Social Media as a Space for Youth's Algorithmic Resistance

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Abstract: Youth spend a significant portion of their time on social media with a wide range of activities. Social media can present risks for youth, and the impact of these is still being discussed in current research. Building on a connected learning framework, this poster qualitatively analyzed youths' social media walkthroughs for practices that showcase algorithmic resistance. The study found that youth navigate social media skillfully, develop awareness about risks, and build strategies to circumvent them.

Introduction

Social media platforms are widely used by youth across the globe to connect and interact in online environments (Aichner et al., 2021). These interactions can be everyday routine practices that involve complex decision trees similar to flow control algorithms, for example, when engaging with common social media features (Keune & Hurtado, 2023). Nevertheless, the use of social media platforms is also associated with social and cognitive risks, such as misinformation (Naem et al., 2020) or the impact on mental health, although the relationship between these risks and social media use are still underdeveloped (Valkenburg, 2022). However, youth cultural practices have a certain form of resilience around them, illustrating a wealth of knowledge about how well youth are aware of social media risks as well as how to remain safe in this space. Youth interact and explore algorithms, building an understanding of them, an algorithm imagining (Low et al., 2023). This resilience that brings about the practices of interacting and exploring algorithms is what we understand as resistance practices.

Building on a connected learning framework, which highlights youth personal interests, supportive relationships, and opportunities as a rich context for learning, within which social media fits (Ito et al., 2020), this qualitative study investigated the risks youth identify in their everyday social media practices and their own strategies to navigate them by analyzing youth's social media walkthroughs. Building from a space that views youth as capable and proactive, we investigated youth's self-identified risks related to navigating online spaces and youths' strategies to mitigate them.

Methods

This study conducted 13 social media walkthroughs with girls and young women (self-identified) between 13 and 18 years old from Latin America (Mexico, Ecuador, and Colombia) and Europe (Germany and Italy). The walkthroughs (Light et al., 2016) were screen recordings of semi-structured interviews (average 70 minutes long; 15 hours total) conducted via Zoom that captured participants' social media practices by sharing their phone screens, showcasing their social media platforms, and how they interact with them in everyday ways. The interview protocol covered four themes: (1) Introductions, including demographic information and social media experience, (2) connected learning on social media, such as content creation and networks, (3) algorithmic learning, such as experiences with and awareness of recommendations, and (4) risks, such as overuse, bias, false information, fake profiles, and data collection. This poster analyzes youths' perceived risks and resistance practices (i.e., approaches to address risks). We conducted an iterative thematic coding to identify risks and practices youth engage in to address them, and then we coded the interviews with the risks as codes. For risks-related factors, we created the following codes: (a) *Unknown audience*, interactions inside/outside of social media strangers or unknown users in social media platforms, (b) *false information*, fabricated, manipulated, imposter, and misleading content, (c) *deleting and curating*, challenges of personal posted digital content remaining online over time, (d) *advertisements*, purchasing (or not) or training ad feeds, and (e) *risks for future misuse*, social media algorithms and their influence in their social media interactions..

Findings

Participants across the interviews described various encounters with a range of risk scenarios. These scenarios were usually accompanied by strategies allowing them to safely navigate social media platforms. Some participants mentioned that they were aware of some risks, such as grooming, from a very young age, and this understanding of the risk was used to curate their network by filtering incoming requests of people they deemed did not fit the necessary safety standards. Here, we show the experiences of one participant, Sonia (pseudonym), an 18-year-old high school student in Colombia, who showcases the risks experienced by most of the participants.

Throughout her years of interacting with various platforms, she built experience and knowledge about social media environments. During the walkthrough, Sonia mentioned the risk of *unknown audiences* and said that from a very young age, she was aware that age differences on friend or chat requests could be inappropriate. To keep herself safe from risky interactions with unknown people, she showed how she filtered follow requests by looking at a profile, including whether the picture seemed conventional (e.g., shows their face), the ratio of followers/following, and contacts in common. This step-by-step approach was done in a matter of seconds. She also mentioned the risk of *false information* as she became wary and aware of content online and tried to verify information that could be valuable but potentially dangerous. Sonia explained that her own network of friends often serves as a filter when they share online information in real life. Sonia also mentioned the risk of *deleting and curating*, by acknowledging her digital footprint as an essential consideration when creating content online and, therefore, her care about which online content she produced that could have repercussions in the future. Sonia mentioned the risk of *advertisements*, explaining that the advertisements cater to what she likes but do not always correctly identify her wishes.

Further, Sonia explained her risks in ways we coded as *risks for future misuse*. She told us that she recognized how the platforms notice her interests, her friends' interests, and general trends in her environment to deliver specific content. She said "*I kind of like that Instagram knows me, like I feel comfortable. I also don't like how much information about me is on the internet.*" This quote illustrates that Sonia, like others in the data, is viewing the algorithm of social media as a source of concern when she highlights that the platforms know information about her, alluding to the fact that this information could be used in a multitude of ways in the future that is not known to her at the moment of sharing. At once, Sonia also appreciates the intimacy she and social media platforms share (e.g., "*I kind of like that Instagram knows me…*"). Despite the ambiguity of risks and well-being within this quote that reflects her social media practice, Sonia highlights that she "feels comfortable," meaning that she considers her actions as a control regarding possible risks for future misuse. The complex reasoning around social media is due to its lack of transparency about its inner workings to the youth we talked with. Overall, Sonia acknowledges these risks but simultaneously tries to use them to her advantage, showing the possibilities youth have developed through practices of resistance.

Discussion

Through the walkthroughs, youth showcased years of experience with social media platforms. Through interactions within the platforms and interacting with their networks online and offline, they developed an awareness of risks that can be part of their everyday experiences with social media. This awareness results in rich and complex practices that allow youth to still invest in their preferred online spaces while keeping themselves and their networks safe. This has implications for the design of social media-based learning activities that aim to highlight engagement of youth and policies aimed at regulating youths' social media use for learning.

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Acknowledgments