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The Algorithmic Lens: Understanding How Social Media Shapes Contemporary Notions Of Health And Taste

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Abstract
This secondary research paper presents an analysis of the far-reaching ramifications of social media algorithms in shaping the perceptions of health and taste that exist within today's world. Through its research, this paper aims to explore how algorithms influence the concept of beauty, life choices, and health practices among social media users. In conducting its research, it aims to synthesize vital information in the three major areas that work as critical points for an individual's influence through algorithmic amplification, the creation of beauty and life content, and finally, the psychological, social, cultural, and public health effects that both occur and influence users. This paper relies on information gathered from interdisciplinary sources that encompass studies within the areas of communications, psychology, public health, and digital sociology studies. This paper aims to demonstrate that these algorithmic structures generate feedback mechanisms that work both in democratizing and homogenizing perceptions regarding health and beauty among social users. This research seeks to conclude that though social platforms present an innovative way for users to learn from multiple aspects of health-related information, algorithmically structured platforms tend to promote extreme content, generate echo chambers, and promote unhealthy models of beauty.

Keywords: health perception on social media, health perception, beauty standards, digital influence, algorithmic curation, taste formation, public health.

Introduction
The new media environment has radically changed the way both perception and the pursuit and display of health and taste occur. The social networking medium has become less about the means to communicate and much more than this and has taken on the role of a arbiter of culture and aesthetic and health. The processing function that underlies this new role is the algorithmic system that is invisible and omnipresent. The relevance of this research stems from a number of intersecting trends. First, social media use has never been more widespread, with estimates of 4.9 billion users in 2023, indicating a profound proportion of people across a range of demographics. Second, social media sites are becoming ever more important sources of health information, especially for younger people, many of whom are eschewing traditional sources of healthcare advice for online, user-generated content. Third, an ever-growing level of evidence indicates that social media usage is linked to a range of mental health issues, issues of self-image, and issues related to self-hurtful and self-beneficial health behaviours. This secondary research study addresses this gap by systematically reviewing and synthesizing existing literature to map how algorithmic curation influences contemporary health and taste formations. The study examines three interconnected dimensions derived from the research framework: people's influence as mediated through algorithms, the curated presentation of

beauty and lifestyle content, and the cascading psychological, social, cultural, and public health impacts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

(Gabriela Poleac, , Alexandra-Niculina , & Ghergut-Babii, 2024), This research examines the views on the role of social media algorithms among social media users and professionals, particularly focusing on data curation, real-time customization, and FOMO (fear of missing out). This research, completed through two focus groups, identified the complex interactions between users' responses to algorithms. In examining the literature, it is crucial to note the significance of algorithms as gatekeepers that shape users' interactions on the internet. In fact, our research highlights, through Information Foraging Theory, how factors such as FOMO, customization of material, and the illusion of choice generated by algorithms significantly impact users' decision-making patterns on the internet. Identifying these key factors will help to clarify the psychological and behavioural factors that stimulate consumers to rely on social media on a regular basis. This research contributes to the broader literature on the societal implications for the use of algorithmic influence, with significant insights for practitioners who aim to interpret the dynamic environment shaped by internet interactions.

(Hannah Metzler, 2024), Social drivers and algorithmic mechanisms on digital media. Data-processing algorithms that recommend content have, therefore, become omnipresent on digital media. Their rapid, largely unregulated adoption has engendered concerns about their role in well-being at both the individual and collective levels. Algorithmic mechanisms in digital media are driven by social drivers, a vicious circle that complicates research to unravel the role of algorithms versus already existing social phenomena. This finding stresses the importance of reflecting on algorithms within the larger societal context that includes but is not limited to individualism, populist politics, and climate change. We provide concrete ideas and research questions to advance the improvement of algorithms on digital platforms and to investigate their role in current problems and potential solutions. Finally, we discuss how the present shift away from social media toward more algorithmically curated media involves risks as well as opportunities if the design of algorithms focuses on the flourishing of individuals and society rather than the pursuit of short-term profit.

