

**T.C.
GALATASARAY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION**

**INDIVIDUAL AND ALGORITHMIC FILTERING IN SOCIAL MEDIA:
PRACTICES AND LITERACY OF USERS**

MASTER'S THESIS

MİREY BAŞARAN

THESIS SUPERVISOR: ASSOC. PROF. DR. TOLGA ÇEVİKEL

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PREFACE

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ABBREVIATIONS

BBS	: Bulletin board systems
CD	: Compact Disc
CEO	: Chief Executive Officer
CF	: Collaborative filtering
CNN	: Cable News Network
CRM	: Customer Relationship Management
DM	: Direct messaging
e.g.	: example gratis (for example)
Ed(s).	: Editor(s)
FOMO	: Fear of missing out
Ibid	: Ibidem (in the same place)
IP address	: Internet Protocol Address
LGBT	: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender
MAGA	: Make America Great Again
NPR	: National Public Radio
Op.cit.	: Opus citatum (the work cited)
RS	: Recommender system
SNS	: Social networking site
UAE	: United Arab Emirates
UK	: United Kingdom
US	: United States
VPN	: Virtual Private Network

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RÉSUMÉ

Les réseaux sociaux, qui sont entrés dans nos vies depuis le début des années 2000 et dont l'importance sociale augmente parallèlement au nombre d'utilisateurs, offrent à leurs utilisateurs la possibilité de produire et de consommer une grande variété de contenus. Les utilisateurs peuvent créer et partager du contenu dans différents formats sur ces plateformes, ainsi que se connecter avec des milliards d'autres utilisateurs où qu'ils se trouvent dans le monde et suivre et consommer le contenu qu'ils produisent. En ce sens, le contenu pouvant être consommé via les plateformes de médias sociaux qui offrent une opportunité de communication bidirectionnelle présente potentiellement un large éventail de diversité et de richesse visuelles, sonores, culturelles, sociales, politiques et idéologiques. Cependant, dans la pratique, on constate que les utilisateurs ne profitent pas/ne peuvent pas toujours profiter pleinement de cette diversité et richesse potentielles, car les contenus accessibles sur les plateformes de réseaux sociaux sont fournis à des utilisateurs filtrés par des algorithmes de réseaux sociaux qui observent les expériences passées de chaque utilisateur, ses likes, intérêts et pratiques d'utilisation de la plateforme. Outre le filtrage algorithmique, les utilisateurs effectuent également une sorte de filtrage/personnalisation à travers les contenus qu'ils s'abstiennent de partager et les comptes qu'ils suivent ou non lorsqu'ils produisent ou consomment des contenus.

Bien que tous ces filtres soient sans aucun doute nécessaires et bénéfiques pour une expérience de médias sociaux meilleure et personnalisée, ils comportent également certains risques. Les pratiques de personnalisation volontaire/consciente ou involontaire/inconsciente dans les médias sociaux piègent les utilisateurs dans des « bulles de filtre » ou des « chambres d'écho » ; les utilisateurs ne consomment que du contenu adapté à leurs propres opinions et goûts, et sont dépourvus ou privés d'autres

contenus. Ainsi, les utilisateurs sont de plus en plus piégés dans des groupes homogènes et fermés où certaines opinions ou croyances sont renforcées par la répétition ; sont isolés des opinions et croyances opposées ou différentes. La surveillance ininterrompue des données personnelles, qui est la principale source de filtrage algorithmique, via les plateformes de médias sociaux pose également des problèmes de confidentialité numérique pour les utilisateurs.

Cette recherche prend en considération la façon dont les utilisateurs des médias sociaux utilisent différentes plateformes de médias sociaux et vise à discuter des effets actuels et potentiels des pratiques de filtrage/personnalisation sur ces plateformes à travers les concepts de bulle de filtre, de chambre d'écho, d'homophilie, de théorie de gatekeeping, de surveillance et de confidentialité numérique. À cette fin, la recherche interroge les opinions et les attitudes des utilisateurs des médias sociaux sur le sujet à l'aide d'entretiens approfondis semi-directifs. L'échantillon de l'étude se compose d'étudiants inscrits dans des programmes d'études supérieures en médias et communication d'une université d'État et d'une université privée.

Mots clés : réseaux sociaux, filtrage, personnalisation, algorithme, bulle de filtre, chambre d'écho, surveillance numérique, vie privée.

ABSTRACT

Social networking sites, which have entered our lives since the beginning of the 2000s and whose social importance is increasing in parallel with the number of users, offer their users the opportunity to produce and consume a wide variety of content. Users can create and share content in different formats on these platforms, as well as connect with billions of other users wherever they are in the world and follow and consume the content they produce. In this sense, the content that can be consumed through social media platforms that offer a two-way communication opportunity potentially presents a wide range of visual, audio, cultural, social, political, ideological diversity, and richness. However, in practice, it is seen that users do not / cannot always fully benefit from this potential diversity and richness, because the content accessible on social media platforms is provided to users filtered by social media algorithms that observe each user's past experiences, likes, interests and platform usage practices. In addition to algorithmic filtering, users also perform a kind of filtering/personalization through the content they refrain from sharing and the accounts they follow or do not follow while they produce or consume content.

While all these filters are undoubtedly necessary and beneficial for a better and personalized social media experience, they also bring some risks. Voluntary/conscious or involuntary/unconscious personalization practices in social media trap users in “filter bubbles” or “echo chambers”; users only consume content suitable for their own views and tastes and are devoid or deprived of other content. Thus, users are increasingly trapped in homogeneous and closed groups where certain views or beliefs are strengthened by repetition; are isolated from opposing or different opinions and beliefs. Uninterrupted

monitoring of personal data, which is the main source of algorithmic filtering, through social media platforms also brings digital privacy concerns for users.

This research takes into consideration the way social media users use different social media platforms and aims to discuss the current and potential effects of filtering/personalization practices on these platforms through the concepts of filter bubble, echo chamber, homophily, gatekeeping, digital surveillance and privacy. For this purpose, the research questions the opinions and attitudes of social media users on the subject with the help of semi-structured in-depth interviews. The sample of the study consists of students studying in media and communication graduate programs of a state university and a private university.

Keywords: social media, filtering, personalization, algorithm, filter bubble, echo chamber, digital surveillance, privacy.

ÖZET

2000’li yılların başından itibaren hayatımıza giren ve kullanıcı sayısına paralel olarak toplumsal önemi de artmakta olan sosyal medya platformları, kullanıcılarına çok geniş bir çeşitlilikte içerik üretme ve tüketme imkanı sunmaktadır. Kullanıcılar, bu platformlarda kendileri farklı formatlarda içerik üretip paylaşabildikleri gibi, sayıları milyarları bulan başka kullanıcılarla dünyanın neresinde olursa olsun bağlantı kurabilmekte ve onların üretmiş olduğu içerikleri takip edip tüketebilmektedirler. Bu anlamda çift yönlü bir iletişim imkanı sunan sosyal medya platformları üzerinden tüketilebilecek içerik, potansiyel olarak oldukça geniş görsel, işitsel, kültürel, sosyal, politik, ideolojik çeşitlilik ve zenginlik arz etmektedir. Ancak pratikte kullanıcıların bu potansiyel çeşitlilik ve zenginlikten her zaman tam anlamıyla yararlan(a)madıkları görülmektedir. Zira sosyal medya platformlarında erişebilir olan içerik, kullanıcılara, sosyal medya algoritmaları tarafından, her bir kullanıcının geçmiş deneyimleri, beğenileri, ilgi alanları ve platform kullanım pratikleri gözlemlenerek bunlara uygun şekilde filtrelenerek sunulmaktadır. Algoritmik filtrelemenin yanı sıra, kullanıcılar kendileri de, hem içerik üretirken hem de tüketirken paylaşmaktan imtina ettikleri içerikler ile takip ettikleri ya da etmedikleri hesaplar üzerinden bir tür filtreleme/kişiselleştirme yapmaktadırlar.

Tüm bu filtrelemeler, daha iyi ve kişiselleştirilmiş bir sosyal medya deneyimi için hiç kuşkusuz gerekli ve faydalı olmakla birlikte, birtakım riskleri de beraberinde getirmektedir. Sosyal medyadaki istemli/bilinçli ya da istemsiz/bilinçsiz kişiselleştirme pratikleri, kullanıcıları “filtre balonları”na ya da “yankı odaları”na hapsetmekte; kullanıcılar yalnızca kendi görüş ve beğenilerine uygun içerikleri tüketmekte, bunun dışındaki içeriklerden mahrum kalmakta ya da bırakılmaktadır. Böylece kullanıcılar, belli

görüş ya da inanışların tekrarlanarak güçlendiği homojen ve kapalı gruplara giderek daha fazla hapsolmakta; karşıt ya da farklı görüş ve inanışlardan yalıtılmaktadır. Algoritmik filtrelemenin temel kaynağını oluşturan kişisel verilerin sosyal medya platformları aracılığıyla kesintisiz olarak gözetlenmesi ise kullanıcılar açısından dijital mahremiyet kaygısını da beraberinde getirmektedir.

Bu araştırma, sosyal medya kullanıcılarının farklı sosyal medya platformlarını kullanma biçimlerini konu almakta; bu platformlardaki filtreleme/kişiselleştirme pratiklerinin mevcut ve olası etkilerini filtre balonu, yankı odası, homofili, eşik beççiliği, dijital gözetim ve mahremiyet kavramları üzerinden tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır. Araştırma bu amaçla, yarı yapılandırılmış derinlemesine görüşmeler yardımıyla sosyal medya kullanıcılarının konuyla ilgili görüş ve tutumlarını sorgulamaktadır. Araştırmanın örneklemini, bir devlet üniversitesi ile bir özel üniversitenin medya ve iletişim ile ilgili lisansüstü programlarında okuyan öğrencilerden oluşmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal medya, filtreleme, kişiselleştirme, algoritma, filtre balonu, yankı odası, dijital gözetim, mahremiyet.

INTRODUCTION

With the invention of the Internet, communication, which has been necessary throughout history for individuals to understand each other, has gained a new dimension. Through the Internet and new communication networks, a considerable part of the world has the possibility of interacting with each other on a global scale. The invention of the Internet has brought radical changes in every area of life. Yet, the main change we want to focus on is the fact that the interaction between individuals and the media, as well as their position in regard to it, have altered as a result of the diversification of media, particularly after the Internet began to be utilized for civilian reasons in addition to military and defense ones at the beginning of the 1990s. Digital media available through the Internet is gradually replacing traditional means of communication. Digital media, which is a virtual environment accessible for a considerable part of the society independently from any location with any online smart device connected to the Internet, offers its users a high level of communication and interaction as well as additional opportunities for accessing, sharing, and exchanging information and knowledge compared to traditional mass media. One of the most significant characteristics that sets digital media apart from traditional media is that communication is no longer unilateral with the use of Web 2.0 technology.

The bidirectional communication based nature of the Web 2.0 technology which enabled the development of social media positions the individuals as producers since they can produce content and share their opinions and feelings as they want and they can also consume content generated by other users. Users of social media being no longer restricted

to merely consuming content but being also capable of producing and presenting it with the development of Web 2.0 technologies indicates the democratization of content production. Today, there are 4.76 billion social media users, which corresponds to 59.4% of the total population in the world.¹ Billions of contents are produced by billions of users every day on social media platforms where everyone exists with different motivations, such as keeping in touch with their acquaintances, staying up to date, entertaining themselves, monitoring what other individuals are doing, and socializing and so on. Since there are too many contents, too many topics, too many alternatives, too many different perspectives to consume in social media platforms due to the high volume of content production and circulation as well, users can sometimes feel overwhelmed with the choice overload. Therefore, “the risk of overload and the need for filtering go hand in hand”².

The fact that social media has fostered user-generated content that is created by individuals rather than by professional media companies or organizations, and therefore classical gatekeepers and their authorities have begun to lose their importance with Web 2.0, has enabled the existence of a large variety of content differing from cultural to political, social to ideological, or to even very niche topics in social media. The main concern of our study is the quantity and diversity of content available online in social media and the extent to which users can consume this content abundance. This abundance includes the number of posts, videos, images, and articles shared on social media platforms, as well as the variety of topics and perspectives covered. The more content available, the greater the abundance. Additionally, content diversity includes the various formats, such as text, images, videos, and audio files, as well as the range of sources, including individual users, brands, media outlets, and influencers.

Since human attention is in short supply and is surrounded by choice overload because of the proliferation of the social media platforms enabling democratization of content production and distribution and increasing intensity of user interaction, engaging in massive filtering turns out to be inevitable from our point of view. Besides, as we have

¹ We Are Social Hootsuite (2023). << Digital 2023 Global Overview Report>>, <https://wearesocial.com/uk/blog/2023/01/the-changing-world-of-digital-in-2023/> (26.01.2023)

² Cass R. SUNSTEIN (2007). **Republic.com 2.0**, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, p.51.

underlined above, we wonder and aim to investigate if this inevitable filtering means that users cannot always take in practice full advantage of the potential content diversity and richness offered by social media platforms due to these platforms' aim of simplifying users' choice through algorithmic filtering and of personalizing the consumption experience to attract users' attention, to keep them engaged by showing them new content according to their interests immediately after each content they consume, and to keep them on the platform longer which is essential for generating advertising revenue. We also want to understand whether users are falling short of this potential diversity or to contribute to this diversity due to algorithmic filtering as well as individual filtering during both content consumption and content production.

Every time users interact online, they leave a digital footprint behind. Every content they like, share or comment on, every photo they post on Instagram, every tweet they send, every time they spend on a content, every platform they use and so on, in short, every single trace intentionally or unintentionally they left behind as a result of their online activity, is a part of this digital footprint. The systematic processing, interpreting, and storing of the users' personal data by tracking their digital footprints with the development of Web 3.0 accompanies personalization of their digital experiences through algorithmic filtering. The content that is accessible to everyone on social media platforms is presented to each user by social media algorithms, filtered in accordance with their and similar users' past experiences and tastes, with the task of gatekeeping passing from humans to algorithms. The global village may have become more of personalized cottages that are generated universally and dispersed locally, despite the fact that the media has become really globalized and that messages and programs are shared throughout the global network.³ Algorithmic filtering on social media enables micro-targeting and therefore, presenting highly personalized and relevant content to each individual user.

It's not solely the algorithms that filter and personalize the content, but also users adopt filtering both in content production and consumption processes. Users who might

³ Manuel CASTELLS (2010). **The Information Age Economy, Society and Culture Volume I: The Rise of the Network Society**, Wiley-Blackwell, Singapore, p.370.

tend to consume content matching their viewpoints due to homophily and selective exposure, that will be presented more in detail in the second chapter, might eliminate some content or accounts on purpose on social media that contradict their existing beliefs due to selective avoidance and might develop some strategies through the features of social media platforms such as unfollowing, blocking, muting the other user's account or hiding or reporting the content in order to enhance their homogenized and homophilous digital world.

