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“GOOD SOCIAL MEDIA?”: UNDERREPRESENTED YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON THE ETHICAL AND EQUITABLE DESIGN OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Melissa Brough
California State University, Northridge

Ioana Literat
Teachers College, Columbia University

Amanda Ikin
California State University, Northridge

Introduction: Social Media, Design, and the Online Experiences of Underrepresented Youth

Although youth of color, youth from lower socioeconomic brackets, and young women are among the heaviest users of social media technologies (Pew, 2018), their voices are almost entirely absent from current conversations about ethical design. Further, we know much less about their particular experiences - and perspectives on - these platforms; such an understanding is a prerequisite to designing ethical software that responds to the diverse needs of its users and avoids universalizing the assumptions and priorities of elite technology designers (primarily White, male adults; see United States Department of Labor, 2018). This study examines underrepresented youth perspectives on their own digital technology use, as a way to inform more ethical and equitable design of social media platforms.

Research is increasingly engaging the question of social media design in relation to user experiences, particularly for non-dominant groups (e.g. Literat & Brough, 2019; Noble, 2018; Massanari, 2017), and a growing number of researchers and designers are calling for more “ethical software” to address concerns of equity and ethics. In terms

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of a more specific focus on youth, while researchers have examined variations in youth social media use based on identity markers like race, gender, sexuality or socioeconomic status, a closer investigation of the role of social media design in regard to the particular experiences of non-dominant youth in these online spaces is largely missing.

This research adds a nuanced, youth-specific perspective to our current understanding of these dynamics by centering the voices and experiences of youth themselves. In contrast to the historical association of “universal design” with equity in the human-computer interaction field (see, e.g. Dix, 2009), we contend that centering difference and drawing attention to the subjective viewpoints of designers and users is crucial to more ethical and equitable technology design. Thus, we do not offer a singular, normative definition of what constitutes “ethical software” or “good social media,” but rather investigate these concepts through the eyes and voices of underrepresented youth.

Methods

Our data consists of in-depth semi-structured interviews and youth-guided “think aloud” tours (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016) of their social media practices, conducted with a group of twenty-five undergraduate students at a Hispanic and Asian American, Native American, and Pacific Islander Serving Institution in the southwestern United States.

Participants were recruited using fliers, email announcements, and in-class announcements. Requirements for participation in the interview process included being over the age of 18; identifying as low-income (and/or being a recipient of a State University Grant, Cal Grant, or Federal Pell Grant for college tuition) and/or belonging to one or more historically underrepresented groups; using social media; and not currently being a student of the researchers. Interested students were asked to complete an online survey about their demographic background and digital media use, which we used to assess whether the student fit the parameters of the research. A total of 60 students filled out the survey, out of which 49 met the study criteria and were invited to participate in an interview. Twenty-five students completed interviews, which each lasted approximately one hour.

Seventy-two percent of interview participants identified as low or lower-middle income, and eighty-eight percent of participants reported receiving a State University Grant, Cal Grant, or Federal Pell Grant as part of their financial aid package. Sixty-eight percent of participants identified as female. Fifty-six percent identified as Hispanic or Latinx, sixteen percent as African American or Black, twelve percent as Asian or Asian American, eight percent as Middle Eastern, four percent as White, and four percent as mixed race.

Data was analyzed using an interview-based thematic analysis process that involved transcribing, multiple rounds of coding and note-taking, and consolidation into larger themes (Magnusson & Merecek, 2015).

Findings and Discussion

Our findings illustrate how young people perceive and experience empowering and disempowering aspects of social media design. Interviewees expressed a palpable sense of underrepresentation in the digital technology design sector and noted several ways in which design elements of social media can exacerbate a sense of inadequacy. The negative implications of user profile design and popularity rating systems that encourage conformity were found to be of particular concern for low-income youth, youth of color, and other underrepresented groups.

On the flip side, interviewees felt that social media could in some instances also be used to counter negative images of under-represented youth and raise awareness. Interviewees additionally felt that social media can be used to connect with others like themselves, or to build social capital, and provided several specific examples of this.

It was noteworthy that most of the interviewees expressed acceptance of the fact that social media platforms' commercial aims tend to trump designers' ethical obligation to users. It was not possible to discern from this data whether this was more a reflection of the interviewees' sense of ethics, or of a general and widespread acceptance of the hegemony of capitalist ideals in the United States.

Nonetheless, interviewees did have concrete recommendations or requests for social media designers that pertained to the wellbeing of users. Young people's desires for exposure to more positive content was palpable; some also called for social media designers to find ways to curb hate speech on their platforms. They also frequently cited the need for greater transparency in how user data is utilized. Several interviewees felt that social media platforms would better serve them if they included features to help limit excessive time spent on them, and most interviewees had at least a vague sense that social media is designed to capitalize on users' psychological and cognitive vulnerabilities to maximize time spent on the platform.

In surfacing underrepresented youths' experiences with social media, we heed Nagy and Neff's (2015) call to consider the affordances of social media as "imagined affordances," emerging at the intersection of the materiality of the technology with users' and designers' perspectives, attitudes and expectations. Our study advances their theory of "imagined affordances" by illustrating how social media functionalities combine with users' perceptions and expectations to shape affordances along distinct identity markers. Underscoring that technological affordances do not result solely from design or materiality, our findings show how the affordances of social media appear (and are used) differently depending on one's intersectional identity.

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