



CREATING STUDENTS' ALGORITHMIC SELVES: SHEDDING LIGHT ON SOCIAL MEDIA'S REPRESENTATIONAL AFFORDANCES

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Abstract. This article presents and analyses the results of focus group studies conducted with students at an international university in Lithuania, interpreting the results in light of the extant literature on social media's impact on the creation and performance of the self. The authors reveal a mixed picture whereby the respondents seem to demonstrate an unexpectedly casual and cynical attitude towards social media while, upon closer inspection, still remaining part of social media's productive exchanges, contributing their data and attention in return for satisfaction. Hence, while by no means rejecting the standard interpretation provided in mainstream literature, the authors are able to present a more complex and nuanced picture of young people's attitudes towards and interaction with social media and the self-creation affordances thereof, ultimately a close, constitutive, and creative interrelationship between humans and code.

Keywords: affordances, agglomeration, algorithm, attention, data, self-creation, social media.

Introduction

This article aims to provide a tentative insight into ways in which young people's use of social media affect their self-creative propensities by analysing the results of three focus group interviews with students at an international university in Klaipėda, Lithuania. While many sweeping claims about the impact of social media, and online platforms more broadly, have been made in recent literature (as discussed in the first part of this article), members of this social media-native generation (social media having been around throughout their formative years) themselves paint a more complex picture, revealing lives lived in-between personal and

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algorithmic creativity and within agglomerations of humans, data, and code. The authors side with the view expressed in Pink, Sumartojo, Lupton, and Heyes La Bond (2017, p. 1), that “the mundane is a domain of creativity and improvisation”, thereby identifying three main aspects of creativity in the social media environment: (1) creation of digital selves for display to others; (2) creation of the personal self through information acquisition; (3) creation and re-creation of the digital environment by digital agents, which feeds back into self-creation.

The first section of this article provides an overview of the main themes that manifest themselves in the literature on social media and the algorithmic architectures that sustain them. Such themes include the agglomeration of users and the harvesting of their data, structuration of behaviour through opening and constraining options, competition over attention, particularly by means of providing algorithmically tailored pleasure and satisfaction, algorithmic sorting, ranking, and tailoring of both content and digital representations of users themselves, and the relative opacity of such processes. In addition, the literature reveals anticipated effects on the individual self, including submission to prescribed norms of visibility, the necessity to “game” algorithmic rules, and challenges to human agency as such. Hence, the mainstream outlook places creative impetus squarely within the digital platform architecture.

The second part is dedicated to presentation of the focus group results, concentrating on general social media use, information acquisition, and self-presentation. The interviews reveal a casual and laid-back (bordering on cynical) attitude towards social media, mostly focused on passive consumption rather than active contribution. In that sense, the respondents seem to be less enthralled by social media and less willing to submit to their self-creation affordances than the extant literature would suggest. At the same time, though, the interviews reveal only a vague understanding of the actual machinery of social media, primarily as it comes to data and privacy. Hence, in the discussion of the findings, the authors demonstrate how the respondents simultaneously avoid some of the enthrallments of social media and, nevertheless, remain part of the media’s productive exchange.

1. Social media and algorithmic governance

In this article, social media are seen as online platforms, *i.e.* infrastructures that “bring together different users: customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers, and even physical objects” (Srnicsek, 2017, p. 43). While the role of bringing together people and, in many cases, content suppliers is rather straightforward and perhaps self-evident, the business model of such platforms has to be taken into account as well, which is where advertisers and objects (both as objects being offered and as the hardware that sustain the platform) come to the fore. Moreover, the connection of human users should also be seen not as a goal in itself but as part of business practices. In other words, beyond the surface function of connecting different actors, the actual reason for the platforms’ existence is to “intermediate the flows of data” as the paramount source of revenue (Beer, 2019, p. 3).

Indeed, whatever we do, we are essentially poised to leave a trace of data that either we choose make public or that is collected without our awareness as a by-product of routine activities (Kelleher & Tierney, 2018, pp. 199–200, 52). In fact, these by-products are so

valuable that online platforms are typically structured to produce as much exhaust as possible and to turn it into a key resource to fuel their own business and the businesses of those willing to pay for access (Srnicek, 2017). The result is a race to attract as many users and as much of their attention as possible, meaning that provision of a seamless, personalised, and pleasurable experience becomes a must. That, in turn, necessitates strategic management of both content and relationships within the confines of such platforms in order to maximise user satisfaction. Hence, the first creative affordance of the digital architecture is real-time fashioning of personalised environments in relation to which users then fashion *their* selves.

