

Young People and Digital Consumption: Profiles and Empirical Pathways in the Algorithmic Age

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Abstract

This paper offers an integrated perspective on youth digital consumption by examining how access, usage patterns, digital skills, and algorithmic awareness intersect to shape differentiated experiences on YouTube and TikTok. Anchored in a theoretical framework that views digital consumption as a space where access, competence, and critical reflexivity toward algorithmic processes converge, the research draws on a sample of 449 young adults residing in Campania and Lombardy. Using quantitative multi-analytical strategy — including typological modeling, multiple correspondence analysis, and structural equation modeling — the study investigates how usage intensity, digital skills, and algorithmic awareness generate unequal configurations of epistemic agency. Findings indicate that frequent platform use alone does not ensure critical engagement; rather, the quality of digital competencies emerges as the key driver in fostering algorithmic awareness. By identifying eight distinct digital profiles, the study contributes also to mapping emerging forms of social stratification within the algorithmically shaped digital environment.

Keywords: algorithmic awareness, digital skills, platform usage, social media, digital profiles.

1. Introduction

In an ecosystem increasingly shaped by algorithmic logics, understanding how individuals navigate digital consumption is not merely a technical issue, but a significantly sociological one. Digital platforms, as is well known, do not simply host content: they filter it, rank it, and determine its visibility based on automated criteria that users rarely fully know or consciously perceive (Airoldi, 2022; Pasquale, 2015; Swart, 2021).

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Within this scenario, daily interaction with digital environments becomes a terrain where new inequalities are produced—inequalities not only of access, but of understanding, awareness, and agency.

Building on this premise, the present paper — developed within the framework of the ALGOFEED project¹ — offers an integrated reading of youth digital consumption, investigating how access and usage, digital skills, and algorithmic awareness interact in producing differentiated configurations of digital experience across YouTube and TikTok. The aim is not merely to describe these configurations, but to propose an interpretative typology that highlights the social and epistemic conditions that enable—or hinder—effective critical participation in digital environments.

The analysis focuses on key dimensions of digital and social media engagement: the availability of digital devices, the frequency of platform access, technical and critical skills of use, and the degree of awareness regarding the existence of algorithmic processes that influence content consumption. The goal is to define not only an analytical model but also a typology of users navigating platforms and the web more broadly, based on their digital skills, algorithmic awareness, and patterns of use.

The contemporary digital landscape is, moreover, in constant evolution. Platforms such as YouTube and TikTok are reshaping not only the production and consumption of content, but also the ways users relate to the algorithmic mechanisms that structure online experience. As explored in the next section, the literature has progressively shifted its focus from technical skill acquisition to the critical capacity to interpret digital dynamics, including the computational processes underpinning content personalization (Van Dijck, 2013). Within this framework, digital access and platform availability emerge as enabling conditions, while digital skills act as a fundamental catalyst for developing effective algorithmic awareness. Without adequate digital and algorithmic literacy, even highly connected users risk becoming passive consumers, vulnerable to biases, echo chambers, and algorithmic manipulation (Quattrocio et al., 2016; Rhodes, 2022).

Furthermore, the increasing prevalence of recursive algorithmic recommendation systems heightens the need to make these systems more “explainable” (Gutierrez Lopez & Halford, 2024), in order to better explore users’ awareness of such processes and the demographic, social, and behavioral factors that shape it (Airoldi, 2022).

¹ The ALGOFEED project is an Italian Research Projects of Significant National Interest (PRIN) which has the general objective of shedding light on the socio-cultural effects of platform-based feedback loops.

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Despite a growing body of research, the literature has not yet fully addressed digital consumption as a space where stratified inequalities of access, competence, and critical awareness emerge. Frequently, digital practices are analyzed separately from the material and cognitive conditions that enable them, or there is a tendency to conflate simple platform usage with mastery of the underlying algorithmic mechanisms. In doing so, the complexity of digital experience—and the role of competencies and structural factors in shaping algorithmic awareness—risks being obscured.

Against this backdrop, the empirical analysis draws on a sample of 449 young individuals residing in Campania and Lombardy and is organized around two main objectives: first, to analyze the relationships among socio-demographic characteristics, digital practices, and levels of algorithmic awareness; and second, to propose a typology of digital consumption in which awareness emerges as the outcome of the interaction between everyday platform use—ranging from simple “lurking” to active content production—and levels of digital competence. In this way, the study aims to offer both a theoretical and empirical contribution to understanding the unequal forms of agency emerging within contemporary algorithmic environments.

The paper is structured as follows: first, a review of the main findings in the field of digital literacy and social media experience; second, a section on methods and materials, detailing the construction of the sample, the conceptual dimensions of the study, and the analytical techniques employed; third, the results section, divided into descriptive analysis and advanced statistical modeling; and finally, a discussion of the results and concluding reflections.

2. Between digital skills and algorithmic awareness

In the era of hyperconnectivity, the ability to interact with digital technologies no longer resides solely in technical proficiency, but involves a set of critical and cognitive competencies that shape individuals’ capacity to access, interpret, and produce online content. Within this context, the concept of digital competence has evolved from a purely instrumental perspective to a more articulated one, encompassing not only access to digital tools but also an understanding of the computational mechanisms that structure user experiences and contribute to the emergence of digital inequalities (Ragnedda et al., 2020), as well as the awareness that content consumption is increasingly governed by opaque algorithmic processes (Airoldi, 2022).

Initially, digital literacy focused primarily on the acquisition of technical skills; today, however, the emphasis has shifted toward the development of critical thinking in relation to digital dynamics, including an understanding of

the underlying processes of content personalization and information manipulation (Quattrociocchi et al., 2016; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2014; Vuorikari et al., 2022).