Although filtering seems inevitable and necessary for a better and personalized social media experience, it also carries some concerning challenges. Either it is done by the user or done for the user, we think that this massive filtering has the possibility of narrowing the scope of users' choices and endangering the sense of autonomy. Consciously or unconsciously, being exposed constantly to self-selected or pre-selected filtering may be the potential causes of filter bubbles and echo chambers. Since personalization and customization are based on overlapping instead of differences, the diversity and richness existing in social media might be endangered. Being trapped in a filter bubble can "reduce creativity by removing some of the diversity that prompts users to think in new and innovative ways"⁴, while echo chambers, or information cocoons, as Sunstein's own words, prevent seeing and hearing a wide variety of topics and ideas that are necessary for democracy⁵.

In addition to the advantages offered by social media platforms, the challenges that come with it are not limited to the isolation of users from content that is outside their own views or likes, or that is containing opposing or different views and beliefs, but also brings digital surveillance and privacy concerns. Being under the digital surveillance of the social media algorithms and their personalization strategies in either overt or covert different manners to obtain more information about users, witnesses the growing "disappearance of disappearance process"⁶ in which it becomes harder for users to protect their privacy

⁴ Eli PARISER (2011). **THE FILTER BUBBLE What the Internet Is Hiding from You?**, The Penguin Press, New York, p.56.

⁵ Cass R. SUNSTEIN (2007). **Republic.com 2.0**, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, p.xi.

⁶ Kevin D. HAGGERTY & Richard V. ERICSON (2000). "The surveillant assemblage", **British Journal of Sociology**, 51(4), p.619.

or avoid being monitored by the algorithms. This digital supervision which is not easily perceived becomes more dominant in everyday life and aims to reach the users at anytime and anywhere by keeping them under control. Since every user shares information about themselves, and this can end up in both positive and negative aspects regarding personalization, we think that it should also be examined to better understand the users' opinions about the personalization privacy dilemma.

As we briefly mentioned above, with the democratization of content production and consumption, pre-filters have lost their importance and post filters, which include algorithmic filters and individual filters, have started to gain importance. The problematic of our research is whether users can fully benefit from the abundance and diversity of content in the social media world due to these post filters. In the first chapter of our study, we focus on the need of filtering out in social media, while in the second chapter we discuss the potential challenges of post filters through the concepts of filter bubble, echo chamber, homophily, selective exposure, digital surveillance, and privacy. In order to understand user experiences and opinions regarding above mentioned statements, we conducted 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews, where we had a general outline of the topics that we want to cover, but the specific questions and the order in which they are asked varied sometimes from interview to interview, with students studying in media and communication graduate programs at a state university and a private university. Since the issues we are discussing are relatively new, their existence and effects are invisible and therefore difficult to realize, we have determined a sample that we assume will have high social media literacy because we wanted to interview individuals who are familiar with these issues and who can approach them both academically and professionally, in order to bring depth to our discussion.

Finally, the originality of this study is that although there is a considerable empirical literature on the use of social media in Turkey, there is no research that extensively discusses the filtering/personalization issue in terms of communication studies. In this sense, it is expected that the research would make a modest contribution to the related field.

CHAPTER I: THE RISE OF THE NEED OF FILTERING OUT WITH THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF CONTENT PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION

“Do you think me a learned, well-read man?”

“Certainly,” replied Zi-gong. “Aren’t you?”

*“Not at all,” said Confucius. “I have simply grasped one thread which links up the
rest.”*

Sima Qian, Confucius⁷

1.1. A new era in content creation and distribution

1.1.1. User empowerment in digital media with the democratization of content

Communication as a “dynamic, continuous, irreversible, interactive and contextual”⁸ process which can be defined as the exchange of feelings, ideas, and information, has always been the basis of human relations throughout history. The communication tools used by humans from prehistory to present have constantly evolved in parallel with the human needs. All the inventions that have triggered to fulfill the human need of communication have had an extraordinarily transformative influence on the way of life. The tools which ensure communication and sharing between humans, and which allow people to be informed quickly of what is happening in the world can be called as media. Barbier and Bertho Lavenir define media as “all communication systems that allow a society to fully or partially fulfill the three basic functions of storing and transmitting messages and information, communicating remotely and updating cultural and political

⁷ Sima Qian, as cited in, Manuel CASTELLS (2010). **The Information Age Economy, Society and Culture Volume I: The Rise of the Network Society**, Wiley-Blackwell, Singapore, p.1.

⁸ Roy M. BERKO & Andrew D. WOLVIN & DARLYN R. WOLVIN & JOAN E. AITKEN (2016). **COMMUNICATING: A Social, Career and Cultural Focus**, Routledge, New York, p.4.

practices”⁹. With the diversification of media, especially with the Internet being used for civilian purposes instead of not only for military and defense purposes since the beginning of the 1990s, the relationship of individuals with the media and their position vis-à-vis to it has changed.

“The Internet, the World Wide Web, and wireless communication are not media in the traditional sense. Rather, they are means of interactive communication.”¹⁰ The traditional mass media communication which “can be considered as both a ‘societal’ and a ‘cultural’ phenomenon”¹¹ and therefore is an inseparable part of the society and which enables to reach wider, anonymous, and often diverse audiences, is challenged by the new communication technologies such as Internet. Moreover, the institutional and organizational communication source of traditional mass communication that formulates the message prior before it reaches to its audience, is also challenged as individuals become increasingly the main determinant of communication’s production and consumption processes.

Depending on their dynamic structures, societies have experienced changes and transformations throughout history affecting their social composition deeply. With technological advances as a driving force for development, modern societies are progressively becoming “information and network societies”¹² as Van Dijk points out. The importance of owning, obtaining, and disseminating the information and knowledge as well as being able to use and communicate them is more than ever before. The new communication networks organized around the Internet, have contributed the democratization of information and knowledge; hence, they are no longer the preserve of an elite. These networks which are beneficial in terms of cost, effort and time have enabled the socialization of information and knowledge, and the easy and quick accessibility to them. Digital media generated by the Internet technologies offer more opportunities for

⁹ Frédéric BARBIER & Catherine BERTHO LAVENIR (2001). **Diderot’dan İnternete Medya Tarihi**, Okyanus Yayınları, İstanbul, p.7.

¹⁰ Manuel CASTELLS (2010). **The Information Age Economy, Society and Culture Volume I: The Rise of the Network Society**, Wiley-Blackwell, Singapore, p.xxvi.

¹¹ Denis MCQUAIL (2010). **McQuail’s Mass Communication Theory**, Sage Publications, London, p.80.

¹² Jan Van DIJK (2006). **The Network Society**, Sage Publications, London, p.21.

accessing, sharing, and exchanging information and knowledge than traditional mass media.

The supremacy that traditional mass media formerly held has been endangered by the development of Internet and digital technologies, as they pave the way of a new opportunity to produce and disseminate information, knowledge, opinions, news, and entertainment. By means of digital technologies, a vast majority of the individuals got the chance to connect to the outer world as never before. Today there are 5.16 billion internet users which constitutes the 64.4% of the population and had seen an increase by 1.9% on year-on-year change.¹³ Digital media that have penetrated every aspect of our daily lives so much that they have made possible an omnipresent connectivity in many different sectors, from education to health, work to entertainment, shopping to news, give anyone with a smart device no matter where they are the opportunity to both produce and consume content in this digital environment. Anyone who has a computer, smartphone or tablet can quickly and easily access information and knowledge anywhere in the world whenever they want. Even, most of the time many individuals prefer to access newspapers, television or radio that constitute the traditional mass media through the Internet.

One of the most important features that distinguishes digital media from traditional media is that communication is not unilateral anymore with the development of Web 2.0 technologies. These technologies positioned former passive audiences as active users who cannot just consume but also produce content and they enabled two-way communication and interaction within users. As the audiences had the chance of producing their own messages and disseminating them to the masses on their own with the development of digital technologies, interpersonal communication and mass communication have begun to interpenetrate. The digital media makes possible a totally new way of communication, so-called mass self-communication by Manuel Castells. This is a brand-new area of communication, with computer networks as its mainstay, a digital language, internationally dispersed senders, and a globally participatory audience.¹⁴ Users who are

¹³ We Are Social (2023). << Digital 2023 Global Overview Report>>, <https://wearesocial.com/uk/blog/2023/01/the-changing-world-of-digital-in-2023/> (26.01.2023)

¹⁴ Manuel CASTELLS (2010). Op.cit. p.xxxi.

often both producers and consumers can freely generate, share, and comment on the content. “The mass self-communication is self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many who communicate with many.”¹⁵

Alvin Toffler's *prosumer* concept is frequently in the Web 2.0 communication used to express the users that are not limited to consumption but can also be involved in production process. However, Toffler was not addressing the digital media users through the concept of prosumer, instead he was expressing the consumption habits of individuals in the process from the agricultural society to the post-industrial society. Even though Toffler mentioned the rise of prosumer with a high technology basis in the Third Wave which signifies postindustrial society¹⁶, Axel Bruns wanted to extend his conceptualization to be able to cover the digital media era, and therefore, now we can use the term *produser* to illustrate “the users of collaborative environments who engage with content interchangeably in consumptive and productive modes and often in both virtually at the same time”¹⁷. The fact that digital media users are not only limited to content consumption, but also can be the source of content production and presentation, that is to say, they are being able to *produsage*, and everyone becoming a media outlet with the rise of the internet technologies¹⁸, points to the democratization of content production.

The proliferation of digital devices that allows users to produce content with the rapid development of digital technologies, the fact that smart devices that provide access to digital content are accessible to a considerable part of the society at lower costs compared to traditional media, and thus their ownership becomes widespread, the day-to-day increase of competencies of digital technologies in data collection, processing, storage and transfer, and therefore becoming crucial to individuals in their daily lives, the ability to produce content through smart devices without the need for very expensive professional equipment, and in the same time the fact that the knowledge required to use these professional equipment is being eliminated with the ease of use of these advanced devices

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Alvin TOFFLER (1980). **The Third Wave**, Bantam Books, pp.266-275.

¹⁷ Axel BRUNS & Joanne JACOBS (2006). **Uses of Blogs**, Peter Lang Publishing, New York, p.6.

¹⁸ Clay SHIRKY (2008). **The Power of Organizing Without Organizations: Here Comes Everybody**, Penguin Books, Great Britain, p.57.

has contributed users to participate in the content production process. Producers can generate content through their personal computers, smartphones, digital cameras, and recorders and share them on interactive online platforms in the form of videos, podcasts, articles, and such as. Hermida and Thurman defines the user generated content “as a process whereby ordinary people have an opportunity to participate with or contribute to professionally edited publications”¹⁹.

The boundaries between the users who had the chance to generate content freely without being subjected to any censorship and control most of the time on digital media platforms with the democratization of content production and the professional content producers have become really blurry. With the democratization of content production, the areas that were previously accessible only to media professionals has become where everyone can produce, consume, and exchange content, and the limitations imposed by traditional mass media began to be bypassed with digital media; therefore, today we are witnessing the gap between professionals and amateurs being narrowed down, which Clay Shirky defines mass amateurization²⁰. Today, it is way easy to enter the market, and anyone can be a writer, musician, journalist, or critics etc. Users now have the opportunity to generate content without the constraints of place and time, as well as they can write pages of content without a page limit, or they can upload content that will last for hours without a 24-hour broadcast limit as in television.

The fact that content production being accessible and easy for a considerable part of the society, brings along an abundance of content produced in terms of both number and diversity. It is also normal that there are many discussions about the quality of the content produced in the digital world where everyone can be who they want and do what they want, and where there is mass amateurization. According to Andrew Keen, democratization of the content, knowledge, information and so on is a huge threat for our cultural institutions and he argues that the democratized media which has become possible with Web 2.0 revolution will bring along “less culture, less reliable news, and a chaos of

¹⁹ Alfred HERMIDA & Neil THURMAN (2008). “A Clash of Cultures: The Integration of User-Generated Content within Professional Journalistic Frameworks at British Newspaper Websites”, **Journalism Practice**, 2(3), p.344.

²⁰ Clay SHIRKY (2008). Op.cit. p.56.

useless information”²¹. Another point that Keen criticizes is that with the proliferation of participatory digital platforms emphasizing user-generated content and the media democratization brought by Web 2.0 revolution, cultural gatekeepers are threatened as well. He thinks that the amateur and homemade content producers are replacing professional journalists, editors, musicians, moviemakers and so on.

1.1.2. The transformation of the concept of gatekeeping in digital media

Today, the vast majority of users participate in content production as well as in the process of distributing the content. The development of digital technologies has not just democratized the content creation but also the content distribution. Since the access to content creation and distribution tools have been democratized for a considerable part of the society with the Internet technologies, users not only consume pre-formed messages for them, but also contribute to the process of creating content and distributing it in many different ways and presenting it to other users. Jenkins, Ford and Green argue that it is not a simple distribution but rather is a circulation since users have really sophisticated ways to shape, share, reframe, and remix media content.²² Which content users will circulate, with whom they share it, and in what context has become crucial in the world of Web 2.0. Users who participate to the circulation of the media have also started to have a say in determining the value of media content. Perhaps, a content that would not be able to pass through the filter of cultural gatekeepers who Keen considers under threat with Web 2.0 revolution, and would not be seen worth sharing, may suddenly become a post on Instagram running towards like record, or become a trending topic on Twitter. At this point, what content users find worth sharing comes to the fore and users play a crucial role in determining which content will get more interaction.

It is definitely controversial how high the users' participation in digital media, where content creation and distribution are democratized, to what extent they can access digital media platforms, how effectively they can use these platforms, and how high

²¹ Andrew KEEN (2007). **The Cult of the Amateur: How today's internet is killing our culture**, Doubleday, New York, pp.15-16.

²² Henry JENKINS & Sam FORD & Joshua GREEN (2013). **Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture: Spreadable Media**, New York University Press, New York and London, p.2.

quality the content they create or circulate, but it is possible to say that classical gatekeepers and their authorities have begun to lose their importance with Web 2.0. Gatekeeping, that was first conceptualized in an article of Kurt Lewin and then coined by David Manning White in communication studies, is a process where an individual or an institution takes an action of selecting and reviewing from a set of options and has the power to influence others. It was the gatekeepers in traditional media that are forced to make difficult choices about which news were worth presenting to their audiences. It was the gatekeepers' responsibility to select "all the news that's fit to print"²³ within the abundance of news, to decide on which book will be read the most or which music will be listened the most. Since there are some space and time limitations in traditional media, the individual or content that try to enter the market and be presented to the audience had to pass through a pre-filter, that is, the gatekeepers. However, the problem is every individual has its own beliefs and values; therefore, interprets everything accordingly. Even if gatekeepers try to be objective, they might be likely to ignore new contents, perceptions or approaches solely because they do not fit to their interests or norms.²⁴ With the democratization of content creation and distribution, as opposed to the limited and expensive areas of traditional media, the abundant and cheap and often free spaces offered by digital media began to bypass the importance of gatekeepers and pre-filters.