Because of the unobtrusive nature of the data-driven systems, their role in filtering users' encounters with content and with one another tends to be difficult to notice; nevertheless, the general rule is simple: "to show us things we're predisposed to like" (Webster, 2017, p. 356), whether those things be pieces of information or other humans, or sponsored content (or anything else). In this way, users are sorted and herded into predetermined enclaves rather than *choosing* to immerse themselves there. Such personalisation, enabled by algorithmic selection of content and relations has a very clear consequence: we are, insofar as possible, going to be offered not what is important but what we are personally going to like (Carlson, 2018, p. 11). In this way, users become immersed in "programmed sociality", referring to "the specific programmed arrangements of social platforms, and the activities that are allowed to take place within those arrangements" (Bucher, 2018, p. 4). Hence, the algorithmic architectures of online platforms play a key part in managing popularity (of both users and content) and connecting the like-minded (Klinger & Swensson, 2018, p. 4656). In that sense, the algorithmic placement of content becomes more important than the content itself (Flyverbom & Murray, 2018, p. 7), signaling that creation of groups and personal identities might well lie with the digital.

In its general form, an algorithm can be said to entail "any rules that humans and/or computers can follow" (Lee, 2018, p. 3). It is, therefore, "an abstract, formalized description of a computational procedure" (Dourish, 2016, p. 3). As such, algorithms are "problem-solving mechanisms", and their role is structuring the online environment through "the automated assignment of relevance to certain selected pieces of information" (Just & Latzer, 2017, p. 239). And while traditional algorithms were defined by relatively straightforward and deterministic "if... then..." rules, the notion of the algorithm has now grown to represent something more powerful and complex, such as "a computational formula that autonomously makes decisions based on statistical models or decision rules without explicit human intervention" (Lee, 2018, p. 3). The major part of algorithms of "social or cultural significance" fall under the latter category; possessing the capacity to learn how to operate over large sets of data, "they observe, characterise, and act on patterns that are in the data" (Dourish, 2016, p. 7). As a consequence, algorithms can be seen as significantly encroaching upon human agency and creativity.

In a partly related fashion, spontaneity becomes a debatable faculty. As "[a]lgorithms can now plough through an immense quantity and breadth of data to identify patterns and correlations", people are rendered fundamentally knowable and predictable (at least as soon as sufficient data is accumulated), sometimes even in counterintuitive ways; that, in turn, allows data-rich actors, social networking platforms included, to target users in customised

ways “that leverage aspects of personality, political leanings, and affective proclivities” (Faraj et al., 2018, p. 64). Therefore, algorithms become “a design-based instrument of control”: once a person’s traits and affective proclivities are uncovered, it becomes possible to arrange choice architecture in a way that renders it impossible not to choose the pre-programmed option (Yeung, 2017, p. 130). The self can, therefore, be only fashioned within strict limits.

Some authors would go even further to endow algorithms with the power of “the orchestration of existence” or even the production of the latter’s basic conditions, essentially subjecting individuals to algorithmic power (Langlois & Elmer, 2019, p. 245). Subjection by algorithms is said to differ from previous forms of domination by being “impersonal”, *i.e.* not focusing exclusively or even primarily on the person as such but, instead, “on orchestrating a set of relations among groups, humans, non-humans, services or products, places, spaces, technologies, and times” (Langlois & Elmer, 2019, p. 246). And while such strong assertions of subjection would necessitate further empirical corroboration, the emphasis on bringing together and agglomerating diverse elements into interrelated – indeed, hardly separable – structures is an important and recurring theme in discussing algorithmic effects. And through the construction of such agglomerations, algorithms can clearly “influence, shape and guide our behaviour and the governance of societies” (Danaher et al., 2017, p. 1), becoming a major social, cultural, creative, and political force.

Particularly in the context of structuring online interactions and access to information, algorithms manifest at least two key modalities of influence: they set the agenda by managing content visibility (thus determining *what* we think about) and frame our perceptions of such content by displaying only certain positions and representations deemed to fit our profile (thus determining *how* we think about things); as a result, algorithms structure our realities and, therefore, behaviour by governing the scope, the placement, and the intensity of our attention (Just & Latzer, 2017, pp. 245–246). On a different end of the spectrum, for advertisers, providers of content, services, and goods, and for others competing for audience attention, such attention-aggregating-and-directing service assumes vital importance (Vaidhyanathan, 2018, p. 80).

The above service is necessary for both users and providers of content, services, and goods because, quite literally, “we never have the means to pay enough attention” (Citton, 2017, p. 35). But as attention in this digital environment in itself represents a form of value-creating labour whereby by merely looking at something we create the value of that object (be it a person or a thing, or a piece of information); the reverse is also true: “you are valued at the value of the attention you are given” (Citton, 2017, pp. 47–48, 70). In this way, attention becomes the main currency of online platforms, albeit one easily convertible into financial returns; however, since the size of such returns is only a function of accumulated attention, it is primarily the “attention value” of any entity at any given time that counts, driving the creative processes behind both things and individual selves (Citton, 2017, pp. 73–75).

