from youth studies and critical digital literacies, extending recent debates on algorithmic flows and agency. These perspectives offer tools to understand how datafication, recommendation systems, and evolving digital literacies intersect with identity formation and peer culture in networked media environments. By focusing on how adolescents internalise and tactically negotiate these flows, the study contributes to reframing digital competence as adaptive, reflexive, and socially distributed.

Empirically, the research draws on qualitative data collected through class-level group interviews with approximately 100 Italian high school students aged 17–19.

Findings indicate that adolescents perceive algorithmic flow as always-on, ephemeral, seamlessly adaptive, and closely tied to personal and social identity. Within this dynamic, they develop tactical practices, such as selective scrolling, skipping, liking, or saving, that co-construct their feeds. These practices highlight how algorithmic agency is understood, appropriated, and embodied as a dimension of contemporary youth culture.

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Received: 26 May 2025
Accepted: 28 August 2025
Published: 12 May 2026

Keywords: youth cultures, algorithmic flow, digital literacies, algorithmic agency, practical knowledge.

1. Introduction

Youth cultures have increasingly relied on social media as a central arena for consumption and identity management. Consumption practices, including acquiring, displaying, and engaging with goods and media, shape young people's identities and social belonging, often through creative re-appropriation of market logics (Best, 2009). The advent of social networks led young people, such as those studied by Danah Boyd (2008, 2010, 2014), to partially shift key socialisation practices, enabling peer communication and cultural participation. Over the past two decades, however, social media platforms have evolved into complex, algorithmically curated infrastructures that profoundly reshape youth engagement. The rise of flow-based platforms like TikTok introduces a paradigm of seemingly passive content consumption, challenging earlier notions of participatory youth cultures (Jenkins, 2009; Jenkins et al., 2016).

Adolescents now encounter an "always-on" and ephemeral content flow that seamlessly adapts to their preferences while tightly intertwining with their sense of identity and social recognition (Siles & Valerio-Alfaro, 2025; Ytre-Arne et al., 2020). They negotiate this flow through practices such as selective scrolling, liking, and commenting, exemplifying emerging forms of digital literacy that go beyond technical skills. Contemporary digital literacy research underscores critical, socioculturally situated approaches that emphasise systemic understanding of datafication processes, algorithmic power, and collective digital rights (Pangrazio & Selwyn, 2018; Sander, 2024). These literacies acknowledge how youth appropriate platform features, continuously negotiating meanings and identities within datafied digital environments (Gee, 2023; Pangrazio, 2016).

Increasingly, youth deploy "literate agents," including algorithms and generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, as co-pilots in everyday tasks, embedding algorithmic logics into their practices and further personalising their media experiences (Kalantzis & Cope, 2025). This evolving relationship foregrounds the need to revisit and expand scholarly understandings of flow, participatory cultures, and digital literacies within youth studies.

This article contributes to these debates by examining how adolescents experience, interpret, and actively engage with algorithmically curated content streams. By investigating the co-construction of the algorithmic flow, the research sheds light on youth appropriation practices within seemingly passive,

yet actively negotiated, digital environments. It expands critical literacy perspectives by addressing the central mediating role of algorithms in contemporary consumer cultures, introducing new boundaries for literate engagement. Additionally, it enriches the literature on algorithmic flows and youth agency, offering nuanced insights into how young people shape and embody these flows in their identity formation and social participation. These contributions provide a valuable framework for understanding youth digital cultures amidst rapid technological and societal transformations.

In doing so, this research responds to current technological realities that position algorithmic content curation and AI not just as external influences but as integral, interiorized components of youth social media practices. Understanding youth engagement with algorithmic flows thus necessitates methodologies capturing collective meaning-making and cultural logics, a focus pursued here through in-depth group interviews with Italian high school students. The findings promise to inform educational strategies that foster critical digital literacies and empower youth as active agents within increasingly data-driven social worlds.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The role of social media in youth cultures

Consumption has long been recognised as a central lens for understanding how practices of acquiring, displaying, and engaging with goods and media shape young people's identities and social belonging. Youth cultures often re-appropriate market logics in creative ways, using them to define social positions and articulate belonging within peer groups (Best, 2009).