Algorithmic awareness (AA) is a relatively recent construct, closely linked to the ability to recognize the role of algorithms in the selection, personalization, and ranking of online content (Ridley & Pawlick-Potts, 2021). Unlike basic digital skills (DS), which primarily concern the ability to use digital tools and resources, AA involves an advanced form of critical literacy: knowing that algorithms exist, understanding how they function, and recognizing their potential effects on individual patterns of consumption and information. Bucher (2017) introduced the concept of the algorithmic imaginary to describe how users construct representations of algorithms, often shaped by media narratives and distorted perceptions. Empirical studies have confirmed that a significant portion of users tends to overestimate the neutrality of algorithms or even ignore their existence altogether (Eslami et al., 2016), despite empirical evidence highlighting their opacity and potential for discrimination (Aragona, 2021; Noble, 2018; O’Neil, 2016). These limitations have important consequences for users’ ability to diversify information sources and counter phenomena such as polarization, misinformation, and filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011; Quattrociocchi et al., 2016). For instance, the study by Eslami et al. (2016) revealed that many Facebook users were unaware of the existence of algorithmically curated feeds, attributing content selection instead to randomness or personal preferences. This lack of awareness can significantly impact users’ ability to resist processes such as fake news dissemination and online radicalization (Acampa, 2024; Pariser, 2011).

If digital access (DA) constitutes the material foundation, and DS represent the ability to navigate the digital space, AA can be seen as the outcome of a reflective process that depends both on initial conditions and on the conscious use of platforms. However, possessing DS does not automatically guarantee a critical understanding of algorithmic mechanisms. Recent studies have highlighted the crucial role of formal education: students exposed to data literacy and algorithmic literacy curricula display a greater ability to identify bias within algorithmic systems compared to those receiving more traditional forms of digital education (Gran et al., 2021).

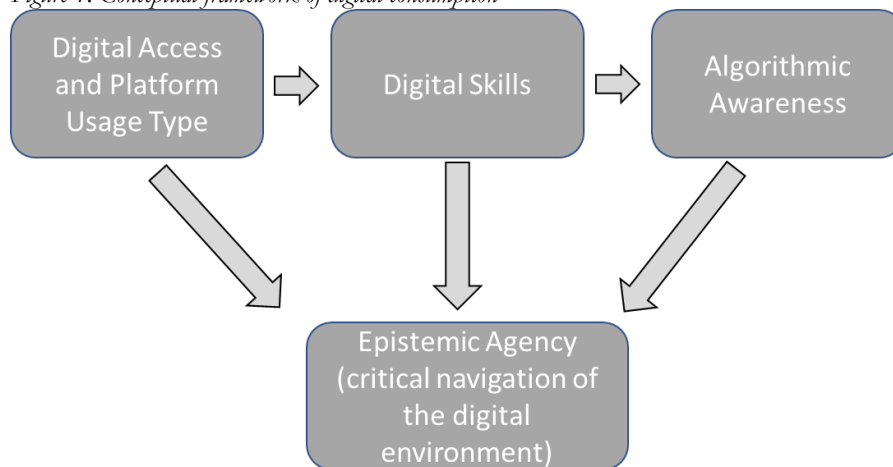
Everyday usage experience also represents a relevant variable: users with greater familiarity with platform logics tend to demonstrate higher levels of AA (Cotter, 2021), although such awareness does not always translate into active strategies of resistance against automatic personalization, as the empirical results of this study also suggest.

Drawing on these theoretical premises, the present study adopts an integrated approach that considers three fundamental and interconnected

dimensions: DA and usage patterns, DS (both operational and critical), and AA. As illustrated in the proposed conceptual model (Fig. 1), these dimensions do not operate linearly but influence each other reciprocally, contributing—albeit differently and according to diverse social and cognitive trajectories—to the formation of what can be termed epistemic agency: the ability to critically navigate the digital environment.

The analysis therefore pursues a dual objective: first, to understand the extent to which DA, usage practices, and DS shape AA among young users; second, to observe how AA translates (or fails to translate) into stratified forms of agency, offering a layered reading of contemporary digital experience.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of digital consumption



3. Methods and materials

3.1 Sample construction

A quota sampling of 449 active users of YouTube and TikTok, aged between 18 and 40 years, was selected based on geographic distribution, age, and educational level². Participants were recruited from the regions of

² The initial sampling plan within the ALGOFEEED research project aimed to recruit 240 participants, evenly split between Campania and Lombardy (120 per region). Participants were expected to engage in a three-phase research design: first, completing a web survey collecting data on digital behaviors; second, consenting to share their personal usage data from YouTube and TikTok, downloaded as log files for analysis of

Lombardy and Campania, ensuring a balanced distribution between the two areas. These regions—respectively the first and second most populous in Italy for the considered age group—present significant socio-economic differences that may influence cultural consumption practices, platform usage patterns, and forms of interaction with algorithmic systems.

Participant identification and recruitment were conducted through an external statistical agency specialized in social research surveys, in order to avoid distortions arising from convenience sampling or recruitment from specific online/offline points. Moreover, participants were guaranteed financial compensation to encourage active involvement in the survey process. Selected individuals were provided with a research participation agreement, which included not only the survey component but also participation in additional qualitative phases and in online activity tracking.

3.2 Instruments and variables

The instrument used was an online questionnaire based on the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing) model. In addition to the standard socio-demographic sections, the questionnaire items were operationalized around four key dimensions: digital access (DA), platform usage type (PUT), digital skills (DS), and algorithmic awareness (AA). Together, these dimensions allowed for an in-depth exploration of the complex relationship between digital consumption practices and awareness of the algorithmic systems shaping online content.

This conceptual structure (Table 1) not only guided the empirical investigation but also offered an integrated framework for understanding how different components of the digital background influence users' critical capacities.

