

Social Influence, Algorithmic Personalization, and Platform Trust Among Young Users: An Exploratory Survey

Maahir Kumar
maahirkumar20@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In the age of young Gen Z and young Gen Alpha, social media platforms have expanded through algorithm engagement which is created to attract users. In a society where corporations target their intended audience through certain features, I was intrigued by how various social media platforms grow rapidly compared to others. This study investigates how trust and user preferences influence the growth of social media platforms. The research is centralized on individuals ages between 10-25 in where limited research exists (in 2026) pertaining social media preferences and behavioral influences. Data was collected through a 7 question survey consisting of 6 multiple choice and 1 short answer question. Responses totaled to 67, using a convenience sampling method. Statistical models and correlation analyses were used to identify the relationship between platform usage patterns and social influences. Results indicated that social media usage and platform selection were heavily motivated by conventional norms and social circles. However, findings also suggest that concerns regarding trust may affect user engagement. Further research could ensure a globally representative sample was collected and examine different age groups and socioeconomic populations. Because participants were recruited from the researcher's personal contacts, results reflect a specific social network rather than a random or representative sample, and should be interpreted as exploratory rather than generalizable. Moreover, studying countries with stricter internet regulations and data policies could result in different social media preferences and an opposite algorithmic influence.

Keywords: Trust, Convenience Sampling, Cross-Sectional, Algorithms, Collaborative Consumption, Social Media, Gen Z, Gen Alpha

INTRODUCTION

How do social media platforms leverage social influences and algorithmic content personalization to influence platform selection, user feature preferences, and user trust levels, specifically among teens?

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Platforms design algorithms to retain users by catering to users' content preferences. The current research will help reveal how social media platforms optimize growth.

The current research identifies what causes social media growth as well as how trust development in users encounters barriers.

Past literature reviews highlight key factors that influence social media platforms. Platform market advertisements are influenced by legal policies such as safe harboring which changes competition between platforms that invest in content screening (Beard et al., 2018) and those that do not. They study the distribution of copyrighted works without the owner's consent. When platforms have less liability for hosting infringing content, they spend less effort ensuring that their content is not infringing. They conclude that increased platform liability for infringing content would increase compliance with copyright laws. This shows how platform-level incentives, not just user behavior, shape what content spreads, but it does not examine how individual users experience or respond to these incentives. (Aridor et al. 2024) provide an economic framework for the three-stage content lifecycle: production, distribution, and consumption. Algorithms in the distribution side drive engagement and in turn generate revenue. Algorithms can encourage the production of engaging content and facilitate the consumption of engaging content. Sponsorship disclosure shapes consumer engagement, while video sharing is driven by social norms rather than other factors. Similarly, social pressure is a driver of online social media engagement, pointing to peer networks as a distinct force from algorithmic personalization (Yang and Wang, 2015). Taken together, this body of research explains platform growth largely from the platform's side: legal liability, algorithmic design, and content lifecycle economics.

METHODS

Research Design

The overall structure of the study was a social media survey consisting of 6 multiple choice questions and 1 short answer question to assess the relation between certain variables. Each participant filled out the survey anonymously and answered the same set of questions in the same order.

Participants

A total of 67 participants were involved from the Morris County region (Chatham, NJ). Although data on the state of residence wasn't collected, the data collection was based in Chatham, NJ as the survey was sent out to the researcher's contacts.

Because the sample was drawn from the researcher's personal and social network rather than a randomized population, respondents are likely to share overlapping friend groups, interests, and social norms. This non-random, convenience-based recruitment is a central limitation of the study: it increases the risk that findings reflect the dynamics of one particular social circle rather than teens and young adults more broadly, and it may partly explain the strong social-influence effects reported below.

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Table 1. Age Distribution of Survey Respondents

The age question was a multiple-choice question. The question was unintentionally written with overlapping age ranges, so it is possible that participants at the boundary may have chosen either category. The overlap in the age categories makes them more ambiguous and thus is a limitation of this data.

Full Sample (N = 67): Total respondents completing all questions.

Analytic Trust Sample (n = 46): During initial survey administration, several questions were recorded to be open-ended before being altered to multiple choice; thus, of the original 67, 46 were taken into consideration to stay standardized.

Primary Interaction Preference: Favorite interaction method (Messaging, Comments, Sharing Videos, Stories, Other).

Friend Influence: Indicator of whether peer usage drove platform adoption (Yes/Mostly vs. No/Sometimes).