"There will always be an open gate somewhere"²⁵ in digital media since we are not anymore living at a time of gate scarcity; therefore, even if some gates are still tried to be keep closed, there will always be an alternative gate to let that content to be posted. In this sense, pre-filters lose their importance and effectiveness, and it is becoming technically impossible for pre-filters to continue their existence in the digital world. Bruns argues that the gatekeeping is challenged by *gatewatching* which is the practice of constantly monitoring the content that exits news organizations' and other sources' output gates in an effort to find material that would be appropriate for publication and discussion

²³ Axel BRUNS (2018). **Gatewatching and News Curation: Journalism, Social Media, and the Public Sphere**, Peter Lang, New York, p.26.

²⁴ Wilbur SCHRAMM & Donald F. ROBERTS (1971). **The process and effects of mass communication**, IL: University of Illinois Press, Illinois, p.382.

²⁵ Tim P. VOS (2015). "Revisiting Gatekeeping Theory during a Time of Transition" in **Gate-keeping in Transition**, Tim P. Vos & François Heinderyckx (eds.), Routledge, New York, p.6.

on the gatewatcher's own website.²⁶ Even if it is just the republishing of existing content in somehow rather than the publication of a totally new content, it will still help increase the visibility of the content by getting in front of other users in the digital world where the methods of content circulation are sophisticated. It is important because the media content's potential significance might be extended, and its worth be increased when further interpretation or contextualization added by the users in the circulation process.

With the development of Internet and digital media technologies, there is a “switch from ‘Why publish this?’ to ‘Why not?’”²⁷. Now the importance and meaning of trying to convince gatekeepers because a content is worth publishing has decreased. Instead, with the democratization of content creation and distribution, again underlying that it is accessible for a considerable part of the society, users can create a content of they want and share with other users since there is no restriction and a valid reason to not to post or share it. Besides, importance of users has gradually increased regarding the circulation of the content and even a content that has a little chance to be seen or heard has become open to wide audiences. Indeed, users have a voice in some cases also about setting agenda of mainstream media. It is possible to say that the agenda setting approach of the traditional media, which tells individuals not what to think but what to think about, is reversed in some cases with the rise of digital media, and some topics are brought to the agenda of the society without the need for the mainstream media to report, and accordingly, they are also covered in the traditional media even if they are not supposed to.

The fact that the classical gatekeepers and pre-filters in traditional media are about to lose their importance, meaning and effect should not make us think certainly that no filters are needed in digital media anymore. Instead, the need of filtering in digital media is vastly larger than the traditional media because in a world where everyone can generate content, there is inevitably a significant abundance of content, both in number and variety, and new ways of filtering are needed in order for users to navigate themselves properly and access and benefit from the information or content they need. As Shirky points, “filter-then-publish” is not an efficient method anymore in digital world. “The expansion of

²⁶ Axel BRUNS (2018). Op.cit. p.27.

²⁷ Clay SHIRKY (2008). Op.cit. p.60.

social media means that the only working system is publish-then-filter.”²⁸ Post filters, which enable the content that user needs show up at the right time and right place, and thus increase the user engagement, have started to gain importance.

The gatekeeping concept and the filtering based on personal judgement of the classical gatekeepers are transforming with Web 3.0 revolution. Gatekeepers and their filtering have not just eliminated, yet the new gatekeepers have become invisible.²⁹ The most important difference of Web 2.0 from Web 1.0, that enabled only a unilateral communication towards its audience, is its ability to allow interaction between users and to enable users to participate content creation and distribution process. Now the Web 3.0 which can be considered as the developments occurring at the background of the Internet, “is a ‘decentralized’ Internet running on top of blockchain-related technologies”³⁰. It is not anymore only the users who interact with each other, but also the technological devices with Web 3.0, that emphasizes blockchain, artificial intelligence and decentralization has in the new era of the Internet. The features of Web 3.0 that is identified with semantic web, enabling “websites to have the ability to learn on autonomy themselves”³¹, allowing software to interpret the data and content users share, and thus letting them to use this interpretation in favor of users’ needs, are being used extensively in digital media such as content curation, individual targeting based on relevancy and invisible filtering. Eli Pariser indicates a process where we shift from “human gatekeepers to algorithmic ones”³². Algorithms has the power of filtering according to user interests and helps to narrow down the set of options on digital platforms to consume. We can designate the shift Pariser points out as a process from pre-filters to post-filters in the digital media era. The thunder of classical gatekeepers is stolen by the Web 2.0 revolution, and thus the need of pre-filtering is eliminated. As a solution, post-filters that are also empowered with the Web

²⁸ *ibid.* p.98.

²⁹ Eli PARISER (2011). **The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You?**, The Penguin Press, New York, p.37.

³⁰ Chuan CHEN & Lei ZHANG & Yihao LI & Tianchi LIAO & Siran ZHAO & Zibin ZHENG & Huawei HUANG & Jiajing WU (2022). “When Digital Economy Meets Web3.0: Applications and Challenges”, **IEEE Open Journal of the Computer Society**, 3, p.234.

³¹ *ibid.*

³² Eli PARISER (2011). << Beware online "filter bubbles">>, https://www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles ,

3.0 revolution has started to gain importance. We will discuss these post-filters more in detail in the social media context in the following sections.

1.2. The rise of filtering in an era of content abundance

“No one can read all the news that’s published every day, so why not set up your page to show you the stories that best represent your interests?”

Google News³³

1.2.1. Micro-targeting with Web 3.0

Has the Google search engine ever asked you “Did you mean this?” while searching for something? Or have you ever received a bunch of recommendations with a message saying, “You may also be interested in these.” right just after you finish a TV show you like and start to think that “What am I going to do now?”? Or maybe have you ever be convinced with some recommendations of different products appearing right after you purchase a dress with a message saying that “People who bought this, also bought this too!”? These are the footsteps of Web 3.0. technology which is seen as the next iteration of the internet and is anticipated to enhance the level of accessibility and personalization in the digital world.

As we mentioned above, masses experienced the period of Web 1.0 which enabled a unilateral communication between the content publisher and the receiver. Users did not have the ability to contribute content, edit content, or comment on content. As Web 1.0 could not meet the growing expectations, Web 2.0 came to the rescue. Web 2.0 can be considered as a milestone as it enabled bilateral communication between users. Users can freely generate, share, and comment on content. With Web 2.0 accompanying to the democratization of content production and distribution, users face an unprecedented abundance of content. Now the Web 3.0 which has the ability to facilitate micro-targeting

³³ Google News, as cited in, Cass R. SUNSTEIN (2007). Op.cit.

or the ability to target specific groups or individuals based on detailed information about their preferences and behavior, is ready to help users to navigate in this abundance.

Micro-targeting is achieved through the collection of vast amounts of data from user interactions and transactions, in other words from digital footprints of the users on the internet. Web 3.0 technology enables the creation of decentralized, interconnected networks where data is collected from various sources. This will result in more reliable and useful data that can help enhance micro-targeting.

Figure 1: WEB 1.0, WEB 2.0 & WEB 3.0 COMPARISON

	Web 1.0	Web 2.0	Web 3.0
Communication	Broadcast	Interactive	Online
Information	Static / Read-Only	Dynamic	Portable & Personal
Target	Organization	Community	Individual
Use	Home Pages	Blogs / Wikis	Livestreams
Content	Ownership	Sharing	Curation
Interaction	Web Forms	Web Applications	Smart Applications
Search	Directories	Key Words / Tags	Context / Relevance
Advertising	Banners	Interactive	Behaviorial
Research	Britannica Online	Wikipedia	The Semantic Web
Technologies	HTML / FTP	Flash / Java / XML	RDF /RDFS / OWL

Source: Textinart, as cited in, Deniz YENGİN (2015). “Yeni Medyanın Olanakları: Semantik Web, *The Turkish Online Journal of Design, Art and Communication (TOJDAC)*, 5(1), p.49.

It is possible to see in Figure 4 that Web 2.0 is characterized by the rise of social networking, user-generated content, and web applications that enable users to interact with each other and collaborate on content creation. Some examples of Web 2.0 technologies include blogs, wikis, and social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. On the other hand, Web 3.0, also known as the semantic web, is focused on creating a more intelligent, intuitive, and interconnected web experience, where data can be accessed and interpreted more effectively. This includes things like artificial intelligence, machine

learning, and smart data processing. The goal of Web 3.0 is to create a more personalized and efficient internet that can cater to individual user needs based on their preferences and behavior.

With Web 3.0, advertisers and profit seeking big companies can revolutionize how they use data. They can target niche markets with greater precision and deliver ads and contents that are more relevant to the needs of users. Web 3.0 allowing software to interpret the data and content users share, and mainly letting them to use this interpretation in favor of users' needs has marked an era in the framework of microtargeting and behavioral advertising. By using micro-targeting, businesses can significantly increase their conversion rates and improve both customer and user satisfaction. The ability to precisely target the right audience leads to a personalized experience for both customers and users, making them feel more valued and connected to the brand or the platform they use.

Micro-targeting feature of Web 3.0 technology, which has become very important for marketing and advertising, is also used extensively in social networking sites. The capability to collect more data from decentralized networks and provide personalized experiences to users will help social networking sites build trust and loyalty with their audience in order to keep them longer on the platform and make sure that they will come back. Showing the right content to right user at the right time is a key element as users trying to find a way out in the content abundance both in terms of number and diversity.

1.2.2. Feeling choice overload

In our modern world, we are constantly bombarded with choices. From mundane tasks like deciding what to wear, eat or go on a vacation, to important decisions like which job to take or what to invest in, we are faced with an overwhelming number of options on a daily basis. As claimed by many, the society we live in can be defined as a consumer society, where we are all surrounded by the “fantastic conspicuousness of consumption and abundance, constituted by the multiplication of objects, services and material goods”

as Jean Baudrillard mentions.³⁴ In this consumption culture we are intensely immersed in, we are faced with a myriad of choices of goods and services that lurk in to tempt us. In the context of rapidly changing technology and consumption practices, not even daily but instantaneously, consumption objects are also changing at an incredible rate and leaving their place to a new one. As Baudrillard points out, “individuals now live to the rhythm of objects. It is individuals who watch the birth, maturity and death of objects, whereas previously it was objects that survived generations of human beings”³⁵.

In modern capitalist societies where consumer behavior is driven by psychological as well as physiological needs³⁶, all our needs and most basic human motives are shaped for consumption. According to Baudrillard, consumption is no longer a means of satisfying the primary needs of individuals, but rather of differentiating oneself. He also underlines that all the needs and aspirations of individuals, activated by social differentiation and demands for status, increase rapidly in industrialized and urbanized societies where competition is intense. In a consumer society where needs, impulses, desires, as well as production and goods are very abundant, questions arise such as how consumers make their choices, whether they are free to choose or not.

Choice overload is one of the consequences of living in a consumption society, where freedom of choice is seen as a fundamental right. In a consumption society, companies market their products and services to individuals, creating a vast array of options to choose from. The advertising industry, which seems attuned to the needs of the individual and to products, yet Galbraith believes it is attuned to the industrial system in fact³⁷, presents a constant stream of new products, each claiming to be better than the last, leading to an ever-increasing range of choices. This abundance of options can easily lead to choice overload, particularly when the cost, quality, and other factors are similar across the variety of options. Consumption societies also create an expectation of instant gratification. People want to have the latest and greatest products, and this desire drives

³⁴ Jean BAUDRILLARD (1970). **La Société de Consommation**, Denoël, p.17.

³⁵ *ibid.* p.18.

³⁶ René ALGESHEIMER & Sharad BORLE & Utpal DHOLOKIA & Siddharth SINGH (2010). “The Impact of Customer Community Participation on Customer Behaviors: An Empirical Investigation”, **Marketing Science**, 29 (4), p.758.

³⁷ *ibid.* p.99.

the release of new products and services every year. Consumers now expect a high degree of customization and control in every aspect of their lives, which can exacerbate the problem of choice overload.

Choice overload can be defined as the challenge of selecting from a high number of worthwhile alternatives.³⁸ It is a phenomenon where too many options can overwhelm individuals and make it challenging for them to make a decision. Choice overload and its impacts on decision making has been studying since the middle of the 20th century. Research show that having too many options, which is inevitable as the alternatives are dizzyingly too many due to the competition in the society we live in, can often both make it difficult for individuals to make decisions and reduces their sense of fulfillment with the decisions they make. We should give a reference here to Iyengar and Lepper's research who were studying the choice overload influence on the decision making and therefore, conducted three experiments. The first experiment they conducted was in a grocery store where the consumers were asked to choose within either 6 or 24 different flavors of jam at a tasting booth. It turned out that consumers who were offered 6 options were more inclined to make a purchase than those who were offered 24 options. The second experiment was done with a group of social psychology students who were asked to choose within either 6 or 30 topics to write an essay about it. Just like in the former one, students preferred to choose from the limited array of options. Finally, another similar experiment was conducted with the consumers who were asked to choose from 6 or 30 chocolates, and it showed that the consumers who made a decision within 30 were more likely to be dissatisfied and regretful of their choices.³⁹ "Although having more choices might appear desirable, it may sometimes have detrimental consequences for human motivation."⁴⁰ Even it seems fun and attractive at first choosing from a vast array of options, it may lead to anxiety, stress, decision fatigue, and sometimes no decision at all. Even, the final result is more likely to be frustrating.

³⁸ Dirk BOLLEN & Bart P. KNIJNENBURG & Martijn C. WILLEMSSEN & Mark GRAUS (2010). "Understanding choice overload in recommender systems", **Proceedings of the 2010 ACM Conference on Recommender Systems, RecSys 2010**, Barcelona, p.63.

³⁹ Sheena S. IYENGAR & Mark R. LEPPER (2000). "When Choice Is Demotivating: Can One Desire Too Much of a Good Thing?", **Journal of Personality and Social Psychology**, 79 (6), pp.996-1003.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

There is an unprecedented abundance of options in today's modern capitalist consumer societies, and these options are more visible and closer to us than ever, with the support of developing digital technologies which are made use of by consumers and users intensely. Whether it is driven by advertising attuned to the industrial system, which is also become digital and is anticipated to surpass 60% of all worldwide ad expenditure for the first time in 2022 and to reach 65.1% by 2024 according to a report from Zenith Media⁴¹, or is purely created by the individuals' psychological or physiological needs, we have lots of choices in every aspect of life. Having a vast number of choices to choose from in between, in other words choice overload, can be overwhelming for the users.

The rise of social media and online platforms has made choice overload even more prevalent. Consumers and users now have access to an almost infinite number of products, services, contents, and opinions. This ease of access to social media by a considerable part of the society and the democratization of content production and distribution mean that users are faced with an overwhelming array of choices, making it more challenging to make a decision from which content to benefit on. "In a properly working consumer society consumers seek actively to be seduced."⁴² So do users on a social media platform. With endless scrolling and a seemingly endless amount of content, it can be difficult to know where to start or to feel satisfied with what we see. We are constantly presented with choices about what to engage with, who to follow, and what platforms to use. We will discuss further in the next section the feeling of choice overload that might users be exposed to and the need of limiting their choices in order to reduce the number of choices they consider.

