

When the Feed Feels Personal: Emotional Dependency on Social Media Algorithms

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Abstract

This paper explores the emotional dependence on algorithmic feeds in the everyday social media use. Using qualitative data from a phenomenological study of internet users in Kerala, this research analyses how users experience and make sense of algorithmic recommendations in their everyday emotional contexts. The study goes beyond the usual questions on algorithmic awareness or technical understanding. It looks at how individual feeds become relevant through moods, rituals, vulnerabilities and everyday interpretations. It implies that users' interactions with algorithms are not only shaped by visibility but also by affective experiences. The research claims that emotional dependence on algorithms is not an issue of overuse, but rather a negotiated interaction between algorithmic personalisation and user affective interpretations, foregrounding user narratives.

Keywords: Algorithmic experience; Algorithmic Imaginary; Phenomenology; Lived Experience

Introduction

Algorithmic systems have become part of the ordinary experience of using digital media. Social media feeds, search results, reel recommendations, targeted advertisements, and personalised notifications are shaped by algorithmic processes. These systems organise what users encounter online by sorting, ranking, filtering, and recommending content (Gillespie, 2014). Most users encounter algorithm not as technical procedures or codes. They encounter algorithm through everyday platform experiences. Scholarly works on algorithm have focused on questions of power, visibility, opacity, governance, and platform control. Studies have shown that algorithms are not neutral technical tools, but socio-technical arrangements integrated in economic and cultural structures (Beer, 2017; Diakopoulos, 2015; Pasquale, 2015; Willson, 2017). These concerns are important because algorithmic systems shape access to information and structure digital environments in significant ways. Also, this approach can sometimes treat “the algorithm” as a hidden object to be uncovered. Gillespie (2016, p. 52) notes that critical algorithm studies has often been directed toward exposing the “hidden core inside these complex systems” and the “mechanic ghost in the machine.” Even though this perspective helps to explain algorithmic power, it does not fully address how users engage with algorithms in day to day life.

Taking into account this limitation, recent scholarly works has turned toward user experience. Empirical studies of algorithmic culture from the user's point of view is limited. Some exceptions are Bucher (2017); Fletcher & Nielsen (2019) Hargittai et al. (2020). User-centered approach towards algorithms are important because users may not know how algorithms technically function, but they often develop explanations and assumptions. Sometimes users raises doubts, and expectations based on what they repeatedly experience on platforms.

This Particular work approaches algorithms from the perspective of lived experience. Based on qualitative data from a broader phenomenological study of internet users in Kerala, it examines how algorithmic feeds are experienced, interpreted, and emotionally negotiated in everyday digital life.

Review of Literature

Several scholars have examined how people notice, imagine, and explain algorithmic systems in everyday life. Bucher (2017) introduces the concept of the “algorithmic imaginary” to describe how users imagine algorithms. This concept of Bucher is useful because users rarely encounter algorithms as technical systems. Instead, they engage them through visible platform outcomes such as recommendations, repeated content, advertisements, and changing feeds. The algorithmic imaginary is therefore more than a false belief about technology, but a method of making sense of systems that remain opaque to a large extent.

DeVito and colleagues define algorithmic folk theories as the “intuitive, informal theories that individuals develop to explain the outcomes, effects, or consequences of technological systems” (DeVito et al., 2017, p. 3165). Studies have shown that users develop such explanations through platform experience, observation, comparison, and experimentation (Eslami et al., 2015; Rader & Gray, 2015). These explanations are often partial and sometimes lack certainty, but they necessarily shape how users interpret platforms and adjust their behaviour. Users may like, skip, search, hide, follow, unfollow, or change browsing habits in an attempt to influence what they see (Haim et al., 2018; Lomborg & Kapsch, 2020; Min, 2019; Thurman & Schifferes, 2012).

In this study , this discussion is extended through a phenomenological approach to algorithmic experience. Phenomenological approaches have already been used to study social media and everyday digital life (Åhman & Hedman, 2019; Bengtsson & Johansson, 2021; Couldry et al., 2016). Longo (2025) argues that this framework can be extended to algorithms by focusing on how algorithms appear to users in their interaction with platforms. This is important as users do not see the algorithm itself. They encounter it’s appearances through arranged feeds, suggestions, advertisements, repetitions, and unexpected forms of relevance.