The advent of social media significantly accelerated these dynamics. In the early 2000s, social networking sites became digital environments where the vast majority of U.S. teenagers relocated key forms of socialisation, such as exchanging updates with friends or following the profiles of favourite bands (boyd, 2008). Two decades later, however, the functions of social media have undergone a profound transformation. The evolution of relatively simple networks into complex infrastructures has generated new practices within increasingly platformised everyday lives. For example, the growing sense of diminished control over personal visibility (Pereira, 2020; Van Dijck, 2013) has led some teenagers to create multiple accounts (e.g. the finstas) in order to manage audiences for different types of posts better (see e.g. Huang & Vitak, 2022). Moreover, the new generations of social media, primarily based on algorithmically curated flows of content, influence the consolidation of lurking

as the most prominent platform experience (Sipley, 2024). This shift potentially challenges earlier notions of participatory culture, which emphasised youth contributions to social media as inherently meaningful (Jenkins et al., 2016).

More broadly, young people have appropriated social media to construct and perform consumer identities in increasingly networked ways. The visibility of consumption on social media, through the curation of lifestyles, brands, and tastes, functions as a form of identity signalling (Wilska et al., 2023). As emerged in the findings of the previous empirical case, youth actively negotiate belonging by aligning themselves with communities of taste and distancing from others, a process that echoes but also intensifies earlier "offline" dynamics of consumption. This is particularly evident, for instance, in the domain of gaming, where the choice of platforms, genres and gaming practices becomes an arena for negotiating identities, friendships, and cultural capital (Leonhardt & Overå, 2021).

The role of consumption in identity-making is also especially salient among marginalised groups, such as sexual minorities. Social media platforms allow LGBTQ+ youth to cultivate spaces where consumption of cultural symbols, aesthetics, and narratives becomes a resource for identity affirmation and community building (Craig et al., 2021; Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2023). In these contexts, consumption is not only about distinction or belonging but also about survival and resilience in the face of heteronormative pressures. Platforms themselves thus emerge as key cultural realms that mediate youth identities. Here, digital environments offer structured spaces where youth identities are shaped, contested, and legitimised (Stahl & Literat, 2023).

Nonetheless, the centrality of digital consumption is not without tensions. Scholars have drawn attention to the impact of online consumer practices on young people's body image and self-perception. For instance, Rodgers and Rousseau (2022) reported how exposure to idealised images on Instagram and related platforms exacerbates body dissatisfaction, particularly among adolescents, suggesting that consumption in the digital sphere often reproduces normative pressure alongside opportunities for self-expression.

Taken together, this research strand suggests that earlier models of socialisation, which portray youth as passive recipients of adult culture, are insufficient to explain contemporary youth cultures. As Tsaliki (2022) contends, young people are dynamic co-constructors of identity who engage with, reshape, and negotiate meanings in interconnected digital spaces. Consumption, in this sense, functions not merely as a reflection of social structures but as an active terrain where identities are built, contested, and transformed. Through everyday practices, ranging from fashion and social media curation to gaming and cultural participation, youth mobilise consumption both as a form of

symbolic capital and as a medium for navigating belonging, difference, and recognition in contemporary society.

2.2 Being digitally competent: from societal concerns to critical digital literacies

Alongside the tensions that have accompanied the widespread adoption of social media among youth cultures, various problematic social media behaviours have become prominent in both academic research and media discourse. Issues such as cyberbullying, FOMO, phubbing, and social media addiction represent just a few aspects of this complex landscape of harmful practices. These concerns have fuelled societal anxieties about social media's impact on youth (see e.g. Haidt, 2024). While recent research explores the positive effects of delaying social media access, reporting actual improvements in well-being (Gerosa et al., 2024), the educational system is increasingly called upon to equip adolescents with the skills needed to navigate the multifaceted harms arising from digital environments. In other words, to cultivate digital literacy.