The first dimension—DA—represents the foundational layer from which the others emerge. It investigates the general usage of digital technologies, focusing on two fundamental aspects. On one hand, web access examines the

actual platform interactions; and third, taking part in elicitation interviews, selected based on usage profiles, to explore their personal narratives and perceptions regarding the interplay of digital capital, literacy, and strategic agency. Due to the complexity of this multi-stage design, the web survey continued beyond the initially planned threshold to ensure sufficient recruitment for the subsequent phases. As a result, the number of completed surveys increased until the necessary pool of data donors and interview participants was reached. This adjustment allowed the research to secure a more robust and balanced sample, while remaining aligned with the study's core objectives.

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modalities and frequency with which users connect to the Internet, as well as the devices they use. On the other, social media access explores users' everyday familiarity with digital platforms, considered a prerequisite for any form of online interaction. Without adequate DA, it is difficult to develop the skills necessary to critically engage with algorithmic mechanisms.

Within the broader context of DA, specific usage patterns are captured separately through PUT. PUT classifies users based on their engagement with social media platforms, drawing on the typologies proposed by Boyd and Ellison (2007) and studies on social media practices (Bennato, 2012; Boccia Artieri & Marinelli, 2018). This dimension distinguishes between contextual factors—such as platform presence, devices used, and content consumption habits—and user behaviors, defining the extent to which individuals interact with, produce, and engage with digital content. The three sub-dimensions, Networking, Context, and Content (consumption or creation), operationalize the concept of users as “prosumers” (Spohr, 2017), enabling a deeper analysis of how different levels of engagement influence exposure to algorithmic recommendations.

The DS dimension refers to a broad set of competencies to interact with digital environments. Based on the European DIGCOMP framework, it identifies core abilities for accessing, navigating, and critically engaging with digital technologies. These include social media skills, netiquette, and digital literacy (Vuorikari et al., 2022). This approach enables a comprehensive assessment of users' abilities to manage digital information flows and engage meaningfully with social media environments, connecting to the broader notion of “digital capital” (Ragnedda et al., 2020), which emphasizes that skills and knowledge are fundamental for meaningful digital engagement and may represent an additional factor of social inequality.

The AA dimension focuses on users' ability to understand and critically evaluate how algorithms operate. This awareness is articulated through four sub-dimensions:

- The cognitive dimension concerns theoretical knowledge of algorithmic processes and the ability to recognize how they influence content selection.
- The procedural dimension observes users' capacity to follow and interpret the operational mechanisms of algorithms.
- The behavioral dimension reflects navigation and consumption habits, showing how greater awareness can influence online choices.
- Finally, the affective dimension examines emotional reactions and subjective perceptions in response to automated recommendations.

Both Zarouali, Boerman, and de Vreese (2021) and Felaco (2022) emphasize the importance of solid algorithmic awareness: only by fully

understanding the functioning of automated systems can users engage with them critically and consciously.

By integrating these four dimensions, the study aims to construct a user profiling index, categorizing individuals according to their DS, PUT, and level of AA.

Table 1. Conceptual dimensions and operational sub-dimensions of the study

Dimensions	Description	Sub-dimensions
<i>Digital Access</i>	General use of digital technologies on social platforms	Web-access; Social media-access.
<i>PUT (Platform Usage Type)</i>	Specific use of YouTube and TikTok platforms	Networking; Context; Contents.
<i>Digital Skills</i>	Competencies to interact with digital spaces	Social media skills; Netiquette; Digital literacy
<i>Algorithm Awareness</i>	Understanding of algorithm functioning	Cognitive; Procedural; Behavioral; Affective

3.3 The platforms under study: YouTube and Tik Tok

This study focuses on two prominent video-sharing platforms, YouTube (YT) and TikTok (TT), both characterized by an extensive use of personalized recommendations (Jordan, 2024). YT, launched in 2005 and owned by Alphabet (Google), counts over 2 billion active users worldwide and is the most widely used social platform in Italy (85.3% of Internet users aged 16–64, WeAreSocial, 2021). While hosting highly heterogeneous content — ranging from music to infotainment — its recommendation logic is based on user behavior data, such as watch history and viewing time (Airoldi et al., 2016). Although some studies have shown that the algorithm significantly shapes consumption patterns (Wu et al., 2019), more recent research highlights the limited attention given to personalization at the individual level (Matamoros-Fernandez et al., 2021; Airoldi, 2021).

TT, launched in 2016, has over 320 million daily active users globally and approximately 5.4 million in Italy (7.7% of the population), primarily concentrated in the 16–35 age group (WeAreSocial, 2021). The platform favors forms of “creative interaction” (Zulli & Zulli, 2020) over discursive ones, while its “For You” section algorithm selects videos based on a variety of behavioral signals (Schellewald, 2021). Academic research on TT is still at an early stage and has mainly focused on issues such as privacy, content formats, and types of

communities, often overlooking a systematic study of recommendation logics and their impact on usage practices (Schellewald, 2021).

Despite differences in design, interface, and demographic target, both YT and TT fundamentally rely on algorithmic recommendation mechanisms to structure content consumption. Understanding these mechanisms and their effects on users' consumption trajectories thus constitutes a crucial step in analyzing cultural practices within the contemporary media ecosystem.

3.4 Analytical strategy

The study developed a three-phase analytical approach, structured into a methodological model articulated in three sections — presented separately but interpreted jointly — encompassing the construction of a typology, Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA), and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) (Tab.2). The combination of these three analytical techniques allowed for a multifaceted exploration of the complex interplay between digital consumption and algorithmic awareness.

3.4.1 Typological Modeling

The typological modeling represents a methodological approach for the integrated classification of complex phenomena, where different variables are cross-referenced to delineate distinct and interpretable profiles (Amaturo, 2012; Marradi, 2007).

In this study, the construction of the typological model for digital consumers is based on the intersection of three key dimensions, each dichotomized into low/high levels.

The crossing of these dimensions generated eight distinct profiles, which not only summarize the different modalities of interaction and competence within digital environments but also provide a crucial tool for interpreting the social and consumption dimensions that emerge in the subsequent MCA.