Importance of Personalization: 4-point scale measuring content importance (4 = Very Important to 1 = Not Important).

Platform Trust Level (TL): Ordinal 4-point scale (4 = High Trust, 3 = Moderately High Trust, 2 = Moderately Low Trust, 1 = Low Trust).

Primary Feature Choice (FC): Categorical feature that prompted platform joining (e.g., Connecting with Friends, FYP, Marketplace, Groups, Disappearing Messages, Stories, Voice/Video Calls, Better Algorithm, Live).

Data Collection

67 people were sent a message to complete an anonymous Google Form survey with some questions. The researcher sent out a message to most of his contacts stating, "Please Fill Out This Form." The survey details informed the participants that the data will be used for a research paper and any information they provide will not be disclosed to any one specific person.

The survey methodology evolved over the course of this research. Specifically, some questions were initially free-response questions but later changed to multiple-choice questions. The same size for the questions made into multiple-choice questions may be smaller than the full sample because some respondents filled out the early free-response versions.

Variables and Measurements

Age. The survey asked the participants their age to determine the category of participants for social media influences.

User Interaction Method. The survey asked the participants to select one answer on what their favorite social media interaction method is on the platform they like to use. 6 different answer choices: Messaging, Comments, Polls, Sharing Videos, Stories, and Mentions and Hashtags.

Platform Influence. The survey asked participants if they used the platform because their friends use them. Answers include, Yes, No, Mostly, Sometimes. The meaning of each phrase was not mentioned to the participant; however, there is a clear distinction between each one.

Importance of Personalized Content (Algorithm). The survey asked participants how important personalized content is to them and why. Again, answers were multiple choice (as shown in the survey above). This variable was later categorized from 4 being very important to 1 being not important at all for correlation analysis in the results section.

Platform Trust. Participants were asked if they trust the platform they use and what certain features enable their trust. 4 multiple choice options were allowed as a response. This variable was later categorized from 4 being the highest trust to 1 being the lowest trust for correlation and confidence statistics.

Specific Platform Features. Participants were surveyed on what specific feature made them join a platform (or not as the “other” box would indicate). Answers are listed in the copy of the survey above. These responses were synthesized using descriptive statistics and models in order to see if there are correlations between trust and a specific platform feature using mean and median trust levels.

Platform Banned. Participants were asked how they would feel if their favorite platform was banned in their country. This variable was the only short answer question.

Procedure

Each participant used an electronic device to complete this survey consisting of 7 questions. Participants were informed that this data will be used for a research paper. This study was intended to take approximately 5-10 minutes per participant. The link was also distributed online through Reddit and LinkedIn, however the form was analyzed through this time period and was found that only 2 responses were provided. Rather, this is not sufficient enough to skew data, still indicating the geographic region being of Chatham, NJ.

Data Analysis

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Descriptive statistics (mean, median, SD), provided correlational data regarding trust and certain platform features. Variable coding was also employed to rank multiple choice answers into qualitative data. Correlation analysis, confidence intervals, and Kruskal-Wallis H Test ($n = 46$). This analysis does not include alternative factors that shape social media influence (ex: parent restrictions).

Ethical Considerations

The survey presented limited but some notable ethical considerations. The short answer questions reveal that some participants indicated that they would use VPNs to bypass platform bans which raises concerns for countries that restrict the use of VPNs. Another consideration involves question comprehension, as some questions may have been phrased in a way that was not fully understood by all participants. Additionally, no parental consent forms were collected anonymously through the Google Form. The survey was voluntary and participants were informed that their responses would be used for research purposes. The OJSS submission guidelines do not have specific requirements for human subjects research. There was no school or programme guidance that was applicable to this work.

Current Research Gap

Current Research fails to address the users' perspective on new features introduced to social media platforms. Research examines the economic and social impact of adding an influential or non-influential feature leading to growth for the social media corporation. They focus on social media optimization and engagement metrics. However, the research doesn't portray the users perspective on how these features impact their social lives within communities. This study focuses on peers within communities that can affect the different ways social media platforms are utilized.

What current literature does not address is the user's side of this relationship, specifically, how everyday users perceive and weigh algorithmic personalization against social influence from friends when choosing and trusting a platform, and how these perceptions differ across age groups and communities. This gap is especially notable for teen and young adult users, who make up a large share of social media activity but are rarely the direct subject of this literature. The current study addresses this gap by surveying users directly, rather than analyzing platform-level data, to examine how social influence and algorithmic personalization jointly shape platform choice and trust among individuals ages 10–25 in Morris County, New Jersey.