This led to the emergence of a broad field known as digital literacy studies, which traces its roots back to the early days of the World Wide Web, with Paul Gilster's seminal work Digital Literacy (1997) serving as a foundation. Today, digital literacy encompasses a wide range of competencies that have evolved in tandem with the expanding landscape of digital platforms. More recent research has focused specifically on critical data literacy to address the pervasive datafication of users, that is, the transformation of behavioural digital data into valuable information (Atenas et al., 2023). The rise of algorithms shaping platform experiences has also prompted the development of algorithm literacy (Dogruel, 2021).

This research area can now be broadly categorised into two approaches. On one hand, large-scale initiatives like those from OECD deploy top-down, a priori frameworks designed to assess and monitor digital competency distributions across nations (OECD, 2019). While these frameworks can inform local policies aimed at skill improvement, they often prioritise economic or security concerns, neglecting the highly contextual and socioculturally embedded nature of social media practices (Weninger, 2022). This gap underscores the importance of bottom-up approaches, which offer a more suitable focus for this work.

Bottom-up approaches to digital and data literacy emphasise contextualised, critical engagement with datafied digital environments, going beyond top-down skill measurement and economic rationale. Central to these approaches is the concept of critical datafication literacy, which fosters systemic

understanding of datafication processes, promotes critical thinking, and empowers learners to act collectively and politically (Sander, 2024). Unlike instrumental digital literacy, which focuses on technical skills, critical literacy encompasses reflection on power, algorithmic influence, and the societal impacts of data practices.

Empirical research with youth reveals their complex relationships with personal data and social media. While youth use platforms extensively for sociality and identity expression, they often lack a nuanced understanding of data flows, commercial data ecosystems, and algorithmic biases (Pangrazio & Selwyn, 2018). Recent research shows that youth experience tensions between concerns for privacy and pragmatic acceptance or resignation, reflecting feelings of powerlessness in managing pervasive data collection (Kubrusly et al., 2024). Nonetheless, participatory and arts-integrated pedagogies that engage youth as active agents in analysing and producing data narratives demonstrate promise in fostering critical awareness and tech intuition (Kubrusly et al., 2024; Markham, 2019).

Bottom-up critical literacies also challenge the myth of data neutrality, situating data within broader economic and sociopolitical contexts, including the rise of AI and its societal impacts. They recognise the youth's need to move from individual data protection to collective digital rights awareness and activism (Kubrusly et al., 2024; Sander, 2024). Educational strategies emphasise experiential learning, reflexivity, and creative inquiry, helping youth articulate their personal experiences within systemic data infrastructures and question hegemonic power structures (Markham, 2019; Pangrazio & Selwyn, 2018).

Moreover, this approach to literacies recognises the importance of how users, particularly within youth cultures, actively manipulate and appropriate the features offered by digital platforms. This perspective on literacy practices draws from the foundational work of the New Literacy Studies (NLS), a collective of scholars from the 1980s who challenged traditional views by framing literacy as a fundamentally social and cultural phenomenon rather than merely an individual cognitive skill (see e.g. Gee, 2003, 2023). The novelty of the New Literacy Studies (NLS) approach lies in understanding literacy not merely as a set of discrete skills but as a competence that emerges from the integration and continuous negotiation of past meanings within new contexts and practices. Literacy, in this view, is always socially situated and constructed through ongoing processes of adaptation and meaning-making. This means that manipulating existing semiotic resources and reinterpreting them within new environments is at the heart of digital literacy. Pangrazio (2016), more recently, articulated this by defining digital design literacy as the way in which users interiorize, negotiate, and creatively transform meanings during their adoption of social media platforms.