(Mertaniemi, 2023), Social media and digital environments have shaped the consumer consumption habits and the world of marketing for good. This literature review studies how have the phenomena of social media influencers emerged from the origins of cultural intermediaries in the context of fashion. The review is carried out concentrating on peer-reviewed academic articles that focus on cultural intermediaries in the context of fashion, social media influencers in the context of fashion and their relationship with algorithms. As social media is evolving rapidly, the review will concentrate on as recent academic articles as possible. The findings of this literature review showed that even though the gap between cultural intermediaries and social media influencers in the field of fashion is narrowing, there are still some distinguishing differences between the two. Being considered a cultural intermediary requires certain level of cultural capital to be able to act as taste attributor in the field and mediating events such as fashion shows. To be able to gain the desired level of visibility for their content, the social media influencers need to understand and obey the algorithmic rules of the social media platforms. Algorithms can be seen as gatekeepers of the taste making activities as they filter what content reaches the consumers on social media platforms.

(Gaw, 2022), This article investigates algorithms and their construction of cultural taste through a socio-technical analysis of the Netflix Recommender System. I examined the key algorithmic processes in the intersection of its technological infrastructure, cultural processes, and social relations by employing Taina Bucher's three methodological tactics for 'unknowing' algorithms. I draw from media logic and computational logic to propose the concept of 'algorithmic logics' and defines the assumptions, processes, and mechanisms that govern the construction of taste within the Netflix platform. These four logics of taste – datafication, reconfiguration, interpellation and reproduction – were identified and it is argued that they reappropriate old apparatuses of social control and generate new capacities in engineering cultural processes. Together, these logics transform algorithms from procedural to self-generative machines in the guise of algorithmic objectivity, user agency, and post-demographic experiences. Algorithmic logics function as an 'interpretative schema' in making sense of algorithms in their entanglement with social actors, institutions, and infrastructures.

(Urbano Reviglio, 2020), This paper is a crucial cross-disciplinary study on the systems of personalization and the gate-keeping function presently exercised by conventional social media. In the first part, a literature study is offered on data-driven personalization and the dilemmas it raises for social media platforms. In the second part, insight is given into rising worries about the capability to overtly persuade using algorithms, bringing into focus the rising trend for the sole ownership of behaviour change using hyper-nudging strategies. In the third part, a data-driven study on users' expectations. In the fourth part, the idea for "algorithmic sovereignty" is brought into focus. This cross-disciplinary original research theory and applications holistically suggest a "s to a social negotiation" in order to move toward a more sustainable environment for social media. In a bid to make the colossal strength of conventional social media decentralized, ensure a public institutions, societies, and academics concerned with public algorithms need to establish a joint sense to pave the way for a balanced approach to a fair and accountable "algorithmic sovereignty."

(Maria Giovanna Onorati, 2020), Social media as taste re-mediators: emerging patterns of food taste on Trip Advisor. This contribution will analyse changes in food taste and gastronomy standards to demonstrate how social media influences food consumption practices through the prism of mobilities. The alliance between food and social media has had its priorities set elsewhere and now relies more heavily on the dynamics of new media and their claim to uniqueness concerning the current era of cultural omnivorousness. The research will analyse the changes in food tastes based upon widespread dining review posts through travel sites, understanding food consumption and social media use practices as changing social practices. To examine the above, the analysis of TripAdvisor reviews of restaurants in the Aoste Valley Region of Italy is conducted over 25 months, and the relevance of the "re-mediation" of the taste of food through social media networking sites in the creation of the culinary capital based on the habitus of adaptability is explored.