Crucially, the choices programmers make in designing the algorithmic architecture of platforms are to be understood as regulatory par excellence due to the material influence that code has on human behaviour. And because the online environment is by definition malleable, the codewriters’ ability to manipulate regulatory architecture is less constrained and, therefore, more potent than in the offline environment, thereby setting parameters for the

creation of groups and individual selves (Weber, 2018, p. 703). No less importantly, whereas traditional laws operate publicly, that is not the case with algorithms: they “function behind the scenes with many users unaware of their presence” and, therefore, ever more readily succumbing to their influence (Cotter, 2019, p. 2). Moreover, whereas traditional regulation should be directed towards the public interest, digital architectures are framed by “profit and business models” and therefore:

“a ‘good’ and well-functioning algorithm is one that creates value, one that makes better and more efficient predictions, and one that ultimately makes people engage and return to the platform or news site time and again” (Bucher, 2018, p. 6).

Hence, narrow utility-maximising private interest dominates, again restricting the room for self-creative human impetus.

Moreover, the functioning of algorithms is also fundamentally inexplicable and impossible to either redress or adjust due to the opacity of their code (Faraj et al., 2018, p. 63). The relationship is clearly an asymmetrical one: while “corporate actors have unprecedented knowledge about the minutiae of our daily lives”, users, in return, “know little to nothing about how they use this knowledge to influence the important decisions that we – and they – make” (Pasquale, 2015, p. 9). As a result, we seem to live in a “black box society” whereby most of the backend that structures and animates our lives (algorithms and the data on which they operate) are only knowable to the industry insiders but not to those directly affected (Pasquale, 2015, p. 191). Therefore, whereas activists and even ordinary citizens are typically able to creatively game traditional regulations, that is not the case with algorithmic architecture.

Despite such inability to adequately comprehend the environment in which the (online) life is lived, one is still conditioned to partake in the attention economy. One aspect that is commonly captured in social media studies is the constant threat of becoming invisible and obsolete if one does not share enough engagement-soliciting content (Goodwin et al., 2016, pp. 9–10). That, in fact, is rather intuitive: we are conditioned to reveal as much about ourselves as possible, creating expansive online personas and thus feeding the data trove to improve content personalisation and advertising revenue. As Bucher (2018, p. 73) stresses, “[b]ecoming visible, or being granted visibility, is a highly contested game of power”. Hence, without being perceived and allocated attention, it would be the same as our digital self did not exist. And as our digital selves have an ever greater impact on the physical selves, particularly with interaction progressively moving online, if we feel that our digital self exists insufficiently, that can easily morph into a feeling of offline deficiency or insufficient existence as well (Shi et al., 2019). Hence, investment in the creation of attention-attractive online self becomes imperative.

A closely related effect can be observed in the creation of “strategically crafted selves” (Goodwin et al., 2016, p. 10): it follows from the above that users face a strong imperative to maximise their affective potential to rise up the visibility pecking order. In more general terms, though, self-creation and self-representation on a profile can be described as “an explicit act of writing yourself into being in a digital environment” (Boyd, 2011, p. 43) or “a series of performative acts which constitute the self” (Cover, 2016, p. 14). On the one hand, because of the lack of physical interaction online, there are fewer constraints to self-creation;

and yet, while constraints pertaining to the nature and attributes of the self are removed, a set of new, algorithmic, constraints is introduced. It is part of the algorithmic ordering and disciplinary toolkit that they determine who and what becomes, or ceases to be, visible, thereby prescribing participatory norms (Cotter, 2019, p. 2). As a result, users and platform designers can be seen as permanently engaged in “visibility games” in which users aim to “game” the algorithm and thus increase their visibility, even though the opacity of the underlying code makes any strategy uncertain, while platform creators aim to play user propensities and their desire to increase visibility to maximise engagement, simultaneously threatening the non-compliant ones with a “formidable threat” – that of invisibility (Cotter, 2019, p. 4).

Hence, claims to independent human agency and strategic creation of the self should not be taken too far – on the contrary, claims to self-creative mastery are undermined: the world outside us is not merely passive and open to be acted upon but acts upon us instead, and not merely in return but also in advance, determining the conditions upon which we can act and create ourselves (Choat, 2018, p. 1030). To an extent at least, the self thus ceases to be tied to a particular body but instead “becomes conceivable as an assemblage”, *i.e.* a self that is fluid and constantly evolving, networked and distributed, emerging “at various intersections between humans, non-humans, objects, materials and energy flows” (Pötzsch, 2018, p. 3314), *i.e.* co-created at the intersection of the human and the digital. Hence, the self *takes place* within such complex co-creative agglomerations.

Nevertheless, some nuance is also necessary: the relationship between humans and algorithms is perhaps not one in which either side enjoys dominance but, instead, a symbiotic one: not only algorithms affect people but also people affect algorithms in return, particularly through feedback loops that help determine how algorithms are (re-)developed, (re-)shaped, and (re-)moulded (Bucher, 2018, pp. 94–95), thus taking co-creativity one step further. In other words, it would be more accurate to imagine humans and algorithms as being “organized in networks, assemblages, or hybrids” non-reducible to their constituent parts, leaving agency and creativity perhaps not entirely dislocated but certainly “disturbed” (Bucher, 2018, p. 50). Such an account still preserves a fair amount of human responsibility and creative drive while simultaneously demonstrating the limitations and concerns faced by the users of online platforms.