Phenomenology helps to look beyond the simple division between hidden reality and surface appearance. Phenomenologists such as Husserl and Heidegger argue that phenomena are not flawed copies of reality, but manifestations of the thing itself (Loidolt, 2018, p. 57). Heidegger states that “one cannot ask for something behind the phenomenon at all, since what the phenomenon gives is precisely that something in itself” (Heidegger 1992, 86). Merleau-Ponty also stressed on the inseparability of subject and world: “The world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject which is nothing but a project of the world, and the subject is inseparable from the world, but from a world which the subject itself projects” (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p. 430). Extending this philosophy to algorithmic media, this means that users’ experiences are not secondary to the algorithm. They are central to how the algorithm becomes meaningful.

Phenomenological framing also connects with methods that study algorithms in practice. Scholarly works of Kitchin (2017), Seaver (2017), Christin (2020), and Dobson (2023) have argued for the move beyond analysing algorithms as mere code. Their work points toward studying algorithms as

socio-technical assemblages, cultural practices, and situated operations. A phenomenological tradition asks the question of how algorithmic systems are disclosed through lived encounters.

For this study affective dimensions is also important. Bucher (2018) argues that algorithms reveal themselves through “their capacity to create certain affective impulses, statements, protests, sensations and feelings of anger, confusion, or joy.” Users do not experience the statistical operations inside these systems but they experience the moods, feelings, and sensations that are co-generated through algorithmic encounters. These affective responses may guide further engagement with the platform, creating “affective feedback loops” (Grusin, 2010).

Affect theory helps clarify this relation. Affect may be understood as mood and intensity emerging through “forces of encounter” (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) idea of the capacity “to affect and be affected” helps us understand the user-algorithm relations. Users affect platforms through clicks, views, searches, likes etc. Platforms affect users by arranging what becomes visible, repeated, or recommended. Kennedy and Hill’s (2018) argument that people’s engagements with data are often emotional rather than purely rational or technical is also important here. Ruckenstein and Granroth (2020) states that personalised advertising can produce an “intimacy of surveillance,” where personalisation feels both intimate and uncomfortable.

Works on algorithmic feeds also highlights how users may experience personalised content as a reflection of themselves. Milton et al. (2023) states that users describe TikTok’s For You Page as reflecting themselves and their communities. Schellewald (2023, p. 1576) describes this as the “for you feeling,” while Bucher (2017) notes that users may also feel classified by algorithms. This reflection is not a direct expression of identity, but an algorithmically amplified reflection of previous viewing habits (Schellewald, 2021). Bhandari and Bimo (2022) describe this shift from the “networked self” (Papacharissi, 2011) to the “algorithmised self,” where users receive a sense of self through repeated encounters with algorithmically curated content.

Objectives of the Study

As we have discussed in previous sessions, this work is concerned with the emotional dimension of users’ everyday encounters with algorithmic feeds. In this work focus is on how users experience personalised recommendations within ordinary social media use. Since algorithmic operations often remain opaque, the study gives attention to the meanings, assumptions, and interpretations through which users make sense of algorithm. Based on this, objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To examine how users emotionally experience algorithmic feeds in everyday social media use.
2. To explore how users make sense of algorithmic suggestions and recommendations.
3. To analyse emotional dependence on algorithmic feeds as a negotiated relationship between personalisation, affect, and user interpretation.

Methodology

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with internet users from Kerala. The interviews attended participants' everyday digital practices, their moments of noticing algorithmic influence, explanations of platform behaviour, and the feelings that emerged from continued engagement with algorithmically mediated content. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling in order to include users with varied levels of digital familiarity, platform use, and social background. The broader fieldwork involved 71 research interactions, and the analysis for this work was based on 37 interviews. Participants aged between 16 to 68 years were part of this study. This consisted of 20 female and 17 male participants. They belong to different socio-economic and occupational backgrounds, including students, teachers, taxi drivers, homemakers, and other everyday internet users.

All the interviews were conducted in Malayalam and were recorded with the consent of the participants. The interviews were manually transcribed and later uploaded into Taguette, an open-source qualitative data analysis software. The transcripts were read multiple times, and relevant portions were highlighted and coded. The analysis followed an interpretive and inductive approach, supported by reflective notes maintained by the researcher during and after the interviews. Pseudonyms are assigned to participants to ensure anonymity, while retaining relevant demographic and contextual details necessary for analysis.