RESULTS

A total of 67 survey responses were recorded. Of respondents, 92.5% were ages 10–25, 1.5% were ages 25–40, and 6.0% were over age 40. Responses from all age groups were retained.

Approximately 74.24% of respondents indicated that their friends' use was a significant factor in their platform choice. The 95% confidence interval was: $0.60 \leq p \leq 0.84$. The majority of respondents viewed personalized content as very important. The 95% confidence interval was: $0.52 \leq p \leq 0.77$. Midpoint: 0.645

Additionally, 32.8% rated personalized content as moderately important, while 1.5% reported that personalization was not important to them.

Approximately 60% of respondents in the Morris County, NJ sample stated that platform-generated content feeds increased their interest in using a platform.

Trust-related responses showed that 52.2% of respondents did not trust the platform they used. More than 85% expressed some level of distrust or caution toward social media platforms.

Respondents identified connecting with friends as one of the most important features when joining a new platform

Regarding platform bans, most respondents reported feelings of sadness or frustration, while some respondents stated they would simply switch to another platform. Qualitative responses also indicated that some users would attempt to bypass bans through VPNs or alternative websites.

The survey demonstrates a divide between initially joining the platform and the ongoing use. Initially 74.24% showed that friends motivated their decision. However, once using the app, user engagement is retained by the content: 64.5% of respondents rated personalized content to be 'Very Important.'

Variable Coding

Table 2. Trust level (TL) - Ordinal, 4 levels

46 participants answered the multiple-choice version of the trust question. The next analysis is limited to those participants only.

Kruskal-Wallis Results - Table 3.

The Kruskal-Wallis test indicates that there is no significant difference in Trust level distributions across Feature choice groups.

$H(8) = 6.6402$, $p = 0.5759$, $\eta^2 = 0.0000$ ($n = 46$, $k = 9$)

Because $p = 0.5759 > 0.05$, the hypothesis cannot be rejected. Feature choice does not account for variations in user platform trust.

Descriptive Statistics - Table 4.

Overall mean TL = 2.46 (SD = 0.81, Median = 2.0). The sample skewed toward moderately low trust, with the majority of respondents ($n = 22$) at TL = 2.

A Pearson correlation coefficient was used to test for any linear relationships between three pairs of variables that were from the social media survey.

First, the relationship between user interaction preference and social influence on platform joining was examined. The results indicated a strong positive correlation ($r=0.992$, $r^2 = 98.4\%$).

Table 5.

All trends were positive linear.

Qualitative sentiment coding of such responses regarding platform bans reveals that users rely heavily on messaging expressed through their response. A small subset ($n=4$) revealed that they would use VPNs to bypass restrictions.

DISCUSSION

Social Influence

Responses to the question “Do you use platforms because your friends use them?” reveal there is a strong social influence effect. This finding aligns with Yang and Wang’s conclusion that social pressure is a driver of online social media engagement. The data suggest that network effect, as social circle grows, platform selection is prevalent in this sample. Users, of ages 10–25, perceive value from the presence of peers exemplifying barriers for new platforms. This may help explain why several upcoming platforms struggle before growth, as society must shift to one platform together, though given the convenience

sample of one interconnected social network, this pattern should be treated as suggestive rather than confirmed. The sample shows preliminary evidence on how younger networks conform socially, within the limits of this specific group of respondents.

Correlation analysis was conducted to determine if a correlation exists between two variables: 1) the influence of friends and 2) feature preference. However, messaging is specified to be an important feature on their specified platform indicating an activity in which friends will participate in. This can be explained as Instagram and Snapchat are one of the only platforms to have such a feature while many others don't, indicating the disparity between results. Youtube is exemplified through this as their long-form content watchtime is falling. As shorter videos are being preferred which are easily accessible through Instagram. Youtube does not have such a sharing feature which limits its growth in the short-video realm.

The majority of respondents viewed personalized content as very important as it aligned with personal interests. This 95% confidence interval is $0.520257 \leq p \leq 0.76663$.

An additional 32.8% rated it as moderately important highlighting how alternative personal interests are important beyond new topics. Only 1.5% did not value personalization, showing frustration with such repetitive content. These results are aligned with Aridor in which platforms maximize engagement by individualizing content to users. For you pages and reels pages are satisfying as Instagram and Tiktok use this resource to help bolster their viewership over YouTube.