3.4.2 The Multiple Correspondence Analysis

As described by Di Franco (2006), MCA proves to be an extremely useful tool for analyzing categorical data. This technique enables the reduction of data complexity by visually mapping latent relationships among qualitative variables. In this study, MCA allowed the identification of two emergent dimensions —

“Social Engagement” and “Digital Competence” — which were fundamental in confirming the typology of digital consumption, differentiating passive users, such as “lurkers” from more proactive users, including content creators. This exploratory approach is essential for understanding how different modes of interaction with platforms are associated with varying levels of digital competence and, consequently, variations in algorithmic awareness.

3.4.3 Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was adopted to verify the theoretical model. This technique allows for the modeling of complex latent variables and the testing of causal hypotheses, even with moderate sample sizes. As highlighted by Tenenhaus et al. (2005) and confirmed by more recent studies, PLS-SEM is particularly suited for predictive analyses in contexts characterized by high relational complexity and multicollinearity. In this study, PLS-SEM was employed to examine how variables related to DA, PUT, and DS influence users’ AA. This modeling approach provided a robust quantitative framework for articulating and testing the specific contributions of each dimension to the overall dynamics of digital consumption.

Table 2. Analytical Strategy: techniques and objectives

Technique	Objectives
Typological Model	<i>Profiling digital users based on platform usage, digital skills, and awareness of social media algorithms</i>
Multiple Correspondence Analysis	<i>Identifying emergent patterns related to digital profiles, usage contexts, social networks, and content consumption practices</i>
Structural Equation Modeling	<i>Analyzing the combined impact of digital access, platform usage, and digital skills on the development of algorithmic awareness</i>

4. Results

4.1 Sample Characteristics

The distribution by gender shows a prevalence of female respondents (61.5%), while males account for 38.5% of the sample. The female prevalence reflects a well-known phenomenon in CAWI surveys, where women are generally more likely to participate (Lombi, 2014), thus influencing the

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composition of the sample. Regarding geographical origin, there is a fairly balanced distribution, with 51.4% of participants residing in Campania and 48.6% in Lombardy. However, a greater proportion live in non-capital municipalities (68.2%) compared to capital cities (31.8%).

From an age perspective, the most represented group is between 35 and 40 years old (51.4%), followed by the 25–34 age group (28.1%) and, lastly, the 18–24 age group (20.5%). In terms of educational attainment, nearly half of the sample (49.4%) holds at least a bachelor’s degree, 38.8% have a high school diploma, and 11.8% completed only lower secondary education or less (Table 3).

The diversity in social and geographical backgrounds within the sample offered the opportunity to observe how conditions of access, digital competencies, and daily practices shape differentiated trajectories of digital consumption and algorithmic awareness.

Table 3. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample by gender, residence area, region, age group, and educational attainment (n = 449)

Variables	Categories	(n)	(%)
Gender	Male	173	38.5
	Female	276	61.5
Residence area	Capital City	143	31.8
	Non-capital municipality	306	68.2
Region	Campania	231	51.4
	Lombardia	218	48.6
Age group	18–24	92	20.5
	25–34	126	28.1
	35–40	231	51.4
Educational Attainment	Lower secondary school or less	53	11.8
	High school diploma	174	38.8
	Bachelor’s degree or higher	222	49.4

4.2 Descriptive Analysis of Digital Dimensions: Access, Usage, Skills, and Awareness

4.2.1 Digital Access

The descriptive overview of the dimensions provides an initial detailed portrait of who the users are and how they interact with the digital environment, both on the broader web and on social media platforms. Data collected on general Web access (Table 4) reveal a population strongly oriented toward mobile usage: almost the entire sample uses smartphones to connect, highlighting an almost exclusive reliance on this device for Internet access.

This predominance suggests that most digital activities — ranging from listening to music to streaming movies and TV series — occur within a daily mobile context that facilitates immediate and rapid content consumption.

Beyond mobile access, a high level of social media engagement emerges (Table 5): over 90% of users report frequent use of social platforms. At the same time, listening to music and accessing streaming services represent central activities, underlining a trend toward digital consumption forms that prioritize audiovisual and multimedia entertainment.

Focusing on the social media experience, respondents rely almost daily on platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram, which serve as privileged channels for maintaining interpersonal relationships. Interestingly, despite the widespread use of these apps, productive activities — such as content creation or active participation in discussions — remain less frequent, with fewer than 20% of users engaging in such practices on a daily basis. This finding suggests that while digital technologies are an integral part of daily communication and content consumption, the drive toward active and creative participation is still limited.

Overall, the sample presents characteristics not far from those commonly observed among the broader youth population and their online consumption habits (Auditel & Censis, 2023). These users appear as dynamic and constantly connected young people, predominantly using smartphones for a wide range of digital activities. They primarily utilize social media to stay in touch with friends and family and to access entertainment content, while content production and participatory interaction are less common practices. These elements not only define who they are and what they do, but also outline the context and tools that shape their access to the digital experience.

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Table 4. Digital Access: Web access

Categories	Sub-categories	%
Device	Smartphone	98.2%
	Laptop	29%
	Tablet	29.8%
	Desktop	23.2%
	Smart TV	17.6%
	Console	5.3%
	Virtual Reality	0.4%
Activities (often/very often)	Using Social Media	91.5%
	Listening Music	86.2%
	Accessing Streaming Services	78.2%
	Watching Movies/TV series	76.4%

Table 5. Digital Access: Social Media access

Categories	Sub-categories	%
Most used Social Media (often/ very often)	WhatsApp	96.7%
	Instagram	87.5%
	TikTok	81.7%
	YouTube	80.4%
	Facebook	57.5%
Social Media activities (daily)	Interacting with friends	55.7%
	Sharing information	24.3%
	Creating content	17.8%
	Participating in discussions	16.5%

4.2.2 Platform Usage Type

A deeper analysis of the use of YouTube (YT) and TikTok (TT), based on the three categories of context, networks, and content, reveals both similarities and differences that reflect the specificities inherent to each platform (Table 6). On one hand, similarities mainly concern aspects related to account registration, where users of both platforms predominantly maintain standard accounts and show high loyalty (being registered for more than one year), although daily access frequency tends to be higher on TT.