1.2.3. Need of filtering out

"There has never been a better time to be a reader, a watcher, a listener, or a participant in human expression."⁴³ It is a perfect time to be a shopper, an internet user, a

⁴¹ Zenith (2021). << Advertising Expenditure Forecasts Report>>, <https://www.zenithmedia.com/digital-advertising-to-exceed-60-of-global-adspend-in-2022/> (06.12.2021)

⁴² Zygmunt BAUMAN (1998). **Globalization: The Human Consequences**, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, p.83.

⁴³ Kevin KELLY (2017). Op.cit. p.165.

consumer as well. An incredible number of new things are created on the Internet every day. “Whenever we click and buy and move our mouses to search results, or take an Uber, or buy takeout, or go on an Expedia trip, we contribute a data point—an incredible amount of data.”⁴⁴ We can say that we have never had so many options. With the proliferation of social media use and the democratization of content production and distribution, our choices regarding content consumption have increased like never before. Did you know that 350.000 tweets are being sent per minute?⁴⁵ Or were you aware of almost 4 million pictures and videos are being posted on Instagram per hour?⁴⁶ Another stunning data is that 720.000 hours of video content is being uploaded on YouTube per day.⁴⁷ Netflix offers its watchers more than 2.2 million minutes of content currently available.⁴⁸ We are exposed to around 10.000 ads per day. It is possible to talk about new content that expands like an avalanche every day in the Internet world and waiting to be consumed. Even better, it is all just a click away. “With little effort today, hardly more than a flick of the wrist, an average person can summon the Library of Everything.”⁴⁹

It is a very long and complicated process including “acquiring memory, encoding, retrieving, and using the information”⁵⁰ for the user to make the most suitable choice for itself. According to the information processing approach, the journey of the acquired information begins first in sensory memory whose storage is really brief, then it passes to short-term or working memory which is also a temporary storage, and finally to long-term memory whose storage is continuous with no limits. However, not all the information is

⁴⁴ Kai-Fu LEE (2017). <<Kai-Fu Lee talks AI-driven unemployment: ‘Who says we need jobs?’>>, <https://venturebeat.com/ai/kai-fu-lee-talks-ai-driven-unemployment-who-says-we-need-jobs/> (12.09.2017)

⁴⁵ Hootsuite (2022). << 33 Twitter Stats That Matter to Marketers in 2023>>, <https://blog.hootsuite.com/twitter-statistics/#:~:text=Broken%20down%20even%20further%2C%20that,200%20billion%20Tweets%20per%20year> (16.03.2022)

⁴⁶ Jason WISE (2022). <<How many pictures are on Instagram in 2023?>>, <https://earthweb.com/how-many-pictures-are-on-instagram/> (28.07.2022)

⁴⁷ Jason WISE (2022). <<How many videos are uploaded to Youtube a day in 2023?>>, <https://earthweb.com/how-many-videos-are-uploaded-to-youtube-a-day/#:~:text=11.1> (22.12.2022)

⁴⁸ Kasey MOORE (2020). <<How long would it take to watch all of Netflix?>>, <https://www.whats-on-netflix.com/news/how-long-would-it-take-to-watch-all-of-netflix/#:~:text=The%20headline%20is%20that%20Netflix,to%2036%2C000%20hours%20in%20total> (31.03.2020)

⁴⁹ Kevin KELLY (2017). Op.cit., p.165.

⁵⁰ David Mike MOORE & John K. BURTON & Robert J. MYERS (1996). “Multiple-channel communication: The theoretical and research foundations of multimedia”, in David H. Jpnassen (ed.), **Handbook of Research on Educational Communications and Technology**, p.979.

lucky enough to move through these three stages. It is attention that enables the transition of information from sensory memory to short-term memory without being forgotten. What we pay attention deserves to get into short-term memory and is kept there for a while, albeit temporarily, to be processed. Then it is sent to long-term memory for further process and longer storage eventually.⁵¹

How does our sensory memory which receives all the information decide which information is worth giving attention and passing respectively to following stages? It searches for some familiar and relevant patterns before getting processed, and if it finds then the necessary attention is given. Users tend to primarily focus on the features that are relevant to them because of the human brain's limited ability to digest information. Since working memory has a finite amount of storage capacity, more emphasis is placed on the relevant attributes that can be quickly retrieved from it, while the remaining attributes are hidden.⁵² Therefore, the user navigating through social media might need pattern recognition to pay attention and to decide to consume from within large set of options.

“In a world of abundance, the only scarcity is human attention.” says a Nobel Prize winning social scientist Herbert Simon, way back in 1971.⁵³ All the system is built upon drawing attention. As Seth Godin said in an interview in Fast Company which dates back 1998, “Marketing is a contest for people’s attention.”⁵⁴ All the producers, companies and every component of the digital economy that emerged with the Internet technologies, know that the only way of their survival passes through a mere crucial thing: user’s attention. Therefore, they constantly compete to shift the user’s attention in one direction rather than another.

Although it is wonderful to be able to access millions or even billions of contents with minimum effort, it is one of the issues worth questioning how much of what we

⁵¹ Charles STANGOR & Jennifer WALINGA (2014). **Introduction to Psychology – 1st Canadian Edition**, Victoria, B.C.: BCcampus. Retrieved from <https://opentextbc.ca/introductiontopsychology/> , p.371.

⁵² Mahesh BALAN U. & Saji K. MATHEW (2019). “An Experimental Study on the Swaying Effect of Web-Personalization”, **SIGMIS Database: The DATABASE for Advances in Information Systems**, 50(4), p.75.

⁵³ Kevin KELLY (2017). Op.cit. p.176.

⁵⁴ William C. TAYLOR, <<Permission Marketing>>, <https://www.fastcompany.com/34360/permission-marketing> (31.03.1998)

consume can be kept in mind. According to Edgar Dale's Learning Pyramid, people remember 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see, 50% of what they hear and see, 70% of what they say or write, 90% of what they say as they do an activity.⁵⁵ Thus, if we try to learn and remember something in a passive way, we might have some knowledge at that moment, but after some days or some weeks it would be gone. The more we are involved in the process, the more we remember it. However, a Microsoft-led study shows that companies only have 8 seconds to grab the user's attention and to win a seat among a world where people remember 50% of what they hear and see. The study also states that the average attention span dropped from 12 seconds to 8 seconds since the year 2000 which is considered as the beginning of the mobile revolution.⁵⁶ Thus, it is getting even harder to grab and keep the users' interest. Another study from 2016 by the Fors Marsh Group found that users of Facebook's News Feed on mobile only spend an average of 1.7 seconds each item of content, compared to 2.5 seconds on desktop. Besides, "it takes only 0.25 seconds of exposure for people to recall mobile feed content at a statistically significant rate"⁵⁷.

Being remarkable, memorable, and compelling in the social media world where the users are always in a hurry is challenging and requires some tricky ways to get the right content at the right time to the right user. As Seth Godin says, "Attention is a precious resource since our brains are cluttered with noise"⁵⁸, so it is necessary to follow an attentive and different strategy in order to show the content that is relevant and effective to surpass other noises and to stay in mind. A great, timely advice to what to consume between the options would be pleasant and helpful in the social media world where the content production is at an incredible pace due to democratization. "Someone, or something, has to choose, or whisper in our ear to help us decide. We need a way to triage. Our only choice is to get assistance in making choices."⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Ken MASTERS (2013). Edgar Dale's *Pyramid of Learning* in medical education: A literature review, **Medical Teacher**, 35(11), p.1586.

⁵⁶ Kevin MCSPADDEN (2015). << You Now Have a Shorter Attention Span Than a Goldfish>>, <https://time.com/3858309/attention-spans-goldfish/> (14.05.2015)

⁵⁷ Facebook (2016). << Capturing Attention in Feed: The Science Behind Effective Video Creative>>, <https://www.facebook.com/business/news/insights/capturing-attention-feed-video-creative> (20.04.2016)

⁵⁸ Seth GODIN (2018). **This is Marketing You Can't Be Seen Until You Learn To See**, Penguin, New York, p.30.

⁵⁹ Kevin KELLY (2017). Op.cit. p.167.

This need of a great advice has been met with filtering algorithms that are constantly changing with new developments arising and can predict which message or content will attract more attention by enabling social media platforms to get to know its users better. “Filtering is inevitable, a fact of life.” says Kelly and adds that it has existed for as long as mankind. Since nobody is able to see, hear, or read everything, every individual filters heavily throughout any given hour just to keep life under control and coherent.⁶⁰ To overcome the choice overload, users themselves and filtering algorithms on behalf of users try to limit users’ choices. This might mean setting parameters for certain decisions or making some suggestions. Users can also prioritize their choices, focusing on the most important decisions and letting go of the less important ones. The more the options proliferate, the more the need of filtering according to user preference gains importance. Since every user might contribute to content production and circulation on social media, it seems like filtering never will come off the stage.

Since the user journey has become more complicated, and since both the alternatives and touchpoints have increased due to the digital development which paved the way for users to become more demanding, the capability to learn more and take action about the users’ preferences and desires becomes a powerful source in the competition between platforms and requires more sophisticated ways as well. Increasing engagement and loyalty, grabbing attention of users, sticking in mind, and understanding the users’ wishes and intentions are harder than ever. “Services that better meet the needs of the consumer should be more satisfying than ‘one-size-fits-all’”.⁶¹ Social media platforms’ ability of filtering and curating the content according to user interests, skills, preferences, point of views, relationships are a great way of keeping the user on the platform and making the user spend more time, increasing user engagement, growing interest, and making sure that the user will return to that platform in a short notice. “The right recommendation at the right time is exactly what an Amazon, a Netflix, a Facebook, a Spotify, a Google, a LinkedIn, a Tinder, a TikTok, and a YouTube aspire to.”⁶² Showing relevant content to users within the infinite array of options reduces choice overload for

⁶⁰ *ibid.* p.7

⁶¹ Dwayne BALL & Pedro S. COELHO & Manuel J. VILARES (2006). “Service personalization and loyalty”, **Journal of Services Marketing**, 20 (6), p.391.

⁶² Michael SCHRAGE (2020). **Recommendation Engines**, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, p.x.

them; therefore, they tend to pass longer time on the platform and likely to have more fun. Adopting a user-centric strategy and taking user-specific action by filtering algorithms is crucial in social media world.

It is not just the social media platforms which filters out the content in favor of their profits, but also the users who think that the content they see is not compelling enough. "... [t]he new media determine a segmented, differentiated audience that, although massive in terms of numbers, is no longer a mass audience in terms of simultaneity and uniformity of the message it receives."⁶³ The former definition of mass media, sending a certain number of messages to a sizable, homogeneous audience does not apply to the digital media according to Sabbah due to pickiness of the audience itself as a result of the diversity of messages, contents and sources. The targeted audience has a propensity to select which message to be sent and to be received and which content to be generated and to be consumed, therefore, this can further the segmentation and strengthen the personal connection between sender and receiver, content producer and consumer. Users may prefer a curated selection of content based on their interests and preferences rather than being inundated with a vast amount of content as well as they can curate their feeds themselves to make them more manageable. This can mean unfollowing accounts that no longer bring them joy or applying some filterings by means of the features that social media platforms offer. By limiting their choices and setting priorities, they can reduce the overwhelming feeling of choice overload and take control of their lives.

We discussed how the concept of gatekeeping has transformed with the democratization of content production and distribution, and how users need some post filters due to the period of content abundance accompanying this democratization. Social media is one of the fruitful research fields that are directly affected by all these trends and where we can observe these post filtering effects through user practices. For this reason, we would like to give more detailed information about social media platforms in the next section.

⁶³ Françoise SABBABH, as cited in, Martin LISTER & Jon DOVEY & Seth GIDDINGS & Iain GRANT & Kieran KELLY (2009). **New Media: A Critical Introduction**, Routledge, London, p.31.

1.3. Ubiquitous social networking in everyday life

1.3.1. The emergence and popularity of social networking sites

“Some are born connected, others achieve connection, still others have connectedness thrust upon them. Everyone is networked. Everyone is either a node or a hub in someone else’s network. Much as the quality of life is influenced by the quality of our networks, our standard of living is increasingly determined by network standards. To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, we shape our networks and then our networks shape us.”⁶⁴

Individuals becoming increasingly connected by electronic technologies which removes the limits of space and time in the virtual world, intense usage and efficacy of smart devices in individuals’ everyday lives, and the elimination of the need to access networks from a fixed certain point owing to the possibility of being online at any time by accessing the internet from anywhere has not only facilitated and accelerated individuals’ access to information, enabled individuals to benefit from services in many areas of daily life and to engage in social communication.

Although the rapid development of the Internet shows a parallelism with the development of technology and the easily transportable characteristic of the technological tools, social networking sites also have a significant effect on the popularity of the internet. These SNSs have become an integral part of modern communication and have played a major role in increasing the usage of the internet. SNSs usually have millions of users worldwide, and the content shared on these sites can go viral, leading to increased traffic and user engagement on the internet. Digital 2023 Global Overview Report clearly shows that the number of internet users increases with each passing year. There are 98 million more users, meaning a 1.9% increase on the global scale of internet users.⁶⁵ According to the results of the Family Information Technology Use Survey conducted by Turkish Statistical Institute, the internet usage rate in the age group 16-74 has increased to 85% in 2022 from 82.6% in 2021.⁶⁶ As for social media user increase, the results are pretty

⁶⁴ Michael SCHRAGE (2003). <<Network Theory’s New Math>> in Randall Rothenberg (ed.), **Enterprise Resilience: Risk and Security in the Networked World**, Booz Allen Hamilton Inc., p.30.

⁶⁵ We Are Social Hootsuite (2023). Op. cit.

⁶⁶ Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu (2022). <<Hanehalkı Bilişim Teknolojileri (BT) Kullanım Araştırması, 2022>>, [https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Hanehalki-Bilisim-Teknolojileri-\(BT\)-Kullanim-Arastirmasi-2022-45587](https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Hanehalki-Bilisim-Teknolojileri-(BT)-Kullanim-Arastirmasi-2022-45587) (26.08.2022)

user profiles to connect with and send messages.⁷⁰ The emergence of social networking sites gained momentum in the early 2000s, with the advent of sites like Friendster and MySpace. These sites allowed users to create customizable profiles, connect with friends, and share updates and media. Their popularity exploded, and they attracted millions of users worldwide, particularly among young people. As it can be seen in Figure 1, in 2004, Facebook was launched, quickly becoming the dominant social networking site. The rise of smartphones and mobile devices in the late 2000s and early 2010s further fuelled the growth of social networking sites, allowing users to access them anytime, anywhere. New sites like Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat emerged, each offering unique features to users.

