THE VALUE AFFORDANCES OF SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT FEATURES

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Have you liked something on a social media platform today? Perhaps a photo from your friend's holiday on Instagram or a TikTok video that resonated with you? Defined as core features of "engagement" (C. Kim & Yang, 2017), modes of interaction such as liking, sharing, and commenting are ubiquitous on social media platforms. While social media content is shaped by local contexts (Miller et al., 2016), engagement features provide a global grammar of interaction, with companies quickly copying successful features (Leaver et al., 2020). Although easy to overlook, such features are "objects of intense feelings" (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) that fundamentally shape how people use the platform and even understand themselves (Hallinan & Brubaker, 2021). As the primary meeting point between people and platforms, engagement features also provide a compelling yet overlooked site to explore the relationship between technological affordances and the normative implications of social media. Specifically, we seek to understand the relationship between engagement features and values, broadly understood as underlying notions of what's important.

The concept of technological affordances foregrounds the relationship between people and technology, asking "how objects enable or constrain" particular ways of acting in the world (Davis, 2020). In the domain of social media, researchers have employed this concept to examine the role of platforms in social and political life (e.g., D. H. Kim & Ellison, 2022). While normative considerations appear in the discussion of affordances, particularly in the attention to power inequalities, values are largely a secondary concern and typically come up in the analysis and interpretation of results (for a notable exception, see Aharoni et al., 2022). However, just as perceptions of what technology can do are profoundly perspectival, so too are perceptions of the values technology promotes or hinders. Research on platform values offers a complementary approach to understanding the social significance of technology that foregrounds the socio-technical construction of values (Hallinan et al., 2022). Synthesizing these two approaches, we

introduce the concept of *value affordances*, defined as the "set of ethical, aesthetic, and relational principles that emerge from the interaction between different stakeholders and technological infrastructures" (Scharlach and Hallinan, 2023, p. 2).

In this study, we investigate the value affordances of engagement features on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. We ask: Which values do social media users think the Like, Comment, and Share features promote and hinder? What mechanisms do they invoke in their explanations?

Method

Starting from the assumption that values emerge from the interactions between people and platforms, we conducted six focus groups with 30 international students who use social media, originating from 16 countries. The interactive dynamics of focus groups make them ideal sites for studying collaborative sensemaking (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). We focused on three prominent engagement features across social media platforms: Like, Comment, and Share. All three are seen as "important forms" (Tenenboim, 2022) or "core features" (C. Kim & Yang, 2017) of engagement. To facilitate comparisons within and across focus groups, we asked participants to identify the values promoted and hindered by specific features using a set of value cards inspired by a study conducted by Belman, Flanagan, and Nissenbaum (2011). Our value cards included the name and basic definition of 32 values, combining values used in values in design research (Belman et al., 2011; Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014) and studies of social media values (Scharlach et al., 2023; Trillò et al., 2021).

To address RQ (1), we tabulated the promoted and hindered values for each feature and for engagement features as a whole. To answer RQ (2), we employed inductive thematic analysis to systematically identify patterns of meaning within the discussions of values (Braun & Clarke, 2012). We focused on the mechanisms that people invoked in their justifications. To ensure a shared understanding of the analytical process and codes, we jointly constructed a codebook and followed the principles of consensual qualitative research (Hill et al., 1997).

Results

Overall, participants agreed that social media engagement features promote the values of *expression*, *care*, and *community*. Each of these values aligns with how social media companies promote the purpose of their platforms. *Expression*, for example, features prominently in corporate mission statements and platform governing documents (Maddox & Malson, 2020; Scharlach et al., 2023). Similarly, *care* has long been associated with sharing on social media and used in promotional slogans to express the core purpose of platforms (John, 2016). The centrality of *community* is reflected in both "Community Guidelines" as a collection of governing policies and the brand identities of platforms like Instagram (Leaver et al., 2020) and YouTube (Snickars & Vonderau, 2009).

Conversely, participants agreed that engagement features hinder the values of *privacy*, *mindfulness*, *peace*, and *safety*. Where the former group of values aligns with the

promotional ideals of social media, the latter matches with longstanding public concerns about its harmful consequences (e.g., Vaidhyanathan, 2018). When identifying the values that engagement features hinder, our participants painted a picture of social media as a place filled with judgment, conflict, and potential risks, where giving up one's privacy is the price of admission.

Our investigation reveals that social media users typically attribute value affordances to the ways that people use technology. In this framework, it is not the *technology* that enables or constrains but rather the *user*. By emphasizing the agency of users, our participants also assign responsibility to users for both the benefits and harms of social media. Interestingly, such perceptions seem to echo how platforms attribute responsibility for the enactment of values such as expression and safety in their policy documents (Scharlach et al., 2023). The fact that our participants actively use social media despite recognizing its possible normative shortcomings raises a further question: How do they navigate tradeoffs in the value affordances of social media? Participants described creative strategies to negotiate, downplay, or even resolve these tensions. These included using features antagonistically, avoiding using specific features, or using features in more limited contexts like groups or direct messages. Another set of strategies concerns how users assign responsibility for promoting or hindering particular values. While our participants consistently emphasized the agency of users, they differentiated responsibility into categories of "us" and "them," identifying with positive actions that promote values and blaming others for negative actions that hinder values.

Conclusion

The concept of value affordances highlights how mundane uses of technology contribute to underlying ideas about what's important on social media and, potentially, in life. Although casual users do not adopt the same vocabulary for discussing the political stakes of design, value card solicitation prompts offer a way for researchers to surface normative concerns. Given the growing integration of platforms into our social, political, and professional lives, surfacing the values of these features can help bring the debate about their role to the public and potentially shift perspectives about the responsibility for platform values.

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