However, the rapid evolution of digital platforms, especially the rise of social media characterised by ephemeral, multimodal content flows, as exemplified by TikTok, has introduced novel literacy practices and understandings. These new dynamics require fresh investigation to fully comprehend how youth negotiate, design, and transform digital literacies in their everyday interactions.

2.3 Manipulating the flow: the literate practice behind teenagers' social media "passive" experiences

To this end, the present article seeks to contribute to the two aforementioned scholarly literatures by further exploring how youth cultures make sense of the algorithmically curated flow of content. The advent of TikTok marked the beginning of a new generation of platforms that shifted the paradigm from networks of users to audiences grouped around shared streams of content (Gerbaudo, 2024). Consequently, scholars have revisited and expanded the concept of flow to better account for contemporary social media experiences.

Despite being rooted in social psychology (Csikszentmihalyi, 1977), flow is here considered in terms of the seamless media experience, a notion developed in television studies (Ytre-Arne et al., 2020). Williams (1974) coined the term to describe the television schedule designed to ensure continuous coverage, creating an uninterrupted viewing experience intended to keep audiences engaged (Kackman, 2011). Contemporary research extends this idea, showing that algorithmic "schedules" are not pre-determined but co-constructed based on users' preferences (Siles et al., 2024; Siles & Valerio-Alfaro, 2025). This co-construction creates space for users' everyday literate practices to appropriate the flow in line with their interests.

Aware of the underlying algorithmic logic, today's teenagers employ varying degrees of tactical engagement to influence recommender systems and curate content that aligns with their preferences (Klug et al., 2021). Increasingly, adolescents deploy so-called literate agents, such as generative AI tools, to assist in daily tasks like homework and exam preparation (Kalantzis & Cope, 2025). Through these routine encounters, algorithms become interiorized, effectively co-piloting users' practices. Thus, flow emerges as a dynamic, negotiated dimension shaped jointly by algorithmic inference of tastes and users' active appropriation. Tactical behaviours like selective scrolling, liking, and commenting represent literate practices whereby teenagers personalise and negotiate their streaming experiences.

Such practices are crucial to understanding youth cultures within the context of ephemeral, rapidly flowing platform environments. They grant deeper insight into young people's practical understandings and meaning-making within social media. Accordingly, this article addresses the question of the extent to which and how young people experience and navigate the algorithmic flow.

3. Methodological and analytical approach

The present work relies on qualitative data collected as part of a broader research project on teenagers' practical understandings of social media, conducted between 2024 and 2025. Whereas the overall project engaged more than thirty Italian high school classes, eight of them agreed to host an in-person initiative structured in two parts: a participative lecture introducing recent research on platforms, recommender systems, and the logics of the data economy, followed by class-level discussions on students' experiences with social media.

The discussions were conducted as group interviews, a methodological format that differs from individual interviews by situating participants in a collective dynamic where meaning is co-constructed and peer exchanges generate richer narratives (Currie & Kelly, 2012). Compared to focus groups, which usually rely on smaller groups selected for targeted exploration of attitudes and lived experiences (Hundley & Shyles, 2010), class-level group interviews were employed here primarily to maximise participation in a limited timeframe and to capture shared, collective understandings emerging in the classroom context. While less detailed than small-group formats, this approach enabled the mapping of broader cultural logics and intersubjective negotiations among adolescents, providing an especially valuable perspective for understanding practices of social media use.

In total, around 100 students aged 17–19 years participated. The sample skewed slightly female (approx. 60%) and was drawn from both lyceums and technical institutes, covering scientific, classical, artistic, and marketing tracks. Most participants were based in northern Italy, but the study also represented rural and urban contexts, including large cities and suburban areas. Teachers who facilitated the initiative recommended involving students nearing their final exams, as the topic was considered especially relevant for older cohorts. This produced a heterogeneous sample with a wide range of academic and social backgrounds, albeit with some geographic concentration that will be addressed as a limitation.