2. Casual and functional: a no-fuss relationship with social media

The findings below represent the results of focus group interviews conducted by the authors at LCC International University, an American-style liberal arts university in Klaipėda, Lithuania. Benefitting from the university’s diverse student body, representing over 40 different nationalities, a decidedly international sample was taken: the 18 students participating in the interviews came from 12 different countries (Georgia, Latvia, Ukraine, New Zealand, Armenia, Lithuania, Afghanistan, the United States (US), Belarus, Germany, Switzerland, and Moldova). This decision was taken in order to ensure diversity of perspectives and cultural contexts.

The picture deriving from this research is that of a rather laid-back (and somewhat cynical) audience. Instead of fully immersing themselves in the social media environment, the

respondents display a functional approach to social media use while also being more avid observers than contributors of content. As such, they appear to have adapted to benefit from social media without entirely losing themselves in (and to) it.

2.1. General characteristics of social media use

Perhaps the clearest and most pronounced contrast has been that between the respondents' frequency of use of social media and self-reported disengagement from them. Such disengagement was primarily manifested in the dominance of consumption over creation of content. In terms of frequency, the respondents reported using social media constantly, or as one respondent admitted, "every freaking moment". However, the actual intensity of their presence on the platforms is questionable: usage was primarily defined along the lines of "just scrolling through social media".

With regards to content, maintenance of social ties was stressed as the key role. Particularly accessing pictures and other updates from friends and family members were almost universally stressed among the prime motivations for visiting social networking platforms for both active and passive use. Mainly, social media use was reported as being about "seeing what other people are up to, what they are interested in". Particularly when one either cannot or does not want to communicate with acquaintances, "*Instagram* and *Facebook* give you a chance to see what they are doing without actually interacting with them". Hence, a passive use attitude dominated the responses – one that does not involve a great deal of commitment or creativity but is primarily reliant on observation.

Likewise, with regards to creating and sharing content, the same social-informational function seemed to be stressed the most: as one respondent admitted, "I haven't posted anything on *Facebook* for about a year. And this annoys my family because they want to know how I am doing" or, according to another characteristic response, "I think I posted something like a year ago and then before that another post a year ago". When explicitly asked about reasons for not posting, respondents were quick to shrug the question off: for example, "I just don't see it necessary. Why it should be out there". When the more frequently-posting participants were asked to reflect on the reasons for posting, the answers were equally casual – perhaps most characteristically, "Letting my family know that I am not dead" or, somewhat less cynically, "it is a nice reminder to your friends that you are alive. When they see a post, they think of you, text you and stuff. Because people are busy, and people don't see each other often", thus perhaps signaling an opening for some creative work on the self. There was also an emphasis on virtual bonding and feeling included in a broader community: "it makes us feel involved in other people's lives, and in the same way we involve them in our [lives]". Overall, then, there is a certain disengagement detectable in the reported attitudes of the respondents: social media seems to be treated as a given, as something insignificant and unworthy of much reflection and consideration. At best, it is a functional means of staying informed about one's social networks (or of reminding them about yourself) – a site of mundane creativity and of consumption of the creativity of others.

Related to the above, there seems to be peer and family pressure to post, mentioned more or less explicitly in a large part of the responses. As one respondent reflected remembering their own attempt to stop posting, "my friends were surprised that I don't post anymore.

They were saying that I disappeared, so it makes me post again” or, from another respondent, “I hear complaints that I don’t post so often, so my friends encourage me to do that”. Moreover, social media seem to create “an expectation that if a person is not posting anything, something is wrong with him”. Yet others were willing to frame this phenomenon in more lenient terms: “It could be like a trend – everyone is doing that, and I do”. Once again, the matter of keeping others informed and aware pops up, pointing towards the drive to create a publicly visible social media self – a manufactured self that both stands in and becomes more “real” – in terms of its effects – than the physical self. While that might be related to the students’ international status, it is equally feasible that such pressure is manifested more broadly. After all, if it was not for the sharing behaviour, mutually encouraged by the users themselves, social media would be stripped down to a bare advertising space devoid of user-generated content.

A natural question, keeping the combination of frequency and passivity of use in mind, would be why turn to social media at all. As indicated by at least some of the answers, a plausible explanation could be that the ambient presence of social media helps dealing with the unease of intermissions in today’s always-on environment: “it is also like stimulation, you have to constantly do something to keep you entertained”. Similarly, as reported by a respondent whose primary social media use is for communication purposes, entertainment is a close second, especially when one is bored. For yet another respondent, social media help with “passing time when I am sitting somewhere waiting”. Given such attitudes, it is not surprising that memes and “funny” or “trending” videos were the most oft-repeated formats of content. Moreover, boredom seems to encourage not only passive but also active use of social media, with several users reporting boredom as prompting them to post.