Regarding indicators related to networks of friends and pages, clearer differences emerge: as expected, YT users generally follow a larger number of channels — suggesting a broader consumption pattern — while TT users display a more selective behavior. However, TT shows a higher number of

followers, with over 56% of respondents reporting having more than 500 followers, compared to approximately 33% on YT.

Content-related activities represent another area where the differences between YT and TT become particularly evident. On TT, a significantly higher percentage of users engage in weekly content publication, reflecting a greater inclination toward creative participation. Conversely, YT is characterized by a more passive consumption model, where content viewing dominates over production.

Table 6. Platform Usage Type on YouTube (YT) and TikTok (TT) by context, networking and contents

Sub-dimensions	Distribution
Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Account: 95% Standard (YT: 94.4%; TT: 95.5%) • Registration Duration: More than 1 year (76.4% YT; 76% TT) • Access Frequency: Daily – YT: 64.1%; TT: 75.7%
Networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Channels / Page followed: <50: YT: 36.7%. TT: 56.3% 50–300: YT: 42.1%. TT: 34.3% >300: YT: 21.2%. TT: 9.4% • Follower: <100: YT: 67.0%. TT: 53.9% 100–500: YT: 14.5%. TT: 24.7% >500: YT: 18.5%. TT: 21.4%
Contents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content creation frequency: Never: YT: 43.0%. TT: 34.1% Once a month/few times a year: YT: 27%. TT: 28.5% Once a week: YT: 29%, TT: 37.4%

4.2.3 Digital skills

While the previous sections focused on the sphere of digital presence and activity, the question of skills also deserves attention. It emerges that almost half of the sample can be considered digitally literate (Table 7). Users demonstrate excellent abilities in basic functions (navigation, searching, creating simple posts), with average scores (on a 0–6 scale) around 5.2–5.3. Conversely, more advanced skills — such as privacy management, data analysis, and complex content creation — appear weaker, with average ratings ranging between 3.9 and 4.1. Moreover, respondents show good knowledge of

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online behavioral norms: only less than 9% have an inadequate understanding of social media etiquette.

Table 7. Digital skills: Digital literacy, Social media skills e Netiquette

Sub-dimensions	Distribution
Digital Literacy	Low: 10.7% Medium: 39.6% High: 49.7%
Social Media Skills	Advanced competencies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic navigation and interaction • Content searching and consumption • Creation of simple posts Average Rating: 5.2 – 5.3 Less developed competencies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advanced privacy management • Performance analysis/monitoring • Creation of complex content Average rating: 3.9 – 4.1
Netiquette	Poor: 8.9% Moderate: 31.5% Good: 59.6%

4.2.4 Algorithm Awareness

The 21-item battery on AA was subjected to Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to identify the latent dimensions that best synthesize the construct. From the initial eigenvalues table (Fig.2), it appears that the first three components together explain 43.76% of the total variance, with the first component accounting for 29%, and the second and third components contributing 8.18% and 6.57%, respectively. Since only the first three eigenvalues exceed the threshold of 1, these three components were extracted, corresponding to the factors labeled “Cognitive”, “Emotional”, and “Critical”³.

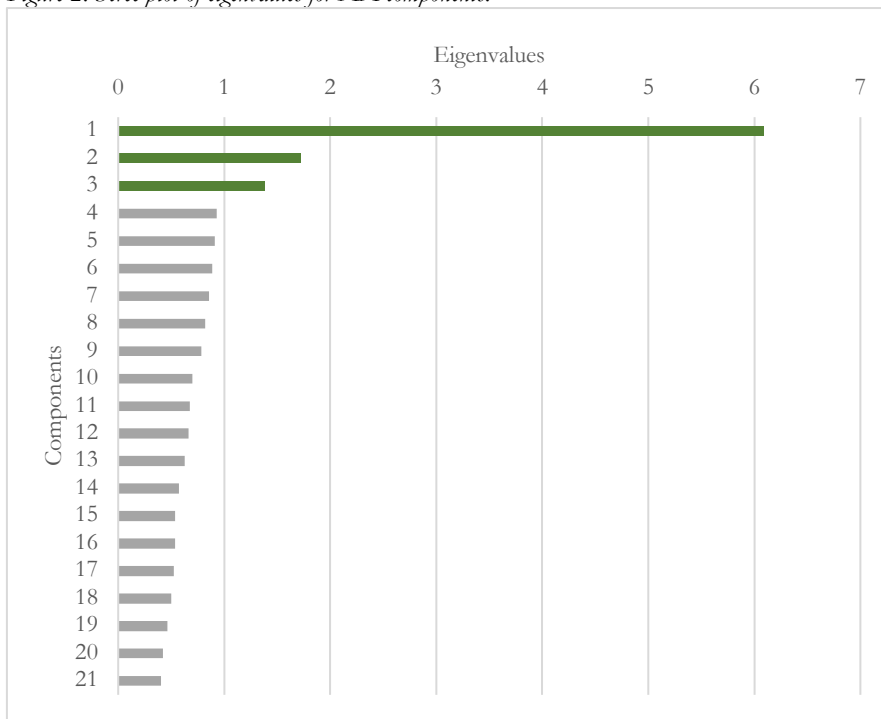
The first component (Cognitive) focuses on the theoretical understanding of algorithmic mechanisms, i.e., the users’ ability to recognize how and why platforms use behavioral data to personalize content. The second component (Emotional) reflects subjective reactions and feelings of frustration or uncertainty when algorithmic choices lack transparency. The third component (Critical) captures users’ awareness of potential distortions or limitations

³ Compared to the four factors mentioned in the literature, the PCA suggests three factors, aggregating the “Procedural” and “Behavioral” dimensions into a single “Critical” factor.

inherent in recommendation systems, including the risks of filter bubbles and the reproduction of human biases within algorithms.