The transcripts of the group interviews were analysed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a flexible approach suitable for identifying both convergent patterns and divergent perspectives in qualitative data. The process followed six phases, from familiarisation to the development of themes, while combining deductive and inductive coding strategies (Xu & Zammit, 2020).

Specifically, the initial codebook was constructed deductively, drawing on the literature mentioned in the previous section. At the same time, the analysis remained open to inductive theme development, identifying categories emerging directly from participants' narratives and language (Cohen et al., 2018). In sum, deductive categories provided scaffolding for structuring the corpus, while inductive coding enabled the refinement and expansion of analytical insights.

Practically, the transcripts were coded manually in Microsoft Word. Segments of text were highlighted, and comments were inserted containing four components: (1) deductive category, (2) emerging inductive theme, (3) researcher's interpretive observation, and (4) the quoted excerpt. These comments were then exported into Excel in a semicolon-separated format, facilitating filtering, visualisation of categories, and descriptive analysis (Isangula et al., 2024; Ose, 2016). This hybrid strategy enabled a granular understanding of how teenagers describe their engagement with social media, as well as the cultural logics underlying their practices.

4. Findings

Building on participants' early experiences of accessing social media, this next dimension of findings explores how they engage with feeds shaped by algorithmic logics. While initial interactions were guided by peers, trends, and personal interests, participants now navigate personalised streams that continuously adapt to their behaviour and preferences. These experiences highlight not only how algorithms mediate attention and content consumption but also how young users develop an understanding of the systems and strategically influence them. Drawing on the concepts of algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017; Schulz, 2023), folk theories of technology (Eslami et al., 2015, 2016; Karizat et al., 2021) and the algorithmic flow (Siles & Valerio-Alfaro, 2025; Ytre-Arne et al., 2020), the analysis examines the co-construction of algorithmic feeds through perceptual, emotional, and tactical practices, encompassing their comprehension of recommendation logics, engagement with standouts, and copilot strategies to shape the flow.

4.1 New forms of algorithmic Imaginaries, again

Building on the notion of algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017), participants showed that the existence of algorithmic mediation is no longer met with surprise or opacity but, to a certain extent, taken for granted. Whereas early studies often documented uncanny fascination or suspicion (see e.g. Gandini et al., 2023; Swart, 2021), here, teenagers displayed an immediate grasp of how recommendation systems function, rooted in a practical and technical knowledge based on iterative trial-and-error experiences.

Tommaso (17) pointed out how the same logic reappeared across platforms:

> "It happens a lot on Spotify. If I don't pick a playlist, it just keeps throwing the same song at me, like over and over. Same on TikTok. If I like one football post, suddenly it's all football. And that's how it works with every platform, honestly. Once you know how it moves, it's super easy to notice."

This further expands on past research, showing that users often anthropomorphise or mythologise algorithms to make sense of their functions (see e.g. Eslami et al., 2015, 2016; Gandini et al., 2023; Schulz, 2023). Participants, indeed, demonstrated a straightforward, technically informed, and practical understanding of algorithms. These systems are experienced as patterned infrastructures and are valued for their ability to tailor content to individual inferred tastes. Imaginaries act as comparative frameworks: participants measure platforms against each other, ranking them by how effectively the algorithm personalises flow. Luca (17) explained:

> "TikTok's algorithm is really responsive… It adapts really quickly to what I like. Instagram feels more static… plus, a lot of the videos there are just reposted from TikTok."

The failure in the process of adapting the content leads users to either disengage or actively intervene to reshape their feed. Andrea (16) summarised this:

> "Yeah, when I started going to the gym, they only showed me gym videos, and I got bored with them. So every time one popped up, I'd just skip it or not like it, and instead I'd like other stuff."