In addition, likely because the respondents tend to use social media functionally rather than for its intrinsic value, such use is not only casual but also devoid of serious attention: “I don’t remember what I did 10 minutes ago on my social media. I think there is so much information going on that you don’t even notice stuff. You just sweep through it”. In effect, it transpires that the respondents’ relationship with social media can best be described in pragmatic, use-value terms. Moreover, content can be explicitly curated with such considerations in mind: “you can definitely unfollow the things you don’t want to see. I unfollowed so many people who just post selfies all day because it is not useful”. Similarly, “I use social media to check on what is interesting to me, and I am not willing to waste my time on some nonsense”. Hence, there is strong indication of respondents engaging in creative work not only on the self but also on their digital-informational environments. Again, the key factor is this: relationship with social media is based on exchange whereby the respondents are willing to pay their attention (which also means to pay in their attention as one pays in a currency) in exchange for social media carrying out their anticipated function (social-observational and entertainment). In cases where the offering does not give value for attention, the latter is immediately withdrawn.

In line with social-observational use, respondents were more likely to use messaging functions or applications than to contribute to public content on social media. As one respondent characteristically put it, “the best way to keep in touch is messaging instead of posting, so I would just text my mom that I am OK”. Likewise, according to a different respondent,

“The friends I care about I interact with directly. So, I don’t have a need to post on social media”. Hence, creation of a public self might be replaced with multiple dyadic interrelationships between selves. In fact, respondents have tended to report using messaging platforms more than any other form of communication. And the fact that messaging has been stressed by respondents in every interview suggests that it would be difficult to underestimate the importance of this affordance. Notably, there sometimes is even very little distinction between platform affordances as such: as stressed by a respondent, “social media is a form of messaging for me”. Hence, lines between means blur while functionality becomes paramount.

2.2. Data collection and use

While all respondents were aware of data collection happening “all the time, like, constantly” and that “probably all” data are collected, both the depth of knowledge and concern about such processes varied. For some respondents, that was primarily about targeted advertising, whereby the tailoring of what was being offered (*i.e.* the creation and alteration of their digital environment) seemed uncannily accurate: “Sometimes I don’t look at anything: I just say it out loud and then it magically appears on my phone. So that is scary” or even “you just think of something and it appears randomly”. The accuracy of targeted advertising can then sometimes seem “terrifying a little bit”. In some cases, however, experiences appear to be completely different: “I scroll through my phone and see an ad for mattress, and I don’t need that but it still pops up”, leading to greater frustration with such annoying inadequacy of use (and mis-creation of the digital environment) than with the collection of data.

In addition, there is some suspicion that “For what we know, they collect information for ads, but we don’t really know if they can use this information for other purposes”. It is indeed these “other” purposes that are sensed but left unarticulated properly. Several respondents referred to government surveillance programmes, either US and British or Russian, but mostly the responses were structured around an abstract “they” that simultaneously and interchangeably seemed to refer to the social media platform owners, governments, or simply other users. Nevertheless, there seemed to be some general understanding about the collection, integration, and analysis of data – that from the use of social media “you can make a lot of assumptions – it all ties together”. Nevertheless, that understanding appeared to be primarily constricted to surface-level data (that “limiting the amount of information you post is going to make a difference”) and not metadata or trace data. Hence, participants were quick to stress that they do not share personal information, geographical location, or in some cases, even emotions on social media, in no uncertain terms implying that such care should prevent data collection. Hence, even passive knowledge of (at least some) elements of the algorithmic architecture can lead to changes in the fashioning of the public self. Likewise, in terms of posts, the main visibility-related concern appeared to be that of visibility to other human users. Here, adjusting privacy settings and selecting who is going to see a particular post were seen as paramount. As a result, respondents felt reasonably in control of their privacy and data – an attitude that that, in light of the existing studies on data collection, appears to be largely misguided. There were, nevertheless, dissenting voices as well, for example, interjecting that “they can take your location from where you posted that photo” and, later on, that “they can access pretty much anything they want”.