The agreement percentages (“Agree”/ “Strongly Agree”) for each item (Table 8) reveal a varied picture: while most users seem to recognize the personalized and automated nature of recommendations (Cognitive factor, with over 60% agreement on average), emotional reactions show intermediate levels, with frustration or curiosity reported by a smaller share of the sample (Emotional factor, less than 40% on average). Moreover, about half of the respondents display a certain level of critical reflection on the possibility that algorithms may limit content diversity or reproduce human stereotypes (Critical factor).

Figure 2. Scree plot of eigenvalues for AA components.



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Table 8. Algorithm Awareness. % Agree / Very Agree by three factors

Factor	Item	% Agree/ Strongly Agree
Cognitive	Algorithms are used to recommend multimedia content on the platform	67.5
	Algorithms are used to personalize certain content on the platform	66.4
	Algorithms do not require human judgment in deciding which content to display on the platform	43.4
	The content recommended by algorithms on a platform depends on users' online behavioral data	65.3
	Choosing to follow or not follow certain accounts or hashtags influences the composition of platform homepages	61.9
Emotive	It is not always clear why algorithms decide to show certain content	52.6
	I feel frustrated when I do not understand why an algorithm shows me certain content	41.2
	I am not indifferent to why algorithms select certain content	36.7
	I do not tend to ignore unexpected recommendation outcomes without trying to understand them	19.2
Critical	Algorithm-recommended content may be subject to human biases and stereotypes	50.8
	Algorithms can limit users to viewing only content that matches their preferences, excluding others	59.9
	I feel curious when encountering unexpected content suggested by algorithms	55

4.3 The platform-consumer typology

The typological index for digital consumers was built through the theoretical-operational cross-tabulation of three dimensions: PUT, DS, and AA, each dichotomized into “Yes” (high level) or “No” (low level) (Table 9). The intersection of usage intensity, digital skills, and algorithmic awareness led to the identification of eight distinct profiles, capturing specific nuances of young people’s digital behavior. The profile distribution concentrates within a few percentage points, revealing a strong internal differentiation of digital experiences (Table 10).

The largest group, albeit slightly, consists of the “Unaware Users” (16%), individuals who frequently use platforms but lack sufficient technical and critical skills — a segment theoretically exposed to passive consumption shaped by algorithmic logics.

In contrast, the “Non-Active Experts” (14.5%) show an opposite pattern:

infrequent platform use combined with high digital competence and critical awareness of recommendation systems. A further 13.6% of the sample falls into the “Technicians” category: users with strong operational abilities but limited critical awareness. Only 12.5% fit the ideal profile of the “Digital Citizen”, characterized by frequent use, strong skills, and deep comprehension of algorithmic mechanisms — the ideal profile for critically navigating digital environments. Particularly noteworthy is the “Conscious Navigator” (12%), who, despite limited technical skills, exhibits significant critical sensitivity, suggesting that algorithmic awareness can also develop without advanced operational mastery. At the opposite pole, “Neophytes” (11.1%) are characterized by sporadic use and limited understanding, both technical and critical. Finally, two minor but relevant profiles emerge: the “Inexperienced Conscious” (10.9%), showing critical awareness despite low platform engagement, and the “Active Users” (9.4%), highly active but lacking critical reflection on algorithmic processes.

Overall, the findings depict a complex and stratified landscape: frequent use does not automatically translate into greater epistemic agency, nor does technical skill guarantee critical awareness. Instead, digital consumption emerges as a space of cognitive stratification, where access, practices, and literacy interact non-linearly, reflecting deep tensions between individual resources, social trajectories, and technological architectures — dynamics that are further explored in the following multidimensional analyses.

Table 9. Construction of the Digital Consumption Typology

		PUT	DS	AA	
		Yes		No	
Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
	Digital Citizen	Active User	Conscious Navigator	Unaware User	
No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
	Non-Active Expert	Technician	Inexperienced Conscious	Neophyte	

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Table 10. Distribution of Platform-Consumer Profiles

User type	%
Unaware User	16%
Non-Active Expert	14.5%
Technician	13.6%
Digital Citizen	12.5%
Conscious Navigator	12 %
Neophyte	11.1%
Inexperienced Conscious	10.9%
Active User	9.4%

**4.4 Relationships between Consumption Profiles and Social Characteristics.
The Multiple Correspondence Analysis**

In the MCA, two factors were extracted that together account for approximately 18.7% of the total variance, with the first factor explaining slightly more than 10.4% and the second factor explaining slightly more than 8.2%. Although this proportion of explained variance is relatively modest, the distinct drop observed in the scree test after these two factors (Gherghi & Lauro, 2008) suggests that it is methodologically justified to focus the interpretation on them.

Analyzing the v-test values, the first axis (“Social Engagement”) organizes users along a continuum opposing, on one side, individuals who use multiple platforms and devices intensively and diversely — actively participating both as content creators and as lurkers — and, on the other, those engaging in limited, poorly diversified, and passive use of the web. Not surprisingly, profiles such as the “Digital Citizen”, the “Conscious Navigator” and the “Unaware User” are positioned on the active pole, while “Neophytes” and “Inexperienced Conscious” gravitate toward the low-involvement side (Tab.11). This distribution suggests that usage intensity is not automatically correlated with the critical quality of digital experience: one can be highly active on platforms without necessarily developing adequate interpretative tools.

The second axis (“Digital Competence”) captures a different logic of differentiation: not mere presence or intensity of activity, but the ability to critically master digital languages, norms, and algorithmic mechanisms (Tab.12). The polarization between users with high digital literacy, netiquette knowledge,

and algorithmic awareness (such as the “Digital Citizen” and the “Non-Active Expert”) and those with low technological literacy (such as the “Unaware User” and the “Neophyte”) reveals a cognitive gap that does not overlap with simple usage quantity.