According to Digital 2023 Global Overview Report, there are 4.76 billion social media users in the world, spending average 2 hours and 31 minutes daily, and using average 7.2 social platforms each month. The number of social media users and the average daily time spent using social media has increased year on year. There are 137 million more users (+3.0%) spending 3 more minutes on social media (+2.0%) comparing the previous year. We can obviously say that almost all the internet users are also social media users since the number of social media users equals the 92.3% off all the internet users.⁷¹

On the other hand, according to Digital 2022 Turkey Report there are 68.90 million social media users in Turkey, spending average 2 hours 59 minutes, almost 3 hours daily. The number of social media users and the average daily time spent using social media has increased year over year for the users in Turkey just as the global users. For Turkey, the percentage of social media users in total internet users is 98.5%. When we look at the share of combined, deduplicated potential advertising reach across Facebook, Instagram, and Messenger, it is highest for the users who are between 25-34 years old just like the participants who form our sample. (12.7% is of females and 17.6% is of males) Top 10 most-used social media platforms between the internet users aged 16 to 64 are respectively WhatsApp (93.2%), Instagram (92.5%), Facebook (78.1%),

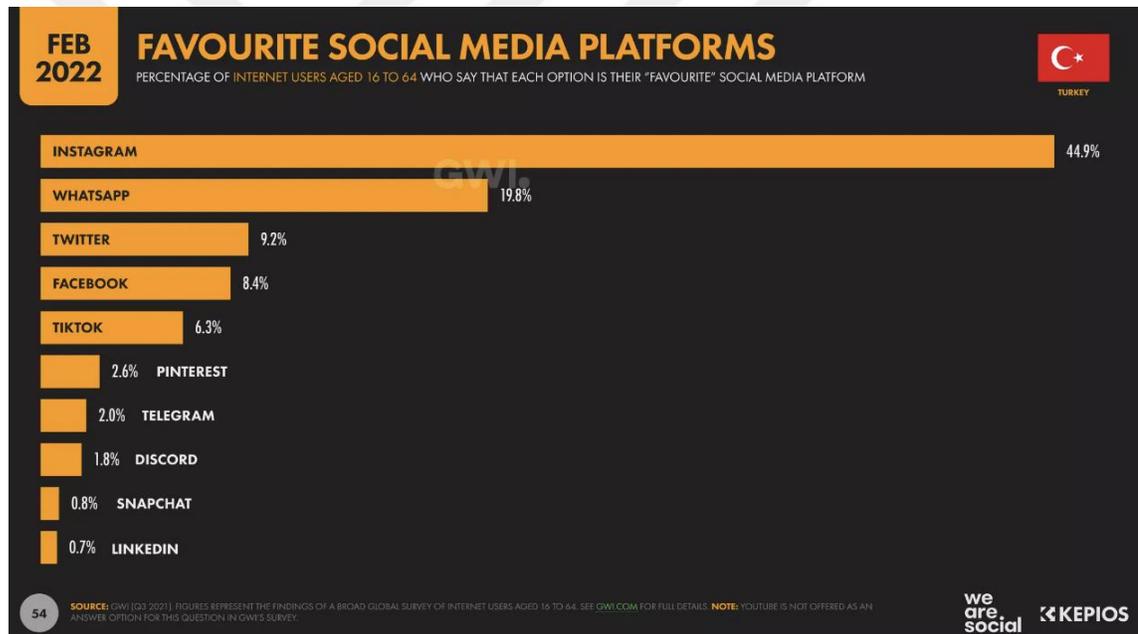
⁷⁰ Danah M. BOYD & Nicole B. ELLISON (2007). Op. cit. p.213.

⁷¹ We Are Social Hootsuite (2023). Op.cit.

Twitter (69.6%), Facebook Messenger (54.3%), Telegram (53.7%), TikTok (47.6%), Pinterest (40.7%), Snapchat (37.2%), LinkedIn (28.2%).⁷²

As it can be seen on Figure 2, favorite social media platforms in Turkey are respectively Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, Pinterest, Telegram, Discord, Snapchat, and LinkedIn. The results of the report and the answers we received from our participants overlap in this sense. For this reason, our research is mainly focused on Instagram and Twitter platforms.

Figure 3: FAVORITE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS OF TURKEY



Source: ibid.

In order to better understand the popularity of social media platforms, it would be useful to first look at the features that distinguish social media from traditional media. One of the features that makes social media platforms unique is that they enable individuals to make connections that they would not otherwise be able to make and allow individuals who might not have been able to meet physically to get to know each other. “Social media

⁷² We Are Social KEPIOS (2022). <<Digital 2022 Turkey>>, <https://recrodigital.com/we-are-social-2022-turkiye-sosyal-medya-kullanimi-verileri/> (19.04.2022)

sites offer a great illustration of ongoing exchange between people from all backgrounds.”⁷³ Social to historical, cultural to economic, technological to environmental, individuals who own different kind of capitals in a Bourdieusian approach can discuss on the same subject on social media. Therefore, “online engagement has become a global phenomenon”.⁷⁴ These platforms often provide tools for users to discover and connect with other users who mostly share similar interests, social connections or geographic locations. There are various types of social media platforms that cater to different audiences. By bridging the gap between the local and the global, social media platforms can offer a possibility for a considerable part of society with an internet connection to exceed the geographical boundaries of territories and cultures.

Digital media has evolved over the years and introduced a new way of communication and self-expression through social media. As we have discussed previously, it facilitated two-way communication between individuals, businesses, and organizations. Through social media, individuals can interact with others by sharing information, engaging in discussions, and giving feedback. Individuals no longer only read the content others publish or only hear others' voices, instead their own opinions and feelings can be read, and their voices can be heard as well. With the democratization of content production and distribution, most individuals have found the opportunity to produce their own genuine content and announce it to others more easily.

The participation of users in content production is a key feature that distinguishes social media from traditional media, but also forms the basis for this research. Social media fosters participation from all over the world by suppressing the distance between media and its audience for most of the people. Everyone who has an internet access can participate to bidirectional communication and interaction and can genuinely create content. Although it may be different in practice, social media is technically an area where everyone can freely express themselves either with posting a content or commenting on a content. Users are always welcomed to involve into conversations or exchange of

⁷³ Beatriz JORDÁ & Azahara CAÑEDO & Márton BENE & Manuel GOYANES (2021). “Out-of-Place Content: How Repetitive, Offensive, and Opinion-Challenging Social Media Posts Shape Users’ Unfriending Strategies in Spain”, *Social Sciences*, 10 (460), p.2.

⁷⁴ Xuequn WANG & Zilong LIU (2019). “Online engagement in social media: A cross-cultural comparison.”, *Computers in Human Behavior*, 97, p.138.

information, ideas, feelings. One-to-many model broadcasting period of the traditional media has gone into a decline, since the social media paved the way for a two-way communication and is based on interaction. Social media enables to gather individuals around some mutual fields of interests, opinions, or events and to create organizations/communities/groups so fast. It has the power of bringing individuals together very fast, even if they are in different parts of the world, around either a political issue or a kitten video and these individuals can stay in constant connection as long as they want.

Even though each social media platform has its own language and forms of content that it allows to share, and their dynamics change, they basically share common features. Users either produce or contribute content, explain it with relevant keywords or tags, assess it actively or passively, and build social networks by adding other users who share their interests as contacts or friends.⁷⁵ There are lots of social media platforms enabling lots of features, but mainly there are three features, three metrics which are important for the interaction between users. “*Like* is the lowest level category feedback” according to Dedić and Stainer.⁷⁶ The quickest and most straightforward approach to demonstrate that the user found the content appealing, beneficial, or simply worth considering is liking the content. Comparing to like, “*comment* is a stronger category of feedback”⁷⁷ since it gives a chance to user to show either its positive or negative point of view. It is a suitable and effective method if the user wants to critique the content or make additional recommendations. Finally, “*share* is the strongest type of feedback”⁷⁸. A user can share the content either publicly to make sure that is seen by a wider audience or privately via direct messaging (DM) to show it to its inner circle to talk about it. Sharing the content means that users imply that the relevant content, opinion, or idea is not only appealing, beneficial, or worth considering but also merits further promotion within the community.

⁷⁵ Kristina LERMAN (2007). “Social Browsing & Information Filtering in Social Media”, University of Southern California Information Sciences Institute, **Cornell University Library arXiv.org**, arXiv:0710.5697v1, p.1.

⁷⁶ Nedim DEDIĆ & Clare STANIER (2017). “Towards Differentiating Business Intelligence, Big Data, Data Analytics and Knowledge Discovery” in F. Piazolo et al. (eds.), **Lecture Notes in Business Information Processing**, Springer International Publishing, Vienna, p.119.

⁷⁷ *ibid.* p.120.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

The democratization of content production and distribution with social media, the fact that users can be involved in these processes, has brought about an abundance of content, and has led users to be more selective while liking the content, commenting on the content, or sharing the content, and applying various post filters. It would be appropriate to mention why users want to take part in this virtual world where there are so many and varied content that they have to apply filters.

1.3.2. Motivations and benefits of using social networking sites

“How do you explain the palpable popularity of social media? Could it be that in a liquid modern world of short-term relationships, commitments ‘until further notice’ and high levels of mobility and speed, social media fill (however inadequately) a gap?”⁷⁹

Social networking sites have become an integral part of our lives. Individuals join social media for different reasons, and their motivations can differ greatly such as keeping in touch with friends and family, reading news stories, filling spare time, finding products to purchase, sharing opinions and so on.⁸⁰

Social media platforms allow individuals to get information about other users, about whom they are curious to know more by removing the restriction of time and space and creating an environment of interaction where distances are not an issue. In other words, social media offers its users the opportunity to monitor others’ lives. As Goffman states, when an individual enters the presence of others, they frequently want to learn more about the individual. Their curiosity might be about his/her overall socioeconomic situation, his/her self-perception, his/her attitude toward them, his/her competency, his/her reliability, e.g. All of this information will allow them to anticipate what the individual will expect of them and what they may expect of him/her.⁸¹

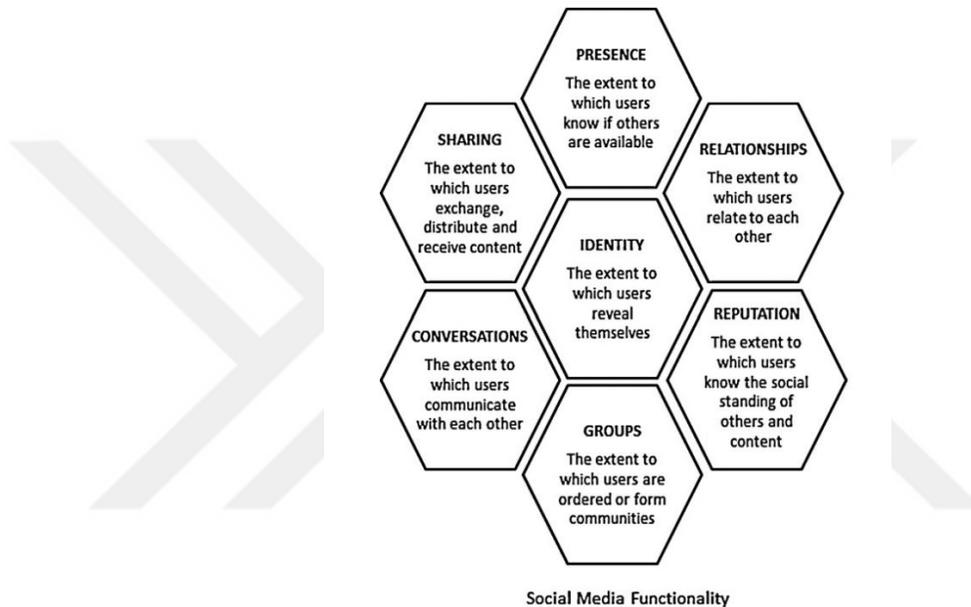
⁷⁹ Zygmunt BAUMAN & David LYON (2013). **Liquid Surveillance**, Polity Press, Cambridge, p.42.

⁸⁰ We Are Social KEPIOS (2022). Op.cit.

⁸¹ Erving GOFFMAN (1956). **The Presentation Of Self In Everyday Life**, University of Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Centre, p.1.

Kietzmann et al. illustrate the functions of social media as a honeycomb as can be seen in Figure 3. “Identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups” that are the units of this honeycomb can be taken into consideration also for understanding the motivations of using social media.

Figure 4: HONEYCOMB OF SOCIAL MEDIA



Source: Jan H. KIETZMANN & Kristopher HERMKENS & Ian P. MCCARTHY & Bruno S. SILVESTRE (2011). “Social Media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media”, *Business Horizons*, 54(3), p.243.

According to Figure 3, presence means knowing where other people are, both virtually and physically, and if they are available. Social media provides information not just about others’ lives, but endless information about any topic of interest. Keeping up to date and getting news prompt individuals to social media. Users can quickly access the information that piques their curiosity, no matter where they are, at the same time as others.

Social media is a platform individuals use to monitor as well as to be seen. On social media platforms, every user, whether they have few or many followers, has their place. According to Figure 3, “users reveal their identities in a social media setting”⁸².

⁸² Jan H. KIETZMANN et al. (2011). Op.cit.

Users exist with their actions in social media, and they cannot be ignored. Even a user with few followers can become, in social media language, “trend topic”⁸³ by sharing remarkable content and reputable either as a person or through the content one shares.

Social media, in addition to want to be seen, also responds to individuals’ requests to be liked, appreciated, or approved. Individuals who want to be seen and heard use social media with the motivations to be considered by more users. Increasing the importance for individuals’ day by day to show themselves and to be appreciated and approved by everyone in social media, the lives shown in social media are also more and more tried to be shown as perfect lives which are for the most part opposite of real life. “... social networks offer users the ability to establish their own positions that they want to be in real life but cannot. So, users can live a virtual life in social networks.”⁸⁴ Users are free to create their profiles as they wish. The profile that the users create as they want is the place where the first impression can be made on the individual. “In everyday life, of course, there is a clear understanding that first impressions are important.”⁸⁵ The profile and therefore the first impression that users create gives a clue inevitably about recognizing an individual. Social media users express themselves intentionally or unintentionally, and in turn their audiences get an impression about them somehow.

Since the human being is by nature a social entity, one of the main motivations of using social media platforms is to get socialized. Socializing benefit of social media gratifies the important need of people. According to Figure 3, the terms "conversations" and "relationships" refer to the features of social media that facilitate conversations among individuals and groups and conducting users to speak, share items of sociality, meet up, or simply just name each other as a friend or fan, respectively.⁸⁶ Social media has brought digital socialization. Social networks which have become an important part of modern life allow individuals to easily join a group and socialize by sharing through these virtual

⁸³ Trend topic (#TT) means popular topic on social media, especially in Twitter. These are topics that become popular and agenda as a result of users sharing a hashtag multiple times.

⁸⁴ Ali TOPRAK & Aysenur YILDIRIM & Eser AYGÜL & Mutlu BİNARK & Senem BÖREKÇİ & Tuğrul ÇOMU (2009). **Toplumsal Paylaşım Ağı Facebook : “görülüyorum öyleyse varım!”**, Kalkedon Yayınları, İstanbul, p. 30.

⁸⁵ Erving GOFFMAN (1956). Op.cit. p.5.