Moving on to attitudes towards data collection as such, a typical answer was that data collection is not a big deal for those who have nothing to hide. According to one respondent, “Myself, I am not afraid that I am being watched. Because I don’t have anything to hide. I live a very normal life, my photos of the seaside are not that interesting to anyone”, hence refusing to cave in to data collection’s disciplinary effect on self-creation. Likewise, as another participant stressed, “I am not particularly worried about targeted ads because they are a logical extension of advertisement”; similarly, according to yet another respondent, “I think it’s normal and widely known and accepted that your data is being collected. So, for me it’s OK”. Hence, it is not surprising that even those respondents who reported attempting to reduce the amount of information deducible from their social media use appeared to feel the need to downplay such concerns, e.g. “I don’t go to the point where I would put a sticker on my camera because the CIA might be watching, I would not go as far”. Nevertheless, there also seems to be some nuance to the apparent carelessness. For example, a respondent who had previously expressed relative indifference to the use of their data then added “But there is also *Cambridge Analytica* that use people’s data to do targeted ads for politics and elections, that is a bit more worrying”. Clearly, then, some ambiguity is present. While we can witness that data collection, at least to an extent, has come to be seen and accepted as normal, there are also limits to such acceptability. Hence, while the respondents seemed to be willing to modify their own self-creative practices in relation to data collection, they were not equally comfortable with outside creation of their attitudes when such efforts become too overt.

2.3. Information and political news

Politics, and news content more generally, was mentioned by a large proportion of the participants but only several mentioned such content among their top priorities for social media use. Nevertheless, respondents have displayed a significant level of media literacy in their accounts of news acquisition.

To begin, a lack of diversity was acknowledged by several respondents straight away. As one of them stated, “really it’s like a bubble and you feed your beliefs. If you are liberal, and you have liberal friends, all you will see will be liberal news, articles”. Likewise, as another respondent elaborated, “If you are strongly inclined to believe in Marxism, you will see that capitalism is exploiting the world, and that is the reality you will face. You are constructively choosing what you want to see [...]. The reality is what you make of it”. Particularly the latter response might be indicative of co-creation taking place in-between humans and algorithms. Of course, such consciousness may not necessarily, taken on its own, imply immunity to filter bubbles and echo chambers, but at the very least it is a sign of adaptation to the changing information environment. Related to the above, there was a high level of skepticism relating to information about politics and current affairs encountered on social media. According to one respondent, “I can be subscribed to one news channel, but I will always check others as well whether information matches. If they don’t match, then I can make certain assumptions and analyses”. Moreover, “there is a lot of clickbait and stuff that is paid for and this will have an impact on your outlook”. Hence, it is possible to claim that a large part of the respondents appears rather media literate. Nevertheless, the actual relationship between awareness and practice would necessitate further observational studies to be determined.

Social media (or *Facebook*, which some respondents appeared to use synonymously with social media) was not considered the main source for news and current affairs-related content: while in some cases implicit in the exclusion of such content from reports on social media use, in other cases that was completely explicit: “I usually use separate platforms entirely for news. I don't take *Facebook* news at face value or I take it with caution”. Hence, while social media (and news delivered through them) have the benefit of constantly being at hand (courtesy to the ever-presence of the smartphone), respondents report to take care verifying, checking the source itself, and corroborating its content with information from other sources known to be trustworthy, particularly “if I am really surprised by something or would like to read more about it”. Hence, respondents on the whole did seem reluctant to surrender their self-creation capacities to algorithmic curation of content. Nevertheless, at least a few seem to rely more on gut instinct: “When I click on the news on *Facebook*, I can already see what the content is and how it looks like, if it is trustworthy or not”. There was also a more relativist approach: “I don't think any information is objective” because even if multiple sources are checked, “they all are going to be subjective in one way or another”. Hence, contrary to the commonplace narrative of believability and high affective capacity, news and current affairs content on social media was treated with a great degree of suspicion by the respondents. Only a few were more open to the potential veracity of information on social media – at least as long as one followed trustworthy groups (without, however, giving a definition of trustworthiness). A parallel stream, meanwhile, would display the familiar attitude of casual disengagement that permeates many reflections on social media. For example, “Personally, I have no view on politics. And nothing to that topic comes up for me, unless it's a funny meme”. Here, memes, encompassing the elements of visuality and entertainment, pop up, displaying a playful and creative attitude towards the environment.

2.4. Presenting the self

In terms of strategic self-creation and self-presentation, those who do post with some frequency were partly in consensus about the performative aspect of such actions: for example, “I think people are putting things that other people want to see. There is nobody putting a photo of the, like, how they actually look without filter and makeup and stuff”. Similarly, according to another participant, “people are just naturally inclined to post a picture where they look better”. Some participants were quite open about their own behaviour as well, for example, “If speaking of me, I like to strategically post photos. I like when people notice my photos” or, similarly, “we are selfish, we want to be noticed”. For yet others, there is a clearly pronounced competitive element: “Social media is also a sphere for competition and recognition. You want people to appreciate your work and to be looked at as an exceptional human being, you want to rival with them”. Or, as another participant summarised it, underscoring the representational element, “That is why it is social media. If you want to do it for yourself, you do it in real life”. Hence, responses appear to indicate a fair amount of intentionality in creating a tailor-made self for presentation on social media, in line with the existing literature.