Particularly noteworthy is the position of highly active profiles like the “Unaware User”, who, despite intensive engagement with platforms, exhibit low placement on the digital competencies axis: evidence that access and engagement alone do not guarantee epistemic agency if not supported by critical literacy pathways.

Beyond the distinction between practices and skills, relevant patterns also emerge regarding socio-demographic factors. Geographical provenance shows a significant effect: residents of urban centers tend to position themselves on poles of higher involvement, while those from non-urban areas are more frequently associated with lower usage and skills profiles. This is not novel evidence: indeed, this finding is in continuity with the classic literature on the digital divide, which emphasizes that urban settings often offer greater infrastructural resources, cultural capital and exposure to diverse digital practices (Norris, 2003; Di Maggio & Hargittai, 2001).

Similarly, educational attainment is mainly associated with the second axis: individuals holding a university degree tend to align with high competence and critical awareness poles, whereas those with only a high school diploma are more often associated with lower mastery levels.

These findings reinforce the idea that, despite the widespread diffusion of digital environments, experiences of digital consumption remain stratified by social inequalities, where cultural capital and territorial context shape not only access but also the quality of interaction with digital ecosystems.

In summary, the MCA confirms that youth digital consumption is structured along two non-overlapping dimensions (Fig.3):

- a performative dimension, linked to the quantity and diversity of interaction with platforms;

- a cognitive dimension, linked to the ability to critically master digital and algorithmic dynamics.

These findings guide the next step of the analysis: by applying the PLS-SEM, the study tests the hypothesis that daily platform use and digital skills contribute — in different ways — to the development of algorithmic awareness.

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Table 11. Axis 1 “Social Engagement”

Positive	v.test
YT high content creation	15.878
TT high content creation	15.287
High number of platforms used	11.266
TT high publishing and content creation activity	9.765
Highly diversified use	9.390
YT high publishing and content creation activity	9.278
YT high lurking activity	8.020
High number of devices used	7.987
Conscious Navigator	7.741
Digital Citizen	5.693
Unaware User	5.025
Residence in provincial capital	2.887
Negative	v.test
YT low content creation	-15.964
TT low content creation	-14.759
Low number of platforms used	-10.344
Good knowledge of netiquette	-9.725
Poorly diversified use	-8.411
Low engagement with algorithmic processes	-7.210
Non-active Expert	-6.233
Low number of devices used	-4.986
Neophyte	-4.066
Inexperienced Conscious	-3.900
Residence in non-capital municipalities	-2.887
Low web usage	-2.880

Table 12. Axis 2: “Digital Competence”

Positive	v.test
High knowledge of algorithms	9.530
TT high lurking activity	9.420
High social media skills	8.497
Good knowledge of netiquette	7.353
YT high lurking activity	7.132
Good digital literacy	6.652
Low awareness of privacy issues	5.640
Non-active Expert	5.427
Aware Navigator	7.741
Bachelor’s degree or higher	4.854
Digital Citizen	4.777
Female	4.187
Negative	v.test
Low knowledge of algorithms	-14.261
Low social media skills	-11.723
Good awareness of privacy issues	-10.366
Low knowledge of netiquette	-7.536
Poorly diversified usage	-8.411
Unaware User	-7.306
Neophyte	-5.402
TT high public activity and content creation	-4.498
Low number of devices	-4.986
Low digital literacy	-4.244
High school diploma	-3.206
Low web usage	-2.880

significant, has only a modest effect on algorithmic awareness ($\beta = 0.095$, $t = 1.97$), highlighting that infrastructural inclusion alone does not translate into critical digital engagement.

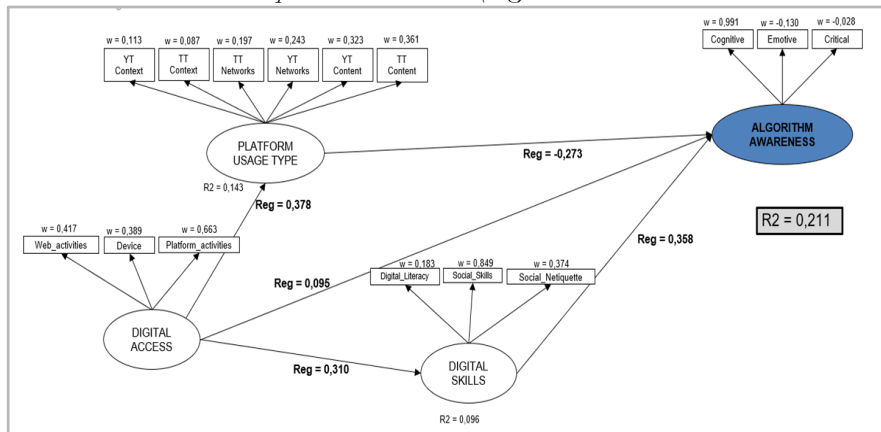
The PUT construct, which captures the intensity and modes of use of platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, includes indicators related to consumption context (e.g., frequency of access and types of content), social networks (number of followers and channels followed), and content production (levels of participation, sharing, and creation). The underlying hypothesis is that, although PUT reflects user engagement, intensive platform use does not necessarily promote greater algorithmic awareness. The negative coefficient between PUT and AA ($\beta = -0.273$, $t = -5.95$) suggests that frequent use may be associated with more passive consumption, where users rely uncritically on algorithmic recommendations.

In contrast, DS emerge as the strongest predictor of AA ($\beta = 0.358$, $t = 8.01$). Operational, cognitive, and relational skills—including digital literacy and mindful use of social media—are essential for interpreting and critically assessing personalization mechanisms. Within this framework, DA is a necessary but not sufficient condition: it is the reinforcement of DS, combined with conscious platform use, that transforms online experience into a participatory and critical process.