(Cohn, 2019), The Burden of Choice examines how recommendations for products, media, news, romantic partners, and even cosmetic surgery are produced and experienced online. The book argues that recommendations are a source of control-a way of framing Americans as heteronormative, white, and affluent while obscuring the diversity of their identities to make affluence seem mundane. Cantering his analysis on the period from the mid-1990s until about

2010, Jonathan Cohn demonstrates that algorithms are neither natural nor neutral but rather are vigorously determinative of and determined by conceptions of gender, sexuality, race, and class. Drawing on the methods of cultural studies-close readings, historical research, and qualitative analysis-in its study of algorithms and culture, the book provides a strong model.

OBJECTIVES

- To analyse the role of people's influence as mediated and amplified through algorithmic recommendation systems in forming health and taste perceptions.
- To examine how algorithmic curation shapes the presentation and consumption of beauty and lifestyle content across social media platforms.
- To document the psychological impacts of algorithmically-curated health and beauty content on individual wellbeing, self-perception, and mental health.

RESEARCH DESIGN: - This research is based on descriptive research.
DATA COLLECTION METHOD: -

- Primary Collection– Structured Questionnaire
- Secondary Collection– Research papers, journals, articles.

HYPOTHESIS: -
H0 (1): Algorithmic exposure to fitness content does not shift a user's perception of an "average" healthy body.
H1 (1): Persistent exposure to elite fitness content skews the user's lens, making extreme physiques appear as the social baseline for "health."
H0 (2): Content labelling certain foods as "toxic" has no significant impact on a user's psychological relationship with food.
H1(2): Engagement-driven algorithms amplify restrictive food content, leading users to develop hyper-fixations on "clean" eating at the expense of mental well-being.
H0 (3): Social media recommendations do not diminish the diversity of an individual's personal or cultural style.
H1 (3): The algorithmic lens creates an "Algorithmic Aesthetic," training users to prefer homogenized, engagement-friendly styles over idiosyncratic or traditional tastes.
H0 (4): Watching "What I Eat in a Day" videos does not affect a person's ability to listen to their own hunger and satiety signals.
H1 (4): These algorithmic trends replace internal biological intuition with external digital templates, reducing the user's trust in their own body.
H0 (5): Health-related "self-diagnosis" content on social media does not increase general health anxiety.
H1 (5): Algorithms funnel users into medical echo chambers that amplify rare symptoms, leading to "cyberchondria" and distorted health perceptions.
H0 (6): The "Instagram ability" of a meal has no bearing on its perceived health value or culinary worth to the consumer.
H1 (6): The algorithmic lens prioritizes the visual "vibe" of food, leading users to value aesthetic appeal over nutritional content or authentic flavour.
H0 (7): Algorithmic content regarding "bio-hacking" and supplements does not change how people define a "healthy" lifestyle.
H1 (7): Users under the algorithmic lens increasingly view health as a performance to be "optimized" via products rather than a natural state of balance.