Always lurking in the background of self-presentation, there is also the problem of negative content, abuse, and perhaps bullying that challenges the crafted digital and, through it, the underlying self. None of the respondents said they had experienced anything of the kind, and they were, once again, rather casual about their potential reactions, as in the following response: “I don’t see the worth of spending time on it. Negative feedback is also something that leads to endless conversations, and I just don’t believe it is worth investing in it”. Similarly, “if it’s just a negative comment under my photo, I will probably just ignore it. I don’t care what people think”. Of course, once again, it is one thing to say you would react in a particular way and yet another to actually do that if/once such a situation occurs.

In a similar vein, respondents were equally aware of the strategic self-creative intentions of others – aware enough not to treat the posts they see seriously: “I realize it’s not the whole real life of people, so I don’t get upset. [...] And you have to realize that no one wants to post a sad picture of them or drinking tea in the morning because it is boring”. Likewise, for another respondent, “people can post a photo from a year ago, so they could fake how they are actually feeling or doing at the moment with that smiley photo from ages ago”. Effectively, then, “it’s like a virtual world”. The preceding could potentially be treated as yet another illustration of adaptation to the social media environment, displayed by the respondents. With social media forming an innate part of their lives, the respondents appear to have developed at least some capacity to critically evaluate the content encountered and the self-creative endeavours of others.

3. Discussion

The results present a mixed picture in the light of the literature analysed in the first part of this article. Certainly, the central role of online platforms, particularly the key social media, is evident: these are the go-to places for communication and entertainment, a choice that is automatic enough not to give it a second thought. Also, as predicted by *e.g.* Srnicek (2017), there is clear evidence of network effects: because everybody is on particular social media platforms, it is clear where one needs to go in order to maximise the reach of either social creativity (posting) or social observation (checking what everybody else is creating). Moreover, the sheer size of the network means that the price of not being “in” (*e.g.* ceasing to actively post) is severely increased, among other things, by peer pressure to return to exposing oneself through continuous creation of one’s digital effigy.

There was also indirect confirmation of the opacity of algorithmic regulation (similarly to Pasquale, 2015), particularly in that the limitations and representational affordances were not engaged with by the respondents but seemingly just taken as a given. In addition, there was a noticeable lack of certainty about the actual operating principles of social media. This vagueness is perhaps best manifested with regards to data collection: while, on the one hand, all respondents were aware that data collection does take place, they were completely unsure as to how. The majority only demonstrated surface-level understanding, focusing on the images, posts, and personal details actively shared (*i.e.* what was within their creative ambit) and not trace data. Similarly, while the respondents were definitely aware of choice architecture being framed and the self digitally co-created on social media, they still did not consciously reflect

the influence this has on their behavioural and choice patterns – or, at least, did not consider such influence noteworthy enough to be brought up. Nevertheless, it also transpires that the actual picture is far more complex than mere algorithmic domination and outside creation of the self – unlike Langlois and Elmer (2019) would suggest. Instead, the self is dragged into but not necessarily subjected to algorithmically structured environments, co-creatively cohabiting with algorithms. The preceding is neither a symbiotic relationship nor one in which either side enjoys permanent advantage but, instead, a human-digital co-creative agglomeration the exact shape of which is situation-dependent.

There seems to be, mostly in line with Carlson (2018), Vaidhyanathan (2018) and others, a relatively clear theme around hedonic use of social media: whether it is in casting a glance over others (a kind of social voyeurism), showing oneself to others, encountering the right meme at the right time, or simply keeping oneself occupied and stimulated without any specific aim, an attention-for-satisfaction exchange takes place. And here emphasis still must be put on algorithmic sorting, ranking, and placement as a means of ensuring that each user gets a version optimised for their satisfaction (Bucher, 2018; Flyverbom & Murray, 2018). This exchange of algorithmic work for attention-work prevents the co-creative agglomerations from falling apart. Out of the two kinds of work, attention-work perhaps necessitates further elaboration since it is often not regarded as work proper and because of the casual nature the respondents' use of social media. First, it must be understood that attention is data: the time, the length, and the object of attention, geographical location and the proximity of others, the means of encountering the object of attention, and other bits of data are generated, thereby manufacturing the raw materials for algorithmic work which further refines the digital environment in order to further shape the conditions for attention-work. Again, agglomerated co-creation is firmly in place. Next, the second facet of attention-work is one's being a motivational factor. Even if one does not actively create content of their own, their attention acts as a motivating factor for those who do, incentivising them to create more (or at least to continue creating) and, therefore, to generate data for the platform. Finally, the third facet of attention-work is attention paid to commercial content, whether these be adds or sponsored posts, creating its value. Hence, to reiterate, the relationship must be conceptualised as human-digital co-creative agglomeration, sustained through algorithmic and attention-work that collectively enable attention-for-pleasure exchange.