Personalized content drives engagement. Users may join Instagram because their friends are there but their algorithm compels them even more. Some platforms like Facebook however, seem to focus more on building a good user experience as opposed to engagement and social stimulations. This research shows that Instagram's Reels and TikTok's For You are primary engagement drivers. They curate feeds to improve watch time metric which is better for a platform. Both can automatically play another video after a video ends, which optimizes for content consumption during periods of time.

Result: Around 60% of people (in the Morris county region of NJ) state how allowing a platform generated content feed makes them interested. This reveals that certain platforms will be preferred over others if curated to such a unique and upcoming audience.

Trust

Respondents' responses regarding their levels of trust in social media platforms revealed that 52.2% of people did not trust the platform they use. Over 85% of people expressed some degree of distrust or caution when utilizing a platform. High platform usage also relates to platform trust as there are opportunity costs when utilizing. Users may distrust platforms but continue using them are generally influenced by conventional norms. This goes against the importance of platform transparency as users are aware of laws but their behaviors are not affected.

Such data suggests that transparency is ineffective at reducing platform usage. Users are aware of their data being stored in some way but not exactly. Companies employ large manual user guides in which users will not read out of convenience. They will just accept the terms and move on which is detrimental for data concerns. Current regulations on such issues seem to be not effective enough. Enforcement of related laws is necessary to ensure control.

Friend-Driven Motivation

Respondents were asked which platform feature they were interested in when joining a new platform. Connecting with friends was vital, which reinforces social influence findings. These findings suggest that while social connectivity remains dominant, algorithm and community features are not the primary role. Platform designers who seek to attract new viewers must integrate such features to accumulate a larger audience, which would amplify their economic and social growth.

The r value for this is 0.955 as features centered on human connection align tightly with friend driven adoption. The 94.4% r^2 variance explains this showing the strongest correlation of the dataset. Features such as Marketplace and algorithm show a weaker friend-motivation alignment.

Overall mean TL = 2.46 (SD = 0.81, Median = 2.0). The sample skewed toward moderately low trust, with the majority of respondents ($n = 22$) at TL = 2.

Some notable findings:

Users who utilize the Marketplace feature tend to have a higher trust (but the difference is statistically insignificant). They are spending their money and putting personal information into the platform to purchase something which highlights their trust in how the platform utilizes credit card or personal information.

Users who spend time on the Groups feature tend to have a moderate to high trust. Interacting with others on the platform can lead to increased familiarity with the community.

Users who enable Disappearing Messages tend to have a low to moderate trust level. If one enables such a feature it highlights that they do not want everything they text with their friends to stay forever on it.

Additional findings:

16 users selected *Connecting with Friends* to be their favorite feature choice; however, the trust level indicates a low trust.

6 users selected *For you page* to be their favorite feature. The Mean TL indicates a high trust which may seem obvious as they are watching their videos sorted by algorithms, certainly, selected by them. Put this into context for a different country, one with higher restrictions (ex: China), this data collection may seem severe as the platform is able to gauge what a typical person likes to watch within 5–10 videos (TikTok).

Users who selected *Stories* have a relatively low trust level. People are sharing almost typical day in the life photos and videos or interests that they have. Stories are enabled to all followers and without any strong restrictions. Rather, in order to block certain people from viewing your story, you must restrict each individual person which is more time-consuming.

Platform Bans (Emotional Attachment)

An r value of 0.952 shows a strong positive correlation. A higher emotional distress score track with a heavier reliance on messaging based interaction. Users who are emotionally invested in platforms are actually disproportionately those who are using them for communication as the r^2 value of 88.2% variance.

When it comes down to platform bans, most sentiments include sadness or upset. A portion of respondents were indifferent explaining how they would probably just switch platforms. Certain qualitative results from the survey reveals that people would attempt to evade social media bans through VPNs or malicious websites. This does have some policy implications. High enforcement costs are a potential problem when people are unwilling to comply with the ban leading to a whole negotiation over certain policies.

These findings correlate to policy. The investment, physically and emotionally in platforms suggest that bans would not harm users but would create just a brief social disruption forcing friend groups to all rotate to a different platform. This is similar to other findings on platform substitution noting that banning one platform will increase the usage of alternate platforms (Aridor et al., 2024). This entails that platform bans aren't inherently awful but are almost useless to communities, who thrive on inclusiveness, but are beneficial to smaller, esoteric platforms.