These findings confirm that while digital access serves as the enabling condition and platform usage type reflects users' exposure and intensity of interaction, it is the strengthening of digital skills that truly empowers individuals to understand and critically interrogate algorithmic mechanisms. This interpretation is further supported by the model's overall performance, which accounts for 21% of the variance in algorithmic awareness ($R^2 = 0.211$). Although not exhaustive, this level of explained variance offers a meaningful balance between the complexity of the phenomenon and the model's predictive capacity, lending credibility to the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis.

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Figure 4. Structural Equation Model (PLS-SEM) illustrating the relationships between Digital Access, Platform Usage Type, and Digital Skills, and the outcome variable Algorithmic Awareness. Coefficients indicate the strength of the associations between latent constructs and their indicators (w), as well as structural relationships between dimensions (Reg).



5. Discussion

5.1 Diverse digital profile

As shown, young users display a highly diversified digital background. On one side, there are those — not many, in fact — who are well-equipped in their experience with digital and social platforms: they possess strong technical skills, familiarity with social environments, and a solid understanding of the algorithmic dynamics that govern these platforms. On the other, we find the so-called “unaware users”: individuals who engage intensively with digital content yet lack key competencies and appear particularly vulnerable to algorithmic recommendation mechanisms. Between these poles lies a grey area, composed of users who have developed a certain degree of algorithmic awareness despite low usage, and others who are highly active — many of them content creators — yet do not seem to prioritize critical navigation of the digital environment.

5.2 The key role of Digital Skills

DS prove to be a decisive factor in the development of Algorithmic Awareness. However, the analysis suggests that technical literacy alone is not

sufficient. A critical reflexivity is also needed, enabling users to question the implications of digital technologies and recommendation systems, thus going beyond mere operational competence.

5.3 The negative effect of intensive social media usage

Frequent use of YouTube and TikTok does not necessarily foster a deeper understanding of algorithmic processes, except on an emotional level (e.g., frustration, curiosity, or discontent with suggested content). This pattern points to a tendency toward passive trust in recommendations, without deeper reflection on how they shape the digital experience. Although not inherently detrimental to critical thinking, heavy engagement with these platforms — even through content creation — appears insufficient to stimulate advanced algorithmic reflection.

5.4 The limited impact of Digital Access

While DA is a necessary condition for online participation, it does not automatically translate into critical understanding of algorithmic mechanisms. Device availability and internet connection provide the infrastructure for digital engagement, but it is the development of digital competencies and reflective abilities that determines actual epistemic agency.

5.5 The intersection of demographic factors and digital consumption

Data analysis highlights how socio-demographic factors — particularly educational attainment and urban vs. non-urban residence — partially influence digital consumption and AA. For instance, users with a higher level of education tend to demonstrate a stronger critical understanding of platform dynamics. However, these factors do not operate in isolation. Instead, they interact with digital competencies and usage practices, shaping a complex landscape that requires further investigation.

6. Conclusions

The results of this study — the first phase of a broader PRIN project — provide a nuanced response to the theoretical question underpinning the

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research: youth digital consumption does not automatically evolve into mature forms of epistemic agency. Frequent and diversified platform use, by itself, does not necessarily entail a greater capacity for critical thinking; likewise, technical competence alone does not guarantee a full understanding of the algorithmic logics that govern the online experience.

The analysis highlights how digital experiences unfold along multiple trajectories: alongside poorly equipped users, we also find individuals who, despite mastering digital tools and languages, struggle to develop critical awareness of recommendation and automatic selection mechanisms. This dissociation between technical literacy and reflexive agency suggests the need to rethink the relationship between digital capital and critical capacity not as a linear progression, but as a complex, stratified, and socially situated process.

In a media ecosystem increasingly mediated by algorithmic environments and pervasive recommendation logics, the presence of instrumental skills constitutes a necessary but not sufficient condition. Building full epistemic agency requires not only technical mastery, but also the ability to critically interrogate digital environments and to resist the invisible dynamics of filtering and personalization.

Contemporary digital consumption does not simply map trajectories of inclusion or exclusion, but rather reveals deep epistemic inequalities that challenge the very future of citizenship in an algorithmic society.

6.1 Study limitations

As with any empirical research, this study also presents certain limitations. First, the cross-sectional design constitutes a significant constraint: in a constantly evolving digital ecosystem, where tools and practices change rapidly, a snapshot such as this risks capturing only partial dynamics or those already undergoing transformation.

Second, although the sample was constructed using representativeness criteria with respect to the youth population, its limited size does not allow for deeper exploration of specific segments nor the introduction of additional explanatory variables that could further enrich the analysis. This sample limitation is also related to the exclusively Italian context: although the present study focuses on the national reality, it is important to recognize that the dynamics of digital skills, algorithmic awareness, and epistemic agency might differ significantly in other sociotechnical and regulatory environments. Countries with stricter data protection regulations, higher levels of digital literacy, or different cultural attitudes towards technology could exhibit distinct patterns of platform use and critical engagement.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that the data collected are based on attitudes rather than actual digital behaviors. This means that the study captures users' perceptions and self-representations, without directly measuring their real consumption practices and interactions with algorithms. However, this last limitation is closely linked to the possible future developments of the research.

6.2 Future developments of the research

In light of the limitations outlined above, particularly regarding the reliance on self-reported data, future research will be developed within the framework of the ALGOFEED project, with the aim of moving beyond the declarative dimension of digital practices.

Through the direct tracking of behaviors and consumption patterns on social media, it will be possible to more accurately observe how actual practices are articulated and how they interact with the digital consumption typologies identified in this study.

The ultimate goal will be to relate concrete consumption behaviors—dynamic, adaptive, and influenced by algorithmic recommendations—to the users' configurations of digital skills and algorithmic awareness, thereby deepening our understanding, also drawing on Hirsch and Silverstone's (1992) perspective on how technologies become part of everyday routines and social meanings, of the mechanisms that foster or hinder the development of epistemic agency.

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