Certainly, Citton's (2017) argument about the struggle over attention still holds. Nevertheless, this attention itself seems to be paid very casually and sometimes even cynically. The casual nature of the responses can be interpreted as demonstrating one more crucial element: their full immersion in, and a taken-for-granted approach to, social media. Since all our respondents were in their early 20s, social media have been around for a larger part of their lives, including their formative years. Hence, they can be called the first fully social media-native generation (by analogy with Prensky's (2001) distinction between "digital natives" and "digital immigrants"). That might form part of the explanation as to why the respondents seem to manifest such a casual and cynical approach to social media while much of the existing literature professes a notable degree of fascination. For the respondents, social media occupy an unexceptional place – they are merely expected to perform smoothly and do the job, just as one would not expect anything exceptional from a refrigerator.

Notably, the respondents' level of active social media use (*i.e.* creating and sharing content) was lower than expected from the literature. Of course, there might be a difference between self-reported use and actual use, but the findings were consistent across focus groups. Nevertheless, as already noted, even passive use, in the form of attention-work, is a valuable asset for social media platforms. On the other hand, those who did report posting and sharing also revealed the same classic patterns found in literature, such as the threat of obsolescence and invisibility should one stop creating and sharing, thereby dropping out of the attention cycle, as well as the very necessity for performing, crafting, and constructing the self (see Boyd, 2011; Cover, 2016; Cotter, 2019). Simultaneously, the awareness of such practices, among both the active and the passive users, appears to cause both a degree of suspicion about other people's content and almost an expectation that everybody acts strategically. That might also be a sign of acculturation in a social media-native generation.

Overall, the situation of the respondents is perhaps somewhere in-between perception of autonomy and actual enjoyment of such autonomy. There is a substantial part of their responses – particularly in relation to control over visibility, the capacity to control data available for commercial harvesting, or information selection – where the respondents declare a substantial amount of perceived creative agency but without necessarily thinking more deeply about the architectural affordances of social media. Hence, the latter continue operating subterraneously, without being recognised and resisted. As a result, it must be again reiterated that online agency can be best framed in terms of co-creative agglomerations of the human and the digital.

Conclusions

This article paints a more complex and nuanced picture of audience relationship with social media and creative processes therein than one present in mainstream literature. Whereas most of the literature would suggest dramatic change and enthrallment, the actual picture that emerges is one of creative agency shared between humans and algorithms, with this interplay being sustained through attention-for-pleasure exchange, signaling a high degree of social media-nativeness. Hence, respondents appear to be outwardly more casual and cynical about social media than initially expected while subterraneously still partaking in most of the datafication and algorithmic governance processes described in the literature.

Indeed, while, on the one hand, one might observe a certain discrepancy between the frequency of social media use on the one hand and a rather casual approach on the other, with social media being seen as unexceptional and unworthy of much attention – part of the natural infrastructure of everyday life. On the other hand, this discrepancy does not contradict the broader literature on the data-based platform economy: on the contrary, as attention (including passive observation of others) is data in itself (and a motivational factor for those who *do* post), even the seemingly passive users are actual contributors.

On a related note, despite the general awareness of data collection and retention by social media platforms, the degree of actual knowledge appeared to be relatively limited. The respondents mostly focused on surface-level data (*i.e.* what is explicitly revealed about oneself), but there was little awareness of trace data and metadata. Likewise, while there certainly

was some awareness of potential manipulation for political purposes and of the presence of filter bubbles, many respondents did report a relatively high confidence in their self-efficacy in information acquisition that might even border on carelessness. Meanwhile, the picture appears squarely aligned with adaptation with regards to models of self-creation and self-presentation (particularly in interpreting the behaviour of their peers), with the respondents being well-versed in the art and craft of the self.

While the size of the sample does not allow comfortable generalisation beyond this case study, it is hoped that this article serves as a useful pilot study, shedding some insights to be tested in further research.

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STUDENTŲ ALGORITMINIŲ SAVASČIŲ KŪRIMAS: SOCIALINIŲ MEDIJŲ REPREZENTACINIŲ GALIMYBIŲ TYRIMAS

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Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje pristatomi ir analizuojami rezultatai, gauti iš tikslinių grupių interviu su Lietuvoje esančio tarptautinio universiteto studentais. Šie rezultatai interpretuojami literatūros, aptariančios socialinių medijų poveikį savęs kūrimui ir raiškai, kontekste. Autoriai atskleidžia prieštarinę paveikslą – respondentai demonstruoja netikėtai atsainų ir net cinišką požiūrį į socialines medijas, tačiau, pažvelgus giliau, vis vien išlieka socialinių medijų produkcijos santykių dalimi, atiduodami savo duomenis mainais į pasitenkinimą. Tad, nors ir neatmesdami literatūroje dominuojančio požiūrio, autoriai pristato sudėtingesnį ir labiau niuansuotą požiūrį į jaunų žmonių nuomonę apie socialines medijas bei jų poveikį savęs kūrimui. Tokiu būdu parodomas atviras ir kūrybiškas santykis tarp žmogiškųjų aktorių ir programinio kodo.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: savastys, aglomeracija, algoritmas, dėmesys, duomenys, savi-kūra, socialinės medijos.