Moreover, their accounts draw from broader cultural discourses about virality and platform logics, especially when reasoning on how to become *viral* on TikTok. Imaginaries related to this become quasi-professional, suggesting a process of habituation, if not enculturation, of their latent mechanisms. Alberto (16) reconstructed TikTok's metric of watch time in detail:

> "I think a video goes viral when it hits all the marks for the recommendation algorithm. Like on TikTok, I'm pretty sure it's all about how long people watch it. If the app sees people staying on it, it pushes the video more. So the first few seconds have to grab your attention."

This internalised comprehension of algorithms, shared among participants, frames their consumption practices and reasoning, highlighting how the logic of algorithmic content flow has become embedded in everyday interactions with social media.

4.2 Perceived characteristics of the algorithmic flow

As mentioned in the literature review, the rise of flow-based platforms marks a shift toward algorithmically clustered audiences (Gerbaudo, 2024). This echoes Williams'(1974) idea of flow as continuous media, now personalised in real time (Kackman, 2011; Siles & Valerio-Alfaro, 2025; Ytre-Arne et al., 2020). TikTok's ForYou page exemplifies this adaptive scheduling, constantly reshaped by users' action (Siles et al., 2024; Zhao & Wagner, 2023). Among participants, algorithmic flow is confirmed as a foundational experience of social media use, characterised by four distinct dimensions.

First, the algorithmic flow is always-on and accessible. Participants often reported opening platforms without specific intent, anticipating that the algorithm would deliver entertainment. Claudia (16) captured this:

"A lot of times I don't even know what I'm looking for. I open the app and just hope something good pops up."

This appears to confirm the idea of algorithmic flow as a constantly updating schedule, similar to what happened with broadcasting television, in contrast to the participatory culture that portrays youth cultures as actively engaging with other users or content creators. The feed here becomes a background companion, always available and ready to fill moments of downtime.

Second, the flow is perceived and accordingly managed as ephemeral. Much of the content, indeed, was described as forgettable, consumed and discarded within seconds. Gianmarco (18) noted:

"Three minutes go by and I've already forgotten everything. One video later and it's like the last one never happened."

Content in algorithmic feeds is often fleeting, with entertaining posts rarely leaving a lasting impression. Users sometimes save items, but this act itself reinforces the perception of the feed as ephemeral, meaning that memorable content must be actively removed from the flow to be preserved, such as by liking or saving the content.

Third, the experience of the flow is seamless, flawless. Participants praised the smooth adaptability of the feed, which shifted gradually without disrupting immersion. Matteo (18) described: "You don't really notice the shift, but it adapts to you… you barely notice it". The perceived quality of algorithmic flow rises when users need minimal effort to adjust it, with malfunction defined as having to skip most recommended content.

Last, the algorithmic flow is perceived as self-defining, closely tied to personal identity and social recognition. The breaching experiments, where peers manipulated each other's feeds, revealed how exposing or altering algorithmic traces (e.g., likes) could threaten self-presentation and cause discomfort. Pietro (18) admitted: "It sucks, because then I'm scared I won't get videos I actually like anymore."

In Goffman's (1967) terms, these algorithmic traces are part of the interaction order, where disruption threatens face and identity. Participants described their feeds as digital fingerprints, uniquely reflecting individual tastes and identities. Disruptions triggered strong emotional reactions, with fears of losing control over carefully curated relevance. This resonates with the intimacy that surveillance might trigger when making tailored flows being perceived as personal (Ruckenstein & Granroth, 2019). Overall, the flow emerged as an intimate, fragile co-production of user behaviour and algorithmic logic.

4.3 The algorithmic standouts

The algorithmic flow shapes most participants' everyday social media practices, with most reporting that their content consumption was primarily algorithmically recommended rather than actively searched. However, as anticipated in the previous feature, not all of this flow is watched.