⁸⁶ Jan H. KIETZMANN et al. (2011). Op.cit. pp.244-246.

groups which individuals create according to their wishes. Groups in Figure 3 underlines the communities and sub-communities users can form. “The more ‘social’ a network becomes, the bigger the group of friends, followers, and contacts.”⁸⁷ Users can continue to communicate with the people with whom they were linked at any time in their life because of family, school, work, place of residence, through social networks as well as they can meet new people and create their own socializing worlds by sending invites to the individuals they want to be friends with.

As for the economic aspect, social media is beneficial both for the users and advertisers. Time is converted into money in the age of capitalism, where the pace of capital turnover is the primary means of generating profits. The bigger the profits could be gained, the quicker you could secure your return and the quicker you could reinvest it.⁸⁸ On the one hand, every user has an equal chance to make money on social media, and on the other hand social media platforms can be an effective way for advertisers in order to reach their target audiences. This is because social media platforms have large and diverse user bases, allowing advertisers to target specific demographics and interests. Additionally, social media users are often highly engaged with the content they consume and may be more receptive to advertising messages that are integrated into their social media feed. “... businesses can access the millions of eyes, wants, needs and wallets logging on to the Social Network on a daily basis.”⁸⁹ Marketing sector professionals interpret social media as “a matter of digital Darwinism that affects any and all forms of marketing and service. In the world of democratized influence, businesses must endure a perpetual ‘survival of the fittest.’”⁹⁰ In order to win the competition, they need to adapt themselves to current needs and wishes of users and social media platforms are great opportunities for “treating different customers differently”⁹¹. Every user’s wish, desires, preferences, expectations are different and unique; therefore, they need to be served accordingly. We can adapt what McKim and Hughes said about Customer Relationship

⁸⁷ *ibid.* p.247.

⁸⁸ Manuel CASTELLS (2010). *Op.cit.* p.xl.

⁸⁹ Kevin CURRAN & Sarah GRAHAM & Christopher TEMPLE (2011). Advertising on Facebook, **International Journal of E-business Development (IJED)**, 1(1), p.28.

⁹⁰ Brian SOLIS (2010). **Engage!**, Wiley, New Jersey, p.xiii.

⁹¹ Don PEPPERS & Martha ROGERS (2004). **Managing Customer Relationships A Strategic Framework**, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New Jersey, p.6.

Management to social media that “if all users were alike, mass marketing and mass communications would work just fine.”⁹² Therefore, personalization to some degree is a key element in today's digital world.

In summary, it is obvious that each user has their own motivations to take part in social media, as we have discussed above or different from all these, which we can think of in a wide range. But how do users navigate themselves in this abundance of content production and consumption? For example, how do users decide which users they want to learn more about, which users they want to know if they are available, which news they want to consume, which topics they want to see content on? Or can users freely generate any content with the motivations of being seen and heard? We have mentioned that users can socialize through social media platforms and form some communities with whom they want. Do they have any criteria for example while socializing, communicating, and interacting with other users, or creating a group? From the marketing point of view, what means do advertisers use to reach and delight their target audiences?

As we have tried to mention throughout the entire first chapter, the democratization of content production and distribution for a considerable part of the society and the participation of users in the content generation and circulation process brought along a significant abundance of content and made it worth examining how users proceed in this abundance. With the democratization, the concept of gatekeeping has been transformed and since the limitation in front of users' content production has been removed, post filters have started to gain importance so that users can cope with choice overload instead of pre filters. Mind blowing developments in the digital communication technologies, especially the decentralized feature and the micro-targeting capability of the Web 3.0 technologies has given the chance to users to receive curated content or tailored message to them, but also to choose what to expect from the media. Since the audience can be selective in digital and social media different than the traditional mass media, users can also develop some sort of individual filtering strategies.

⁹² Bob MCKIM & Arthur Middleton HUGHES (2000). “How to measure customer relationship management success”, **Journal of Database Marketing**, 8(3), p.225.

While users exist with various motivations in the social media that we have chosen as the research universe, while producing or consuming content, they adopt both the individual filters we have discussed in the main title of post filters and the algorithmic filters offered by the platforms. In the next chapter, we will cover in more detail why and how individual and algorithmic filters are applied, and we will examine in more detail whether these filters have any challenging aspects.



CHAPTER II: READING THE POTENTIAL CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL MEDIA THROUGH THE INDIVIDUAL AND ALGORITHMIC FILTERING

“We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us.”

Marshall McLuhan⁹³

2.1. Algorithmic filtering on social media

“An alluring quality of many digital datasets is that they contain all ‘footprints’ from everyone on a given ‘beach’.”⁹⁴ Just like we are on a beach, we leave footprints behind while we are browsing on the Internet. As Lewis mentions, some of us live the beach life to the full and keep running and playing just like the users who spend too much time online whereby whose digital activities are really high. Some of us sitting under umbrellas just like the modest users of the Internet but still leave some traces behind. Also, some of us prefers to stay at home just like the individuals who avoid being an Internet user.⁹⁵

Every time we send a message, listen to a song, watch a video, post a photo, or share a video, browse a website, search something, like a comment, purchase a product in the digital world, we give the Internet some clues about us. In brief, every time we interact online, we leave a digital footprint behind sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously. When the users post on their social media accounts, comment on online forums, send e-mails, subscribe to newsletters, or give consent to cookie policies of the websites, they intentionally and actively leave their footprints behind. On the other hand,

⁹³ Marshall MCLUHAN, as cited in, Eli PARISER (2011). **THE FILTER BUBBLE What the Internet Is Hiding from You?**, The Penguin Press, New York, p.6.

⁹⁴ Kevin LEWIS (2015). “Three fallacies of digital footprints”, **Big Data & Society**, 2(2), p.2.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

when the website collects information about the users' visit time or frequency, field of interests, location, browsing history or the IP address without them being aware, these are counted as the passive kind of footprints. It is also same for the social networking sites, gathering information from the users' likes, comments, posts, tweets, shares, time spent on a content, habits of platform use and so on. All these digital footprints either they are collected actively or passively, are used by the filtering algorithms to get to know users better and to shape and improve their online experience. Algorithms are "encoded procedures for transforming input data into a desired output, based on specified calculations"⁹⁶. Algorithmic filters are mathematical formulas that social media platforms use to sort and prioritize the content that users see. These filters are designed to personalize the content based on the user's interests, activity, and behavior. This means that two users using the same platform may have completely different experiences based on their use patterns. The more algorithms collect input data, the more they can produce data-enriched and compelling outputs, and therefore a better platform experience.

Scott Lash, professor of sociology and cultural studies, describes the algorithms as "compressed and hidden *generative* rules"⁹⁷. According to him there was always constitutive and regulative rules that kept busy the human scientists for a long time. If it was a game, the constitutive rules would be our admission ticket to enter the game and the regulative rules would be the instructions guiding us to how to play the game. Yet, he underlines a third kind or rule which is algorithmic, generative rules in a society where media is omnipresent, and coding is common. Generative rules are virtuals that produce a wide range of actuals. Even if we do not come across to them like the constitutive or regulative ones, generative rules are "more and more pervasive in our social and cultural life of the post-hegemonic order"⁹⁸. In the post hegemonic order, the hegemon is so deeply penetrated everyday life just like the pervasive characteristic of algorithms and makes feel its power from the inside and not from the above like algorithms do. "A society of

⁹⁶ Tarleton GILLESPIE (2014). "The relevance of algorithms", in Tarleton GILLESPIE & Pablo BOCZKOWSKI & Kirsten FOOT (Ed.) **Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society**, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, p.167.

⁹⁷ Scott LASH (2007). "Power after Hegemony", **Theory, Culture & Society**, 24(3), p.71.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

ubiquitous media means a society in which power is increasingly in the algorithm.”⁹⁹ As many claims, today, we live to the rhythm of the algorithmic power.

As we have mentioned in the first chapter and gave reference to Pariser, with the rise of Web 3.0 and the development of algorithm-based filtering, traditional gatekeeping theory was challenged. “In the digital media environment, traditional gatekeeping is increasingly replaced by algorithmic curating”.¹⁰⁰ It refers to a concept that implicates and overlaps journalistic, strategic, personal and social curation according to Thorson and Wells. They claim that it is not only the journalistic curators anymore who decide which content will be visible, but also the personal curators which are individual media users, strategic communicators, social curators which are performed by the social network, and the algorithms.¹⁰¹ As we have discussed before, users are not exposed anymore to gatekeepers and pre-filters to produce a content on social media platforms. They can freely generate and circulate the content. Yet, algorithmic gatekeeping and post-filters have become an integral part of social media usage. The concept that Pariser refers to as algorithmic gatekeeping is also referred to as network gatekeeping and is gaining more and more importance. Figure 5 illustrates the comparison between traditional and network gatekeeping.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Birgit STARK & Daniel STEGMANN & Melanie MAGIN & Pascal JÜRGENS (2020). “Are Algorithms a Threat to Democracy? The Rise of Intermediaries: A Challenge for Public Discourse”, *Governing Platforms*, p.10.

¹⁰¹ Kjerstin THORSON & Chris WELLS (2015). “Curated Flows: A Framework for Mapping Media Exposure in the Digital Age”, *Communication Theory*, 26(3), pp.314-317.

Figure 5: COMPARISON OF TRADITIONAL AND NETWORK GATEKEEPING

	Traditional gatekeeping	Network gatekeeping
Network gatekeeping identification		
Gate (<i>the passage point</i>)	One-to-few number and types of gates	Few-to-many number and types of gates
Gatekeeping (<i>the process</i>)	Primarily a process of: selection (communication); intermediation (management); dissemination and preservation of culture (Information Science)	A more inclusive definition which encompasses any process of information control (Table 1).
Gated (<i>on whom gatekeeping is exercised</i>)	No vocabulary in the literature	Network gatekeeping identification recognizes the role of those subjected to gatekeeping. Network gatekeeping salience presents the dynamism of gated types (Table 6).
Gatekeeping mechanism (<i>the means used to carry out gatekeeping</i>)	Mainly editorial mechanisms Primarily a manual process	Many mechanisms to execute gatekeeping (Table 3 exhibits some). Due to information volume, procedures become more automated.
Gatekeeper (<i>who performs gatekeeping</i>)	Individuals	Focus shifts to institutional actors. Two dimensions are suggested: authority and functional gatekeepers (Table 4).
Network gatekeeping salience		
Relationship (<i>gated-gatekeeper</i>)	Relations of sender-receiver; the gatekeeper is the sender.	Continuity modes of relationships between no relations or indirect relations (sender-receiver mode) and through frequent, enduring, and direct exchange.
Information production (<i>of gated</i>)	Notion of source-destination; the gatekeeper is the source. Only gatekeepers produce information freely.	Association between source-destination and gatekeeper-gated positions are interchangeable. Gated also may produce information.
Alternatives (<i>for gated</i>)	Scant-none alternatives to gatekeeping.	Possible circumventions of gatekeepers and gatekeeping mechanisms exist.
Political power (<i>in relation to the gatekeeper</i>)	Gatekeeper has most of the political power.	Gated also may have political power.

Source: Karine BARZILAI-NAHON (2008). "Toward a theory of network gatekeeping: A framework for exploring information control", *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 59(9), p.1508.

It is important that the number and types of gates as well as the gatekeeping executors have increased with the network gatekeeping. Besides, the process has shifted from manual to automated because of the high information volume. Network gatekeeping has also enabled a frequent, enduring, and direct exchange between the sender and the receiver. Moreover, a fundamental characteristic of the network gatekeeping is that the gatekeeper-gated positions are interchangeable and the gated has also the chance of producing information.

Social networking sites as the platforms of algorithmic or network gatekeeping, filter the content according to users' tastes and preferences and become gatekeepers as are broadcasters who used to filter by government or media bosses' rules.¹⁰² It is worth to question why social media platforms tailor the content according to each user's own

¹⁰² Mariarosaria TADDEO & Luciano FLORIDI (2015). "The Debate on the Moral Responsibilities of Online Service Providers", *Science and Engineering Ethics*, 22(6), p. 1579.

interests, preferences, and needs. The motivation behind social media platforms using algorithmic filters is to enhance user engagement and maximize profit. Social media platforms generate revenue through advertising, and they target their users based on their interests and preferences. Algorithmic filters help in understanding user preferences by analyzing their online behavior, interactions, and engagement with content. With this information, social media platforms can personalize the user experience by presenting them with content that aligns with their interests.

One of the main profits of algorithmic filters is that they increase user engagement. Algorithms have the ability of predicting what users might like and also considering other options and opening the door of different opportunities that they might not have thought of. If what the user wants is better understood, which is a core function of algorithms, it is possible to “increase the user satisfaction and increase user fidelity”¹⁰³. By showing users a personalized feed, users are more likely to spend more time on the platform and interact more with content. If users find the content being showed relevant and interesting, it will become an enjoyable experience and they will tend to visit that platform again really soon. This increased engagement with content translates to increased views, likes, shares, and comments, which in turn leads to higher revenue for the platform.

Another profit of algorithmic filters is that they improve the platform's ability to target advertisements. This is because the algorithmic filters collect massive amounts of data on user interests, and this information is valuable for advertisers. By analyzing user behavior and interests, advertisers can create targeted ads that are more relevant to users, increasing the likelihood of users clicking on these ads and generating revenue for the platform.

We are aware that it is not possible for us to know or observe exactly how the algorithms work in the background to apply all these filters. Yet, even if social media platforms keep secret their algorithms, some prominent features about the logic behind is

¹⁰³ Francesco RICCI & Lior ROKACH & Bracha SHAPIRA (2011). “Introduction to recommender systems handbook” in Francesco RICCI, Lior ROKACH, Bracha SHAPIRA (eds.) **Recommender Systems Handbook**, Springer, Boston, p.5.

shared. Since our research focuses on Instagram and Twitter, we will try to explain with examples how the algorithms of these platforms work.

Just like all algorithms, Instagram essentially collects and processes data about both the user and the content and tries to show the right content that will attract the most attention to the user. In general, interaction, interest and relevancy are three most important ranking factors of Instagram.¹⁰⁴ The more you interact with a user (liking, leaving comments, messaging etc.), the more you can see the new content that user creates. If you like or watch couple of the same type or format of content, if you show the platform that you enjoy the posts that reflect the same interest, then Instagram suggests you more on the same. Relevancy is another key factor that includes trending topics and timeliness.