For this paper, selected narratives from the thesis data were re-analysed with specific attention to emotional dependence on algorithms and objectives of this study. The following analysis and discussion part is focused on how participants described algorithmic feeds and make sense of its operations.

Analysis & Discussion

Algorithmic Companionship and Emotional Support

Several participants viewed the algorithmic feed not merely as a system that delivers personalised content. They described it through a vocabulary of companionship, care, adjustment, healing, and encouragement. These descriptions are important because they show how users make sense of algorithmic recommendations. Concern here is not whether the algorithm actually understands emotion, but how users experience its presence affectively.

Adithyadev, an undergraduate student, aged 20, described one such experience:

“It [Instagram algorithm] can accurately know the emotional state that I am going through. January, last year, I went through a breakup, which emotionally hit me hard. At that time, Instagram started suggesting content that resonated with my emotions. I found it comforting. Algorithm feels like an emotional companion.”

In Adithyadev's case, the Instagram feed did not appear as a random arrangement of posts and reels for him. It is something more than that which move close to his emotional state. In technical terms,

the platform may be responding to patterns of engagement such as repeated viewing, clicking behaviour, interaction history, or the amount of time spent on particular content (Barocas & Selbst, 2016; Bucher, 2018; Kincaid, 2010; Rubinstein et al., 2008). But, this is not how he explains the experience. Adithyadev does not describe the feed through the language of data extraction or recommendation logic. He calls it an “emotional companion”. This phrase is important because it shows how the algorithm becomes meaningful to him not as an abstract technical system, but as something that appears to accompany him during a vulnerable personal moment.

A 30 year old assistant professor, Munawar, used a similar language of responsiveness. He said, “It provides content that matches my emotional state. I see this as a positive aspect since it serves to my mood. The algorithm adjusts to my mood.” According to Munawar, the algorithm is not imagined as a fixed or mechanical system. He described it as something that “adjusts.” The word adjusts suggests flexibility, sensitivity, and movement. Munawar’s account highlights that when recommendations appear to match a user’s emotional condition, the feed may be understood as mood-sensitive. The platform is not seen as showing same content. It is experienced as changing along with the user.

Sivahari, aged 22, also connected Instagram to emotional handling. He explained:

“Instagram helps me in healing my emotions. When I feel low, I scroll through Instagram reels. It suggest content that resonates with my emotions at that time. After watching that content for some time it slowly starts suggesting content to overcome that situation, something with healing effect.”

In Sivahari’s narratives, the feed is believed to participate in emotional repair. He is of the opinion that Instagram first provides content that matches his low mood and after engaging it for sometimes it shifts towards content that helps him feel better. Whether his opinion is technically accurate or not is not the main question here. What matters here is that the explanation allows him to make sense of his experience. For him the algorithm becomes part of practice of moving through sadness. Williams (1977: p. 23) argues such engagements need not be understood as “formally held or systematic beliefs” but as meanings and values that are “actively lived and felt.” Sivahari’s statement of the feed as having a “healing effect” should be interpreted as a lived meaning and less as a technical claim.

Bhasha, a postgraduate student ,aged 23, brings another dimension to this. She connects algorithmic recommendations with motivation

“Sometimes, when I watch motivational videos, I get inspired to restart my UPSC preparations which was stopped two years back. The algorithm keeps suggesting more motivational videos every now and then, which encourages me to resume my preparation. So these suggestions are beneficial for me. But I think it also serves commercial purposes. Because maany of the video suggestions come from institutions like Fortune and Lead [civil service coaching institutes in Kerala], which attract my attention. Although it has a commercial angle, the algorithm feels like a companion to me who motivates to target at my goals.”

Bhasha’s response is noteworthy because she does not ignore the commercial nature of the feed. She identifies that the motivational videos are connected to coaching institutions, and they serve

commercial purposes. Yet this does not cancel the emotional value she attaches to them. The feed still feels encouraging and motivating. In Bhasha's case, algorithmic recommendations become part of motivation and an attempt to return to fulfilling her goals. Therefore, algorithm is experienced both as a commercial tool and as a motivation source.

Above narratives from the participants show that they often describe algorithmic feeds through the language of social relationship. The feed "adjusts", "heals", "encourages", "comforts", and becomes a "companion". These words and usages are not technically precise, but they are meaningful. They indicate how participants interpret an opaque system using an available vocabulary from everyday life. Since most participants do not have access to the technical vocabulary, they draw from familiar social and emotional categories to explain what the feed seems to be doing. Thus, calling the algorithm a companion is not simply a mistake. It is an interpretive strategy. This interpretive strategy used by participants is important in understanding algorithmic experience. Participants encountered it as something that enters the ordinary situations of life. During a relationship breakup, it appears as comfort. During sadness, it appears as healing. During preparation for an examination, it appears as motivation. These meanings emerge because participants experience algorithmic recommendations within specific emotional contexts.

