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BECOMING INTIMATE WITH ALGORITHMS: USERS' ENCOUNTERS, IMAGINARIES, AND AFFECTIVE BONDS WITH TIKTOK

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Introduction

In an increasingly algorithm-driven digital landscape, personalization systems are often praised as magical entities capable of "knowing us better than we know ourselves". Taking TikTok as our object of investigation, this study explores how users engage with these algorithms that seek to "know" them. That is, how does it feel to be known by an algorithm? Through 20 semi-structured interviews with TikTok users in Brazil, we explore everyday encounters, perceptions, and imaginaries surrounding algorithmic recommendations. Our findings show that users not only recognize the presence of algorithms and develop intuitive theories about their functioning but also actively "train" the system to refine its understanding of them. In doing so, they develop affective—perhaps even intimate—relationships with the algorithm. This study explores the emerging phenomenon of *becoming intimate with algorithms*, contributing to reflections on the transformation of intimacy in internet studies.

Methodological approach

Our approach aligns with a growing body of internet researchers advocating for a focus on the "everyday" (Lupinacci et al., 2024) and exploring users' daily encounters with algorithms (Bucher, 2016; Kant, 2020; Siles, 2023). These studies emphasize that algorithms are not just abstract computational processes, but sociotechnical assemblages entangled in practices, perceptions, and imaginations (Bucher, 2018). We conducted 20 in-depth interviews with active TikTok users in Brazil to understand how people perceive and interact with recommendation systems in their daily lives. Rather than pursuing a statistically representative sample, we adopted a qualitative approach prioritizing rich conversations with engaged users who have been actively involved with the platform for at least a year. Our sample was relatively diverse, though predominantly composed of highly educated individuals aged 20 to 30. We deliberately prioritized

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everyday users over content creators to examine engagement with TikTok's algorithm as consumers rather than producers.

TikTok as an algorithm-centered platform

Our focus on TikTok reflects a recent transformation in the digital ecosystem. While algorithms have traditionally operated in the background, functioning at the infrastructural level while remaining relatively invisible to users, TikTok subverts this logic by making it the main character. With a far more aggressive approach to personalization (Siles & Meléndez-Moran, 2021), the platform's entire architecture revolves around the *For You Page*, granting the algorithm an unprecedented prominence and explicitly shaping the user experience around its recommendation system (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). In this sense, we understand TikTok as an algorithm-centered platform.

This distinction was also evident in our interviewees' perceptions. Many noted that, unlike on other social media, they don't interact with friends on TikTok but instead engage with the algorithm itself. These users preferred to remain "ghosts" on the app and perceived it as a more private or personal space compared to other platforms, stating that the focus was not socialization. As one participant said, "It's a moment of interacting with the things I like, not with other people" (T). Interviewee D further emphasized this dynamic, saying: "on Instagram, I connect with people I know, but on TikTok the relationship is between me and the algorithm... each video is like a new conversation where it understands more of what I want" (D).

Algorithmic awareness, imaginaries, and affections

TikTok's algorithm-centered architecture makes its recommendation system particularly hard to ignore, shaping how users perceive, imagine, and interact with the app. As one participant said, "on TikTok, the algorithm is there all the time" (R). Not only did our interviewees exhibit a high level of algorithmic awareness (Gran, Booth & Bucher, 2020), acknowledging its presence, but they also developed intuitive theories about how the algorithm operates and conceived informal strategies to "train" it. Within different algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2016), some users admired the system's precision, calling it "magical" or "incredibly well-made", while others found its accuracy unsettling, reinforcing beliefs that it "listens to what we are saying".

Fifteen out of 20 participants described various strategies to "train," "tame," or "educate" TikTok's algorithm, reinforcing our understanding that navigating the platform is about engaging in a relationship with the algorithm itself. Despite TikTok's reputation for having a magical recommendation system, we found that most users actively demonstrated their preferences through liking, commenting, searching, or using the 'not interested' button. That is, they "helped" the algorithm understand their tastes.

Through this process of training, users received increasingly personalized recommendations and, in many cases, developed affective bonds with TikTok. Our findings suggest that algorithmic personalization operates as much on an emotional level as on the technical one: when a recommendation 'gets it right,' it fosters

identification, a sense of belonging, comfort, and validation of individual tastes. During the interviews, many participants expressed a deep emotional attachment to the platform and its algorithm, declaring their love for TikTok. Some felt “represented” by their personalized feeds, while others expressed a desire for the algorithm to truly “know” them. As one interviewee put it, “I love my algorithm because it really represents me” (C). Another echoed this sentiment, stating, “I want it to know me” (D).

Becoming intimate with algorithms

One of the most intriguing findings from our interviews was how some participants described their relationship with algorithms as intimate, almost confessional, suggesting that the systems accessed hidden dimensions of their identities. As users trained their algorithms, they perceived recommendations as increasingly attuned to their emotions and experiences. Some mentioned cases where the algorithm seemed to know they had eating disorders, were going through breakups, or struggling with mental health issues. Beyond entertainment (comedy, dances, recipes), TikTok recommended videos they deeply identified with, making them feel as if “there will always be someone on TikTok who has gone through what you’re going through” (Q).

Ultimately, we propose that the For You personalization model fosters a kind of algorithmic intimacy not through explicit dialogue or verbal confession, but through automated processes of data collection and analysis. Through clicks, likes, searches, and interactions, people reveal personal, sensitive, even embarrassing preferences. As one interviewee put it, it sometimes feels like "sharing a secret with the algorithm" (A), exposing details they might not share with others but that the system quietly knows. Another participant mentioned that she would feel very exposed if someone else accessed her For You Page, explaining that it would feel "too raw, too personal” (B).

Although the transformation of intimacy is not a new topic in internet studies, early scholarship largely focused on two dimensions. The first was the exposure of intimate life, showing how self-performances on blogs and social media redraw the boundaries of what is considered private and sharable (Marwick & boyd, 2014; Sibilia, 2016). The second examined the *digital mediation* of intimacy, exploring how technologies reconfigure personal connections and experiences between subjects (Chambers, 2013; Attwood et al., 2017).

What we observe in algorithmic environments such as TikTok, however, signals a distinct transformation. Intimacy is not merely *exposed* or *mediated through* digital technologies—it is increasingly *constructed with* them. As Wiehn (2023) observes, “intimacy is not only the closeness between people but also the subjectiveness of closeness that algorithms evoke” (p. 120). In this sense, we understand that intimacy emerges not only among people but also in the affective bonds formed with algorithms, in the sense of feeling “seen” or recognized by the system, even as this relation remains shaped by datafication and driven by commercial interests of platforms.

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