Figure 6: EXAMPLE 1 OF INSTAGRAM FEED ALGORITHMIC FILTERING



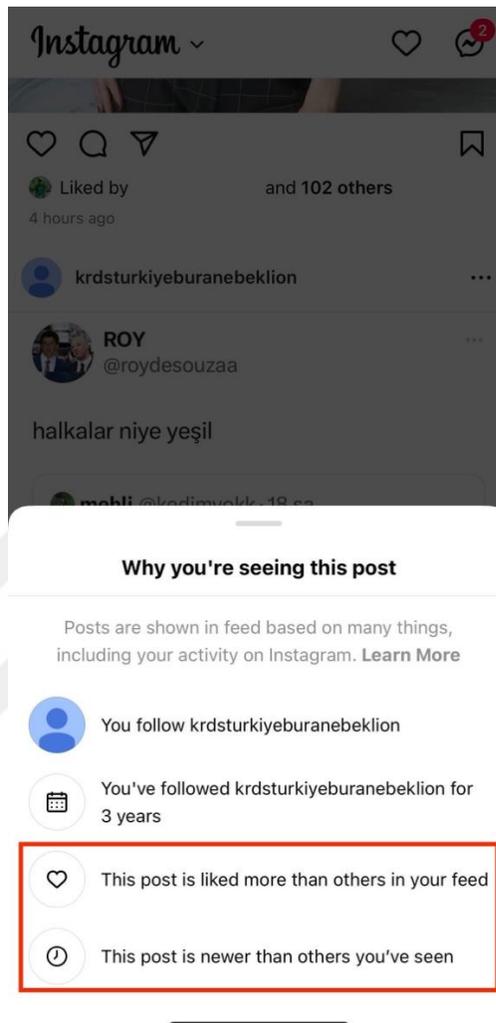
¹⁰⁴ Alyssa HIROSE (2023). <<2023 Instagram Algorithm Solved: How to Get Your Content Seen>>, <https://blog.hootsuite.com/instagram-algorithm> (12.04.2023)

Figure 7: EXAMPLE 2 OF INSTAGRAM FEED ALGORITHMIC FILTERING



As it can be seen on Figure 6 and 7, Instagram would recommend more content related to user's prior interactions and watching habits. Since you have interacted with that user before, or you watched a specific video content, you are more likely to see similar content to them. In the case of a reel, for instance, if you frequently engage with content from a user "X" who made a reel, you are more likely to see their content in your feed. If you like, comment, or share a reel, Instagram may also show you similar content from other users. Ultimately, Instagram's algorithm works to cater to individual users' interests and feed them the content they are most likely to engage with.

Figure 8: EXAMPLE 3 OF INSTAGRAM FEED ALGORITHMIC FILTERING



As it can be seen on Figure 8, relevancy meaning that the popularity and the timeliness of the content, is important. Instagram clearly underlines this. The example above was screenshotted by tapping on three dots on the right corner of the content and selecting the option “Why you’re seeing this post”. The answer is because the content is liked more than others in the feed, and it is newer than others already seen.

Another three important Instagram ranking factors are user’s frequency of using the platform, following number of the user and user’s session time. If the user does not open the platform very frequently, or spends very little time, that user would probably see the most relevant content such as family and friends’ posts. This means that businesses

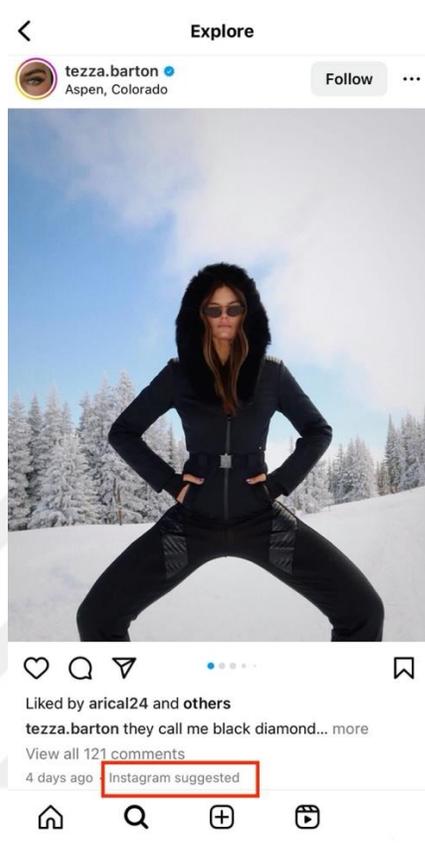
might go out of play. Besides, if the user follows too many accounts, it would probably be witness to a content competition for placement in its feed.

We have talked about Instagram feed algorithm so far, but the logic is the same for the Instagram Explore as well. Again, the post's popularity within the users, user's relationship with the content creator, user's prior explore tab activities, and the information about the content creator are crucial regarding the algorithms' way of working.

Figure 9: EXAMPLE 1 OF INSTAGRAM EXPLORE ALGORITHMIC FILTERING



Figure 10: EXAMPLE 2 OF INSTAGRAM EXPLORE ALGORITHMIC FILTERING



As it can be seen on the examples above, algorithms have the power of filtering, ranking, profiling, targeting, tracking, and especially recommending according to above mentioned factors. As it was discussed above, these suggestions help users to reduce choice overload, to consume the most accurate content when it is needed, and to get them enjoyed.

The working logic of Twitter's algorithms is also quite similar to that of Instagram. Twitter recommends content essentially based on engagement, relevance, and recency.¹⁰⁵ A tweet would be prioritized if it is popular and moreover if it is getting interaction especially within the users in your network. If there are some certain topics that the user specifically follows, Twitter will also consider the number of tweets, retweets, replies, and likes of contents in that topic.

¹⁰⁵ Josiah HUGHES (2022). <<How the Twitter Algorithm Works [2023 GUIDE]>>, <https://blog.hootsuite.com/twitter-algorithm/> (14.12.2022)

Figure 11: EXAMPLE 1 OF TWITTER ALGORITHMIC FILTERING



Figure 12: EXAMPLE 1 OF TWITTER ALGORITHMIC FILTERING



As it can be seen on Figure 11 and 12, Twitter would suggest you more tweets based on your previous behaviors on the platform just as in Instagram. User's own prior tweets, retweets as well as the ones that the user interacted with, the other users and topics that the user follows or engages with just as we mentioned above are important for Twitter algorithms. Based on what the user is already following, Twitter can prioritize tweets of other users that those users follow, with the thought that they may be relevant as in the Figure 12. Differing from Instagram, location is a key factor for Twitter algorithms in prioritizing and recommending content. Lastly, recency is also important. Popular tweets are more likely to be shown to the user.

Algorithmic recommenders become more and more prominent in eliminating the content less relevant to user. "RS make use of different sources of information for

providing users with predictions and recommendations of items.”¹⁰⁶ There are different kinds of algorithms used in recommender systems, but the most common filtering types are collaborative filtering and content-based recommendation systems. “CF is based on the way in which humans have made decisions throughout history: besides on our own experiences, we also base our decisions on the experiences and knowledge that reach each of us from a relatively large group of acquaintances.”¹⁰⁷ Collaborative filtering algorithms which are dependent to other users, identify the users who have similar interests, preferences, and needs. They make use of the historical data of the users who have similar tastes like their posts, tweets, retweets, likes, comments, replies, saves and so on, and assume that they will continue to share similarities; therefore, they recommend accordingly. This similarity seeking recommender systems can come users' way saying that "people who followed this also followed..., or people who liked this also liked..." and so on.

On the other hand, content-based recommender systems are independent of other users. “Content-based filtering makes recommendations based on user choices made in the past (e.g. in a web-based e-commerce RS, if the user purchased some fiction films in the past, the RS will probably recommend a recent fiction film that he has not yet purchased on this website).”¹⁰⁸ If we go back to the examples mentioned above, if the user watches constantly kitten videos on Instagram, then the RS would recommend more of kitten videos. This type of recommenders relies on the content which has already seen, liked, or spent quite some time on by the users. Keeping record of this data, algorithms try to do matching and recommend contents alike.

2.2. Individual filtering on social media

In the previous section, we discussed the algorithm-triggered part of the post filters applied during content consumption. However, post filters are not only limited to

¹⁰⁶ J. BOBADILLA & F. ORTEGA & A. HERNANDO & A. GUTIÉRREZ (2013). “Recommender systems survey”, **Knowledge-Based Systems**, 46, p.109.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ J. BOBADILLA & F. ORTEGA & A. HERNANDO & A. GUTIÉRREZ (2013). *Op.cit.* p.112.

algorithms. Individuals also apply some filters themselves. At this point, it would be appropriate to separate individual filters in content consumption and production.

2.2.1. Individual filtering while content consuming

As we have discussed in the first chapter, with the democratization of content creation and circulation and the huge increase of content production both in terms of number and diversity, users might find themselves inundated with an overwhelming amount of content. This choice overload regarding the content consumption can make it difficult to sift through and find the relevant information that truly matters to users.

Many platforms, like we gave the examples of Instagram and Twitter, try to address this issue by implementing algorithms that filter content and provide tailored recommendations. However, these algorithms can only do so much, and individual filtering has become an increasingly important and supplementary tool for social media users. Individual filtering is the process of customizing one's social media experience by deciding what content to engage with and what to ignore. This can involve unfollowing accounts that do not align with one's interests, muting certain topics or words, or creating curated lists of accounts to follow.

The relationship between individual filtering and content overload is clear. Without some level of filtering, social media users can quickly become overwhelmed and disengaged from the platform altogether. By taking control over what content they consume, users can reduce the noise and focus on what matters most to them. As we have mentioned before, it is not only for the benefit of the platforms, but also for the personal desire of the users to see the content that will attract their attention, since the attention of the users is limited, they can be distracted quickly, and they can keep what they see in their memory for a short time.

In order to fulfill this expectation, users might make use of the features that both Instagram and Twitter offer to them. First of all, users can filter their feed view on both platforms. They have options to personalize their feed view.

Figure 13: INSTAGRAM FEED VIEW OPTIONS



Figure 14: TWITTER FEED VIEW OPTIONS



In the Figure 13, it is possible to see users' Instagram feed view options. If the user taps on the Instagram logo, a pop will appear that the user can choose from there which feed prefers. There are mainly three options for viewing the Instagram feed: the algorithmic Home feed that the application is opened by default like this, the chronological Following feed that shows the content of following accounts according to their recency, and the Favorites feed which consists of accounts user chooses.¹⁰⁹ A similar feed viewing option exists also on Twitter. Different from Instagram, Twitter offers only two options. On the one hand, there is "For you" tab which can be seen on Figure 14. It is based on user's Twitter history and by looking at user's previous behaviors on the platform, it suggests contents or accounts that user might be interested in. On the other hand, there is "Following" tab which consists of tweets of the accounts user follows in a chronological order.

Users can also filter the trends they prefer to consume on Twitter. It can be seen on Figure 15 that users can either turn on or turn off the location and personalization options. If the user keeps on location option on, then user will have the chance to see what's happening around him/her at that moment, and if the user turns personalization option on, then user can see trend topics tailored to him/her.

¹⁰⁹ Sarah PEREZ (2022). <<Instagram launches chronological and 'favorites' feeds for all users, but they can't be the default>>, <https://techcrunch.com/2022/03/23/instagram-launches-chronological-and-favorites-feeds-for-all-users-but-they-cant-be-the-default/?guccounter=1> (23.03.2022)

Figure 15: FIRST OPTION OF TWITTER TRENDS VIEW

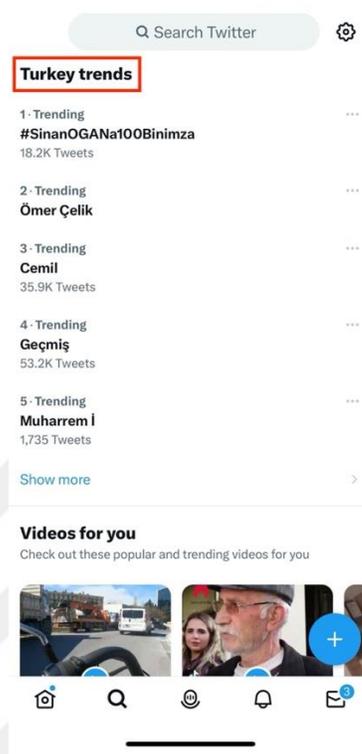


Figure 16: SECOND OPTION OF TWITTER TRENDS VIEW



Twitter users can also filter topics that generate their interest and follow certain of those topics just like following an account.

Figure 17: TWITTER TOPICS

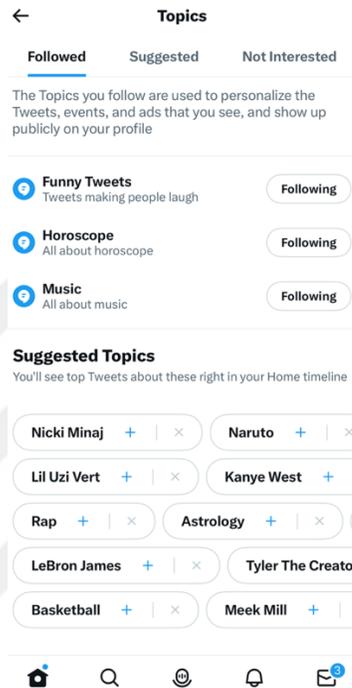
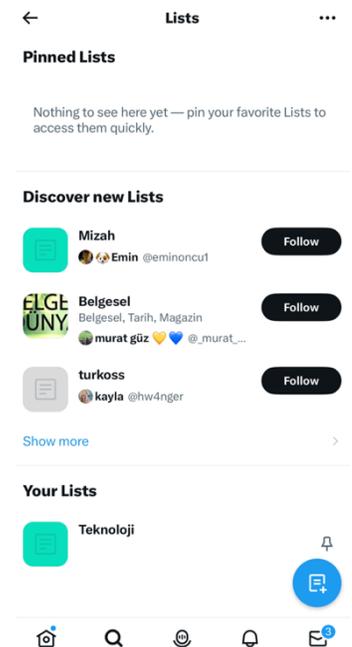
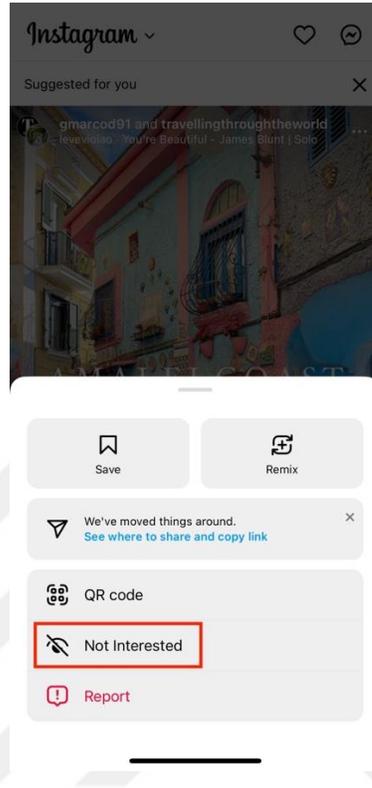
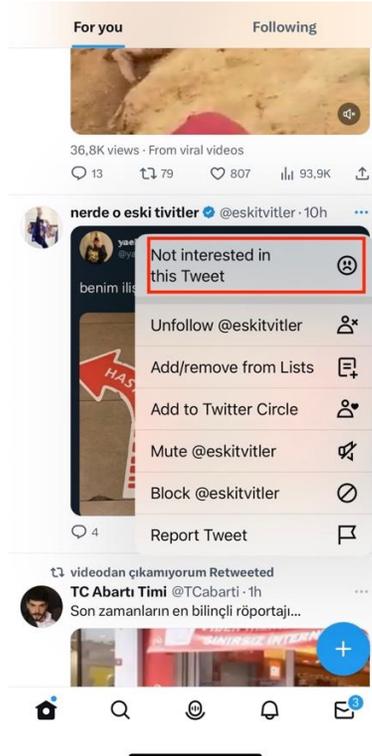


Figure 18: TWITTER LISTS



As it can be seen on Figure 17, users can easily opt-in to receive tweets about certain topics such as funny tweets, horoscope, music, sports, and so on. Twitter for sure would also suggest some topics that it thinks that it might be relevant to user. Filtering through topics would be practical to user as the user would not need to find specific accounts on those topics or manually search for hashtags. Twitter Lists are also a functional feature offered by the platform as the users might create some lists about their interests by adding relevant accounts that constantly post content about the interests in question. Moreover, tweets of this accounts are shown to user in a chronological order. Therefore, users can directly access the content related to the field of interest and minimize the possibility of missing the contents of the accounts they have added to their lists.