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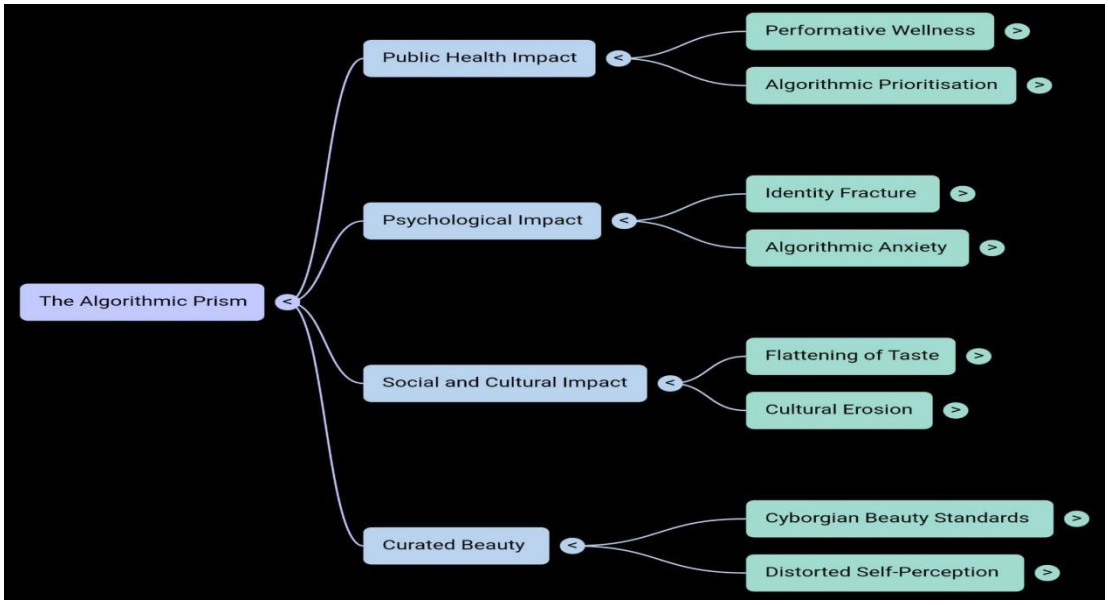
H0 (8): Recommender systems expand a user's taste by introducing them to genuinely new and diverse cultural experiences.
H1 (8): Algorithms create a "narrow-taste effect," where users are funnelled into repetitive "rabbit holes" that actually limit their cultural and aesthetic growth.
H0 (9): Exposure to perfectly curated home and lifestyle content does not influence how users feel about their own real-world environments.
H1(9): The algorithmic lens causes users to feel "aesthetic shame," perceiving their messy, uncrated lives as failing to meet a digital standard of "taste."
H0 (10): The rapid cycle of algorithmically driven "micro-trends" does not change long-term consumer taste or waste habits.
H1 (10): The lens accelerates the "death" of trends, forcing users to constantly update their taste to remain "relevant" in the eyes of the algorithm.

FRAMEWORK



The analysis that can be derived from research about social media algorithms is that social media algorithms act less like a mirror that reflects who we are and more like a prism that refracts reality.
The essential concept drawn from the research is that social media algorithms operate with the objective of optimization in mind and not human happiness; therefore, algorithms tend to form a feedback loop that Favors content that is extreme or just optimal. This “lens” tends to change the way we see health, beauty, or culture.

1. Public Health Impact: The Rise of Performative Wellness:

The analysis shows how evidence-based health shifts to "performative wellness" when algorithms prefer content that appears healthy-perfectly composed smoothie bowls or fit bodies-to actual health-promoting content. It builds a "digital obesogenic environment" where extreme diets and exercises that are medically unsound yet highly engaging overwhelm users.

Algorithms more often than not fail to recognize healthy discipline from disordered eating and tend to amplify harm trends of restrictive dieting when those fuel the interaction, casting nuanced medical advice into noise over viral "health hacks."

2. Psychological Impact: The Quantified Self and Fracture:
When applying the trends of psychology, the following conclusion is found regarding the relationship between algorithmic curation and "identity fracture": "Users are not pitting themselves against others, but against the ‘best-of’ greatest hits montage that’s been algorithmically determined to keep them scrolling.
And what this reveals is that this perpetual bombardment of hyper-idealized lives puts a certain type of social comparison in motion in which users can’t measure up because their own lives are messy, rather than polished."

According to the analysis, "the resulting ‘algorithmic anxiety’ is an experience of one’s own identity performances becoming bound up with the arbitrary vicissitudes of online validation—the contingent pleasure of likes, views, and shares—to the point where social interaction itself is placed in a position of high stakes performance.”

3. Social and Cultural Impact: The Flattening of Taste:
Analysis of cultural trends suggests a phenomenon known as the "global homogenization" or the "flattening" of taste. With the algorithm serving up what it thinks the world will like best, there is a fundamental way in which it kills the local, the unique, or the "niche" cultural expressions in Favor of a homogenous "aesthetic."
Research writes of the way in which interior design, fashion, and even the presentation of food is homing in on what is known as the "internet aesthetic" (such as the "minimalist coffee shop" look) that—as it turns out—asserts its ubiquitous presence in a manner of "belonging nowhere at all" because of the homogenous looks that algorithms are creating in their wake.