Objectives and Limitations

Objectives set out in the beginning were partially met. As ages 10-25 were the respondents, which is great to discover the Gen Z influence, a larger demographic of older people are left out which is also the limitation.

A further limitation is sample composition: because participants were recruited through the researcher's own contacts using convenience sampling, the sample is not representative of teens and young adults generally. Because the researcher's contacts were concentrated in Chatman (Morris County, New Jersey), it is likely that this county is heavily represented. Shared social ties among respondents may inflate the appearance of social-influence effects and limit how far these findings can be generalized. Results should be read as a preliminary, exploratory picture of one network rather than a population-level claim, and future work should use randomized or stratified sampling across multiple, unconnected social groups to confirm these patterns.

Although the standardized multiple-choice responses can facilitate the analysis by making the response variable categorical with a finite number of categories, a limitation of multiple-choice responses is that they do not allow the respondent to fully customize the answer.

APPENDIX

A copy of the survey is below.

Social Media Survey

• This Data will be used for a Research Paper. Anything you write here will not be disclosed to anyone.

How old are you? *

☐ 0-10

☐ 10-25

☐ 25-40

☐ 40+

What user interaction method do you like to have on the platform you use? *

☐ Messaging

☐ Comments

☐ Polls

☐ Sharing Videos

☐ Stories

☐ Mentions and Hashtags

Do you use platforms because your friends use them? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Mostly

☐ Sometimes

How important is personalized content? Why do you like it? *

☐ Very as it allows me to scroll on videos or photos I am interested in.

☐ Moderate, I want to research and see new topics

☐ No, I hate having videos of similar content appear over and over again.

Do you trust the platform you use? What certain features make you trust it? *

☐ Yes, I trust it because data protection services are enabled.

☐ Yes, I trust it but I do not know if my data is stored.

☐ No, I am careful of what I do/post on this platform.

☐ No, I do not trust this platform at all.

Have you ever joined a new platform because of a specific feature, and what was it? *

☐ Groups

☐ Marketplace

☐ Events

☐ Stories

☐ Threads

☐ Live

☐ Gaming

☐ For you page

☐ Disappearing messages

☐ Connecting with Friends

☐ Voice/Video Calls

☐ Other: _____

How would you feel if your favorite social media platform was not allowed in your ^{*} country?

Your answer

Submit Clear form

Table 1. Age Distribution of Survey Respondents

Age Group	Count	Percentage
10–25	62	92.5%
25–40	1	1.5%
40+	4	6.0%

Table 2. Trust level (TL) - Ordinal, 4 levels

Score	Label
4	High Trust
3	Moderately High
2	Moderately Low
1	Low Trust

Kruskal-Wallis Results - Table 3.

Statistic Value	Value
H statistic	6.6402
Degrees of freedom (k-1)	8
p-value	0.5759
Eta-squared (n^2)	0.0000
N (analytic sample)	46

Number of FC groups (k)	9
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Descriptive Statistics - Table 4.

Overall mean TL = 2.46 (SD = 0.81, Median = 2.0). The sample skewed toward moderately low trust, with the majority of respondents (n = 22) at TL = 2.

Feature Choice (FC)	n	Mean TL	Median TL	SD
Better Algorithm	1	2.00	2.0	—
Connecting with Friends	16	2.31	2.0	0.87
Disappearing Messages	3	2.33	2.0	0.58
For you page	6	3.00	3.0	0.89
Groups	7	2.57	2.0	0.79
Live	1	2.00	2.0	—
Marketplace	5	2.80	3.0	0.45
Stories	6	2.17	2.0	0.98
Voice/Video Calls	1	2.00	2.0	—

SD = '—' for groups with n = 1 (standard deviation undefined)

Table 5.

Sentiment Group	Intensity Score (1-5)	Messaging Pref. (%)
Very Negative	5	62.1%
Negative	4	55.9%
Mild Negative	3	21.2%
Would Switch	2	12.7%
Nuanced	1	10.6%
Overall	—	—

CONCLUSION

Overall, this study demonstrates that algorithmic personalization and social influence are vital factors that shape adoption of social media platforms and engagement (trust remains low, however). Although a convenience sample was conducted, the evidence from the users are key to understanding peer networks and platform engagement. Further research should explore a more diversified sample to confirm if these patterns are retained among larger populations.

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Maahir Kumar is a sophomore at Chatham High School in New Jersey. He currently has a podcast highlighting his high school sports program. Maahir plans to study Behavioral Economics and Sports Business.

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