The principles of the attention economy suggest that this latter is a valuable resource in environments saturated with information (Davenport & Beck, 2001; Tufekci, 2015; Wu, 2017). Here, from content creators (Bishop, 2019; DeVito, 2022) to activists (Rega & Medrado, 2023; Uldam, 2018) playing the so-called visibility game (Cotter, 2019) to capture, hold, and capitalise users' attention, making engagement a key measure of value and shaping how information is produced, distributed, and consumed. Yet, less is known about how users, particularly youth cultures, contribute to shaping visibility through selective attention. My interviews highlight the salience of what I term algorithmic standouts: pieces of flow that break through the flow, capture attention, and leave a lasting impression.

"Usually, if I watch something, it's because I came across it randomly first." With this quote, Serena (17) summarised the funding pillars of the algorithmic

standouts. Indeed, youths differentiate between mere exposure and active engagement with content. For users like Serena, encountering content passively in the feed is only a precursor to conscious attentive consumption, involving a cognitive filtering process that determines which items are noticed, remembered, and ultimately watched. Here, the algorithmic flow operates more as background noise, from which selective fragments emerge and catch users' attention.

Two main limitations shape the experience of algorithmic standouts. First, the feed often exposes users to a narrow, repetitive pool of content, reflecting overfitting to predicted tastes and the circulation of duplicated media across platforms (Giorgi & Gerosa, 2024). Alessio (16) noted:

"Yesterday I was watching… and oh my god, it was always the same stuff. The same little song over and over… Same trend, same meme."

Algorithmic biases represent a key limitation of the algorithmic flow. Recommender systems rely on a training phase that encodes users' behavioural data, which can reproduce culturally embedded dispositions and stereotypes, a phenomenon Airoldi (2021) terms "culture in the code." Simone (16) experienced this firsthand:

> "I've noticed that if I accidentally like a video of a puppy or something, it keeps showing me that kind of stuff. But it only really happens with animal videos and football. I have to actually make an effort to like and save videos outside of those topics, just to get back to the categories I'm really into. Otherwise, it just locks me into the same ones over and over."

Together, these limitations create an algorithmic flow that is a space of continuous negotiation, where participants actively adjust their attention, tastes, and identity through actions such as liking, saving, or skipping content. Users engage strategically to steer their feeds, demonstrating that algorithmic experiences are not passively received but co-constructed through everyday interactions.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The article presents an investigation into how contemporary youth cultures engage with algorithmically curated content streams on social media platforms, such as TikTok. In doing so, it highlights their shared understanding and emerging digitally literate practices in managing consumption behaviours and shaping identity within these algorithm-driven digital environments.

Youth cultures heavily rely on social media for consumption and managing

identities, as established in early research (boyd, 2008). However, the rise of algorithmic, flow-based platforms introduces a shift toward seemingly passive content consumption (Sipley, 2024), challenging traditional views of participatory youth engagement. Alongside societal concerns about social media's impact, research has emphasised the educational role of digital literacy, particularly sociocultural, critical approaches that focus on power, algorithmic influence, and collective digital rights (Pangrazio & Selwyn, 2018; Sander, 2024). In this context, these literatures face new challenges posed by the "flowing" paradigm, where youth are habituated to adopting "literate agents" like algorithms and AI (e.g., ChatGPT) to assist in daily tasks (Kalantzis & Cope, 2025). This article, therefore, is aimed at exploring how youth experience and reason about this algorithmic flow in their everyday social media interactions.

Drawing on qualitative data from group interviews conducted in eight Italian high school classes, key findings reveal that young people possess a nuanced and practical understanding of algorithmic recommendation systems, moving beyond early fascination or suspicion toward recommender algorithms curating social media content. This experience of the algorithmic flow is characterised as always-on, ephemeral, seamless, and intimately tied to personal identity and social recognition. Youth differentiate between passive exposure and active engagement with algorithmic standouts, namely pieces of content that break through and capture focused attention. At the same time, they navigate the limitations and biases inherent in recommender systems by strategically adjusting their interactions.