4. Curated Beauty: The Standardization of the Face:
Perhaps the most interesting issue here is that of what can now be labelled "Cyborg beauty" norms. The findings show that the use of beauty filters and optimization algorithms results in a singular global beauty ideal—that of a face with particular features such as high cheekbones, skin without pores, and "cat eyes."

The findings are explained thus: "This is a symptom of a world where beauty is no longer something that is determined by human anatomy or ethnic heritage but becomes something determined by processing program recognizes as 'optimal' skin.

The results show that users are embracing this machine-defined beauty to the point where there now appears to be a discrepancy between human self-perception and the edited beauty ideal, with the human face being perceived as 'imperfect' or 'unfinished' without the digital beauty enhancement."

FINDINGS

OBJECTIVES	FINDINGS
• To analyse how people's influence, amplified through algorithmic recommendation systems, shapes health and taste perceptions	Secondary research illustrates that the social media algorithms consistently promote influencers and trends related to food, fitness, and healthy living. Users are thereby consistently exposed to the same ideas, which cause these concepts to feel familiar or credible. Over time, the ideas that are suggested by these algorithms in regards to nutrition and food will ultimately determine what is 'healthy' or acceptable, without users being completely aware of their role in this process.
• To examine how algorithmic curation affects the presentation and consumption of beauty and lifestyle content on social media platforms	Studies show that the algorithms used by these platforms observe a bias towards visually pleasing and trend-driven content. This helps in presenting a superficial and restricted view of what constitutes beauty and caring for oneself. Exposure to this kind of material impacts users in terms of consumption patterns, beauty care, and mode of living, as there is a sense that there is only a particular way to live, look, and treat oneself.
• To document the psychological impact of algorithmically curated health and beauty content on wellbeing and self-perception	Research findings have indicated that perpetual exposure to these ideals for good health and beauty contributes to comparing, criticizing, and being pressured to live up to the standards presented. Although some individuals might feel inspired momentarily, being constantly exposed might have negative implications for self-esteem, body satisfaction, and mental health, particularly for younger users who tend to be highly susceptible to these standards presented by the algorithms.

CONCLUSION

The paper underlines the fact that the algorithms on social media function more like powerful prisms, which distort the reflections on reality, more so than the more passive function of a mirror. The fact that the algorithms are more inclined to optimize engaged content pushes the extreme fitness ideals, strict diets, and generic aesthetics, which can end up creating a distorted perception of users' cultural identity. The conclusion that the algorithms reach in terms of the effect they pose on personal wellbeing is that they are able to democratize information, yet they

are more inclined to homogenize taste, thus creating echo chambers that are devoid of diversity and uniqueness. The psychological implications of the cloning of wellbeing are underlined to function more so on the aesthetic level. Socially, the levelling of taste affects local cultural practices, even as the beauty filter redefines global ideals of attractiveness. Public health is likewise affected, as the performance of wellness crowds out evidence-based healthy practices. Ultimately, the findings of the research presented herein are that the effect of the algorithmic lens on society must be interrogated for responsible management. It is a challenge to use the benefits of social media responsibly, to the end that the distorting light of the pragmatics of the digital world might transform the distortive lens of the digital world into a healthy, diverse, and authentic world.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Users should be encouraged to develop digital literacy skills to critically evaluate algorithmically curated health and beauty content.
- Social media platforms must increase transparency by explaining how recommendation systems select and amplify content.
- Algorithms should be redesigned to deliberately expose users to diverse cultural, health, and lifestyle perspectives.
- Public health institutions need to collaborate with platforms to ensure evidence-based information competes with viral but misleading content.
- Individuals should practice mindful consumption by limiting screen time, curating their feeds, and engaging intentionally.
- Policymakers should establish ethical guidelines and regulatory frameworks to safeguard mental health and cultural diversity in digital spaces.

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