Here it is important to note that this argument does not mean that the platform actually performs care in any intentional sense. The point is that algorithmic systems become emotionally understandable through the language of everyday social life. When technical operations are invisible, users explain the feed through the forms of relationship they already understand and use. This is the reason why the vocabulary of companionship becomes analytically important. In addition to content delivery, users also interpret algorithmic responses through the meanings they attach to it. These participant narratives suggest that emotional dependence on algorithmic feeds begins when recommendations appear to participate in the user's emotional life. For participants, algorithmic feed becomes a familiar presence that they may turn to for comfort, emotional repair, or motivation

When Emotional Alignment Becomes Disturbing

Algorithmic feeds do not always provide emotional relevance as comfort or support. The same quality that participants in previous sessions said makes the feed feel personal can also make it feel intrusive, difficult to manage, or even stressful. Participants feel the recommendations as a disturbing presence when it appears to match the emotional state too closely. This reveals the contradictory nature of emotional dependence. Personalised algorithmic suggestions may support users in some situations, but in some other situations they intensify feelings that they are trying to control, avoid, or move away from.

Siyana, aged 24, narrates such an experience in relation to homesickness:

“When I am in hostel and miss my home, contents that increase the feeling of homesickness start appearing. It makes me cry. It can be stressful.”

In Siyana's version, the feed does not provide her comfort. Instead, it deepens an emotion that was already present. For Siyana, home-related content becomes difficult because it appears when she is

already thinking about going home. Interestingly, here also the recommendation feels emotionally relevant, but this relevance does not help her. Perhaps it increases sadness and stress. Emotional alignment is not always positive. An algorithmic feed that appears to understand the participants mood may provide relief in one context and emotional burden in another.

Syamili, aged 35, also describes how emotional alignment can become disturbing when the platform appears to know too closely what the user wants. Speaking about Spotify, she explained that when songs matching her mood are suggested, it first feels relaxed and comforting. Later it becomes tense because it feels like platform is looking at her too closely:

“When I receive songs on Spotify that pick up the mood I am in, it first feels relaxed and comforting. But then it makes me tense to think it knows me so closely.”

Syamili’s response indicates a shift from comfort to discomfort. At initial phase, the recommendation is welcomed because it matches her mood. But, the same accuracy later becomes disturbing. The problem is not simply that Spotify recommends music. In fact, the problem is that the recommendation appears too intimate. It seems to know not only her music tastes, but also what her mind wants at that particular moment. This closeness produces tension. Feed begins to feel less like a service and more like a system that is observing or following her.

Syamili also described her attempts to break this pattern:

“I sometimes listen to fast songs, to break this pattern. I actually don’t even like those fast numbers.”

Syamili’s strategy to confuse algorithm is significant because it shows that users are not just passive. They attempt to disturb the pattern. Her action is an attempt to interfere with the feed’s emotional understanding of her. Her discomfort leads her to act on the platform in order to change what it returns to her. There are few other user-made strategic attempts like this, but since they are outside the scope of this paper, they are skipped.

Emotional alignment produces a double effect. On the one hand, participants may feel that the platform understands them. On other hand, this same feeling can become uncomfortable when they feel like platform understands them too much. Emotional relevance creates the feeling that the system has entered a private emotional space. Personalisation is not the issue; it is the affective force of personalisation that discomforts participants. This is where emotional dependence becomes complicated. Users may return to algorithmic feeds because they provide comfort, motivation, or distraction. Yet the same feeds can also hit users with emotions they did not want to deepen. .

This contradictory nature is central to algorithmic experience. Feeds become emotionally significant not because they genuinely understand users. But because of its appearance in emotionally charged situations. Due to this, they may feel close and responsive, yet this closeness can also become stressful. Algorithmic feeds are not merely systems of content delivery, but affective environments that can intensify, disturb, and reshape emotional life.