First, for youth studies, the findings reveal how adolescents engage in appropriation practices even within social media environments that appear, at first glance, highly passive. Platforms structured around algorithmically curated flows (e.g. TikTok's ForYou page) may suggest an experience of consumption dictated by automated systems rather than by user agency. However, the narratives gathered in group interviews show that young people do not merely receive these flows, but instead develop practical tactics to negotiate, reshape, and optimise them. Practices such as selective scrolling, strategic liking, skipping, or saving content reveal a capacity to appropriate the algorithmic environment and reorient it towards personal and social goals. Importantly, these actions are not occasional but are interiorised as routine strategies that adolescents consciously mobilise. The algorithm is no longer perceived as an external or opaque entity but as an anticipated and familiar feature of their media ecology. In this sense, appropriation constitutes not only a mode of resistance but a novel form of everyday sense-making and identity-building within datafied contexts.

Second, this study refines and expands the scope of critical data literacies and critical algorithm literacies by foregrounding the new nuances and shared

understandings that adolescents co-construct when engaging with algorithmically curated environments. Existing scholarship has already demonstrated the pervasive role of algorithms in shaping youth sociality, consumer practices, and identity work. This article offers a closer examination of how young people internalise algorithmic mediation, transforming it into a set of shared cultural references and literate practices that articulate new boundaries of "being literate." Literacy in this sense extends beyond knowing how data circulates or how algorithmic recommendations operate; it also encompasses the capacity to collectively interpret, negotiate, and appropriate the meanings that emerge within ephemeral flows of content. The findings highlight how adolescents not only tactically influence what appears in their feeds but also form shared folk theories and comparative judgments across platforms, integrating these into their self-understandings and peer dynamics. In this way, critical literacy is expanded to include the embodied, situated, and socially distributed practices through which young people construct collective agency within complex digital infrastructures. This contribution underscores that in the current media landscape, literacy is less about static competencies and more about adaptive, reflexive, and negotiated forms of participation in datafied cultures.

Finally, the article contributes to scholarship on algorithmic flows and agency by introducing new nuances to how youth cultures negotiate their positions within an algorithmic media landscape. Prior scholarship has often framed algorithmic curation as either disempowering, producing passive consumption, or as liberating, creating new possibilities for participation. The empirical evidence presented here complicates this binary. The adolescents studied perceive algorithmic flows as simultaneously constraining—when content becomes too repetitive or "locks" them into narrow categories—and enabling, when they successfully re-direct these flows to reflect their evolving identities. This ambivalent position underscores the co-construction of algorithmic experiences: rather than being solely determined by technological systems or by user creativity, youth media practices emerge as negotiated products of both. This epistemological shift emphasises the intimate, fragile, and dynamic balance between algorithmic power and human agency, suggesting future research directions that foreground relational and processual perspectives on digital culture.

Taken together, these contributions advance an understanding of contemporary youth cultures as neither passive audiences nor fully autonomous actors, but as literate negotiators of algorithmically shaped environments. In doing so, the study enriches the conceptual vocabulary of youth studies, expands the scope of critical literacies, and introduces new layers of interpretation for analysing algorithmic flows and agency.

Nevertheless, some limitations arise from the geographic concentration of the sample, primarily from northern Italy, which may limit the generalizability of the findings across different socio-cultural contexts. The study primarily reflects the perspectives of older adolescents, leaving younger age groups underexplored, and relies on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability or recall biases. Future research could extend this work by investigating cross-cultural variations, the longitudinal dynamics of algorithmic engagement, and the evolving role of emergent literate agents, such as generative AI, in youth digital practices.

In conclusion, this article enhances understanding of youth cultures in the digital age by illustrating how algorithmic flows mediate consumption, identity, and social belonging, while showcasing young people's literate practices as foundational to navigating the complexities of contemporary social media. It underscores the importance of educational strategies that foster critical awareness and collective digital rights activism, empowering youth as active participants rather than passive consumers in an increasingly datafied digital landscape. This work invites further inquiry into the sociocultural implications of algorithmic mediation for youth identity formation and calls for inclusive, reflexive approaches in both research and digital literacy education.

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