Interpreting Emotional Relevance: Imagination as a Mode of Knowing

As we have seen in the previous sections that algorithmic feeds are experienced by several participants as sources of companionship, adjustment, healing, and motivation, while for some others it was experienced as stressful or intrusive. These responses suggest that users do not simply receive recommendations but they actively interpret them. As the technical operations of these algorithmic systems remain largely invisible, users make algorithms knowable through the meanings they attach to their outputs. Participants often do not encounter the computational logic behind these systems. Instead, they encounter affects: a song that matches a mood, a reel that appears during a breakup, or content that intensifies homesickness. Their knowledge of algorithms is therefore experiential and affective.

Gadamer's hermeneutics helps explain this. He argues that understanding involves "fore-meanings" that are continually tested and revised through experience (Gadamer, 1975, p. 267). It is with the assumptions about what algorithms know and why content appears, participants approach algorithms. Sources of these assumptions are prior experiences and repeated encounters with feeds.

When emotionally relevant recommendations appear, these assumptions are confirmed, modified, or unsettled. In Gadamer's terms, understanding is an ongoing process of projection and revision, continually reshaped by new encounters with the feed. Looking back to the previous session, Adithyadev's description of Instagram as an emotional companion, Munawar's perception that the algorithm "adjusts" to his mood, Sivahari's experience of emotional healing, and Bhasha's feelings of motivation all points to how participants interpret recommendations in relation to their emotional lives. The same process is seen in moments of discomfort. Siyana's experience of home-related content becoming stressful and Syamili's tension when Spotify seemed to know what she wanted points that emotional relevance can become discomforting. What begins as helpfulness may be interpreted as too much closeness. This prompts questions about whether the system is supporting, tracking, or surveilling them.

Imagination is central to participants' knowledge of algorithms. It can't be unattended flagging it as a lack of technical understanding. But it is a method of making sense of opaque systems. These interpretations are relational in nature. Meaning emerges between recommendations and users' actual situations. Breakup reel matters because it appears during a breakup; a song becomes disturbing because it matches closely with the mood. So therefore, emotional significance depends on context, memory, mood, and expectation and not only on content alone.

As Couldry et al. (2016) argue, people actively reflect on how operational systems work. In emotional contexts, this reflection intensifies because recommendations appear to touch moods and vulnerabilities. This may lead to participants trusting, questioning, resisting, or attempting to redirect algorithmic patterns. Syamili's effort to confuse Spotify's mood-based recommendations by listening to fast songs is an example that shows how interpretation can lead to action.

Imagination and interpretation are an integral part of everyday algorithmic experience. Users know algorithms through what they appear to do and how those appearances connect with them emotionally. Algorithmic systems become socially and emotionally real through this interpretive work. Emotional dependence is thus inseparable from hermeneutic activity. Users live with

algorithms by continually interpreting their appearances and revising their assumptions about systems whose inner workings remain unknown to them.

Conclusion

The article examined emotional dependence on algorithmic feeds as a lived experience of everyday social media use. In contrast to treating algorithms only as technical systems, this work focused on how users experience algorithmic feeds. As we have seen in analysis part, participants in this research relate to feeds not only through knowledge or awareness but also through comfort, motivation, disturbance, doubt, and imagination. Participants defined feeds using the language of companionship, healing, and motivation. Such accounts do not imply that participants see algorithms as nearly human or that platforms provide care. Instead, it shows how people use relatable social vocabularies to make sense of opaque systems. It is through these social vocabularies and interpretation that algorithm acquire emotional meaning.

This emotional relevance is also ambivalent. Recommendations that feel highly aligned can become unsettling, especially during vulnerable moments. Algorithmically curated feed can provide comfort, but it can also intensify sadness, stress, or feelings of being watched. Emotional dependence therefore involves vulnerability as much as attachment. This article foregrounds the idea of imagination and interpretation as central to how users engage with algorithms. Participants make sense of these blackboxed systems through their affects. Reflecting on Gadamer's (1975) notion of fore meaning, this article argues that imagination is not the sign of misunderstanding or lack of awareness, but a way of making opaque systems intelligible. The meaning lies not only in the content curated by algorithmic feed, but in how that content is interpreted by the user. The relationship between user and algorithms are always evolving. Emotional dependence emerges between algorithmic personalisation and user interpretation. Users trust, question, resist, and rely on feeds in different ways. Their relationship with algorithms are negotiated rather than fixed. Sensing algorithms in everyday life therefore requires attention not only to what they do technically, but also to how they are experienced, felt, and interpreted within the emotional conditions of digital life.

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