What if social media users see a content that does not align with their interests? Considering the abundance of content that we have covered so far, it is of course possible for users to encounter content that does not interest them. If the user does not use a platform frequently, spends a short time on the platform, and the algorithms do not know himself well enough, or in a low probability, content that will not be of interest to the user may appear regardless of all these factors. For sure, users might simply skip over content that doesn't interest them. They may not engage with it at all and move on to something that captures their attention. However, social media platforms offer them some features to reveal the content that does not appeal to them.

Figure 19: INSTAGRAM NOT INTERESTED OPTION**Figure 20: TWITTER NOT INTERESTED OPTION**

As it can be seen on Figure 19 and 20, it is really easy for user to mark the content as not interested if it does not draw their attention at all. In fact, this is a method that can enable algorithms to get to know the user better. It is possible to say that both algorithms and users are profitable in this case. By taking this action, the user will train the algorithm, so to speak, so that he/she does not encounter a similar content and will make the time spent there more interesting and enjoyable. Algorithms, on the other hand, will have another clue on the way to get to know the user in order to keep the user on the platform longer and increase profits.

The filtering options of individuals are not limited to these. If the users encounter content that does not interest them, contradicts their thoughts and beliefs, makes them feel uncomfortable and do not like it, they can not only mark as not interested, but also mute or hide the account that posted that content.

Figure 21: INSTAGRAM MUTE OPTION

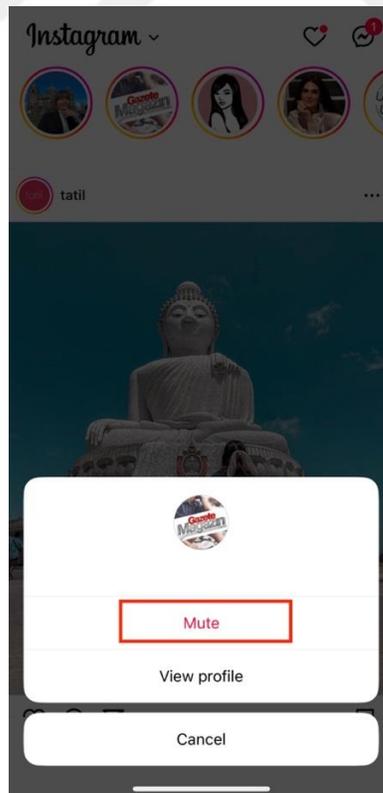
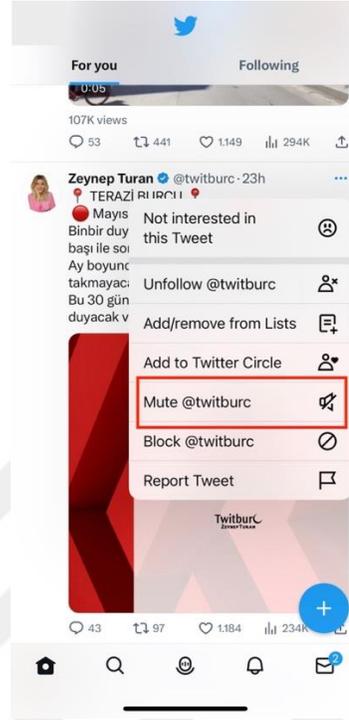


Figure 22: TWITTER MUTE OPTION

As it can be seen on Figure 21 and 22, another way to filter out unwanted content is to use the mute or hide feature. This allows users to temporarily or permanently hide accounts or specific posts without completely unfollowing the source. Some users may choose to unfollow an account or block content and users that do not match their interests. This can help create a more curated online experience. In some cases, users may choose to report content that they find offensive or inappropriate. This can be for various reasons, such as hate speech, cyberbullying, discrimination, misinformation, or violence. Ultimately, how users filter content depends on each individual's preferences and values.

2.2.2. Individual filtering while content producing

*“More than a third of West Germans said, ‘I don’t care what other people think of me’.
The misconception people make about themselves could not be greater than this.”*

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Elisabeth NOELLE-NEUMANN (1998). **KAMUOYU: Suskunluk Sarmalının Keşfi**, (Çeviren Murat Özkök), Dost Kitabevi, Ankara, p.XVI.

In the previous sections, we mentioned algorithmic filtering that users are exposed to while consuming content on social media, and we discussed the individual filtering strategies that users apply personally to avoid contents or users that do not appeal to them or to avoid situations that conflict with their own established thoughts and beliefs. Besides all these, the individual filtering that users apply to themselves while producing content on social media is also worth discussing.

Users might adopt some individual filtering strategies themselves while generating content on social media. It's not uncommon to have various fears or insecurities while posting personal or professional content online. Individuals fear public scrutiny, judgment, backlash, or even losing their job or reputation. The presence of trolls, cyberbullies, and cancel culture, which are topics that offer in-depth research in itself, has made it even more challenging for social media users to feel comfortable and safe while sharing their perspectives.

The fear of offending others has also led to self-censorship, causing a silence spiral. “The spiral of silence theory is based on the view that society threatens to exclude and expel individuals who fall out of common agreement, while individuals often have an unconscious, possibly genetic, fear of exclusion.”¹¹¹ With the fear of reaction and exclusion, individuals tend to constantly monitor their surroundings and make inferences and act accordingly in order to determine which views, behaviors, preferences are accepted, and which are not. If individuals feel that their views are in harmony with the rest of society, they may be more willing to participate in conversations and express themselves; nevertheless, when they think they are in the minority, on the contrary, they prefer to remain silent. In this way, the act of being silent causes them to appear weak in society, and as a result, silence turns into a self-reproducing spiral.

“Putting a badge on the collar or a sticker on the car is ‘talking’; even though we have an opinion, not doing them is ‘silence’”.¹¹² Referring to the relationship between public opinion and the media, Neumann states that the majority in the society is more

¹¹¹ *ibid.* p.234.

¹¹² *ibid.* p.49.

willing to speak when supported by the media, if the media supports the minority, a silent majority will form, if the minority is confronted with the hostile attitude of the media, they will remain silent, and if the minority is supported, they will have more desire to speak than the majority.¹¹³ At this point, we can say that the dominant role is in the media.

Research on the existence, validity and effects of the spiral of silence theory continues in the context of digital media. A survey conducted by Pew Research Center with 1801 adults in 2014 about the “Edward Snowden’s 2013 revelations of widespread government surveillance of Americans’ phone and email records”¹¹⁴, only 42% of Facebook and Twitter users were willing to post about the issue, even though 86% of Americans were willing to discuss it in person. It also revealed that at work people were three times more likely to talk about the issue if they believed their coworkers shared their opinion. The study shows that users are beware of sharing ideas that they think their friends or followers will not like in the social media environment.

Another study dwells on being able anonym and expressing opinions in this manner on social media platforms. Individuals may share their thoughts anonymously rather than speaking out in public under their real names and running the danger of societal repercussions in the event of unfavorable opinions.¹¹⁵ In the social media world, they may easily express their support by doing things like liking, sharing, and leaving brief comments on material.

Based on the examples above, individuals might tend to hold back their opinions, thoughts, and feelings to avoid any potential conflict or criticism. This might result in a lack of diversity in the discourse, as individuals limit themselves to talking about only what is deemed socially acceptable. Remaining silent, avoiding producing content, not

¹¹³ Elisabeth NOELLE-NEUMANN (1997). “Suskunluk Sarmalı Kuramının Medyayı Anlamaya Katkısı”, in S. İrvan (eds.), **Medya, Kültür, Siyaset**, Ark, Ankara, pp.228-229.

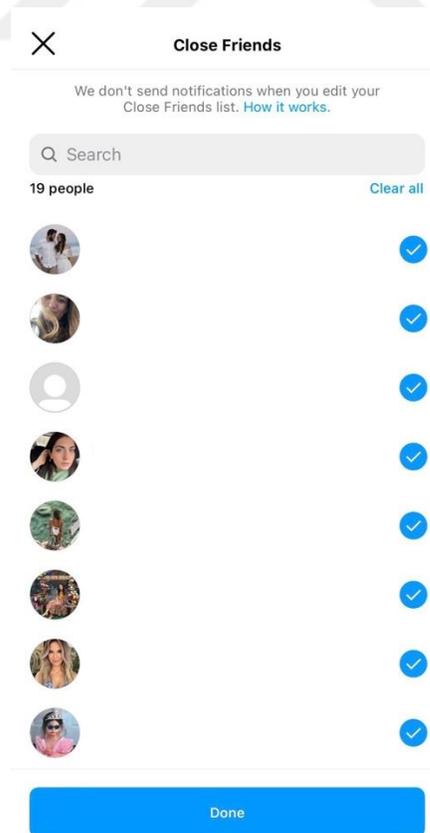
¹¹⁴ Keith HAMPTON & Lee RAINIE & Weixu LU & Maria DWYER & Inyoung SHIN & Kristen PURCELL (2014). << Social Media and the ‘Spiral of Silence’>>, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2014/08/26/social-media-and-the-spiral-of-silence/> (26.08.2014)

¹¹⁵ Pablo PORTEN-CHEÉ & Christiane EILDERS (2015). “Spiral of silence online: How online communication affects opinion climate perception and opinion expression regarding the climate change debate”, **Studies in Communication Sciences**, 15(1), p.145.

sharing any opinion will of course have a negative impact on the abundance and diversity of content on social media. However, instead of not producing content completely or posting content anonymously, users can filter which accounts can see the content they will post by taking advantage of the features offered by the platforms while producing content.

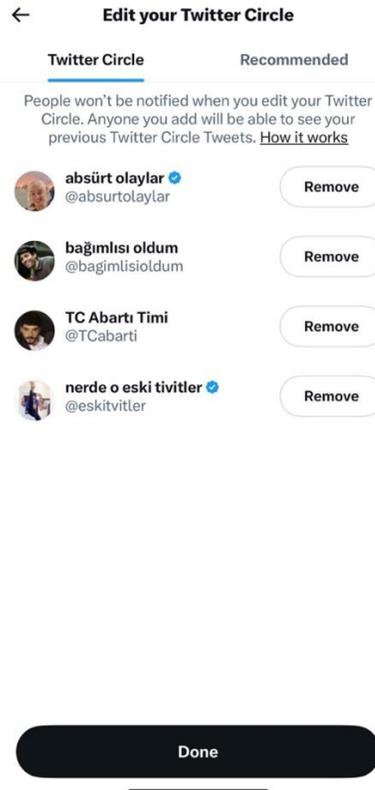
As it can be seen on Figure 23, Instagram's Close Friends feature allows users to create a private list of followers who can see their Story content. While posting a Story, users can choose to share it with either their entire followers or just their Close Friends list. This feature allows users to share more personal and exclusive content with a selected group of followers. Yet, if the users do not want to create a Close Friends list, they can also prevent other users that they do not want to be seen their Story contents by them by blocking them only from Story section either temporary or permanently.

Figure 23: INSTAGRAM CLOSE FRIENDS VIEW



A study conducted in Turkey to examine in detail the practice of using the close friend feature of Instagram users reveals important findings that will support our research on the motivations for using this feature. According to this study, users prefer close friends feature both for inclusion and exclusion. One of the prominent themes for inclusion is ideological affinity. Users tend to add to their close friends those who they think have a similar view of life ideologically or from different perspectives. Another important point about inclusion is non-judgement. Users add people they think they will not judge their posts to close friends. On the other hand, study shows that the reasons for exclusion are family/relatives, and work relations. In particular, users who do not want their posts containing alcohol to be seen by their family members tend to prefer close friends. Close friends is a safe space where users can share any content they think will not be judged, such as their sexual identity, photos that do not comply with social media expectations.¹¹⁶

Figure 24: TWITTER CIRCLE VIEW



¹¹⁶ Sinan AŞÇI & Nihal KOCABAY-ŞENER (2022). “‘Instagram’ kullanıcılarının ‘yakın arkadaş’ özelliğini kullanım pratikleri üzerine bir araştırma”, **Etkileşim**, 11, p.118.

Just as Instagram, Twitter also gives the opportunity to users to curate the audience that will see their content. Twitter Circle allows users to share content with a more filtered audience. User's tweets can only be seen by and responded to by members of the circle. When user starts tweeting, Twitter will prompt user to choose between tweeting to Twitter Circle and everyone else. Users are free to add and remove participants from the circle as much as they choose, and once someone is gone, no one will be informed just like in Instagram.

Overall, both features provide a more personalized experience for users by allowing them to connect and share content with a smaller group of followers or accounts they follow.

2.3. Challenging sides of algorithmic and individual filtering

The relationship between social media and algorithmic and individual filtering is actually complex, and the impact of these filters on users' online experience is still being studied. While they help personalize users' online experience, ensuring that they only see relevant content, they may have unintended consequences that we need to address. The use of algorithmic and individual filtering has raised concerns as the users are only exposed to content that agrees with their interests, existing beliefs, attitudes, and values. This might lead to a lack of diversity in content abundance and can further segment users. In the previous section, we discussed why and how both algorithmic and individual filtering have applied. Now, we would like to talk about the challenging aspects of these filters and their possible negative consequences.

2.3.1. The filter bubble effect

"The power of individual targeting – the technology will be so good it will be very hard for people to watch or consume something that has not in some sense been tailored for them. We know roughly who you are, roughly what you care about, roughly who your friends are."

Filtering through algorithms and individually is increasingly becoming a crucial, indispensable, and inseparable component of social media. As we have discussed previously, relevancy is a key concept because it is the relevancy that will grab attention of the users in the content abundance and will keep them on the platform more. However, it is not an easy process as it requires incredible amount of personal data explicitly or implicitly shared. To be able to show the most relevant content or the account to users, algorithms need to know their interests, admirations, fears, drawbacks, things they love or hate, simply everything. More relevancies require more data, and more data requires more sophisticated filters to be organized. This cycle never ends.¹¹⁸

Almost the entire Internet world is built on filterings including algorithms that make predictions about what users will like or be interested in in the future by monitoring what users or similar us have liked or been interested in in the past, and including also individual filters that both bypass the unwanted content while consuming and producing. Eli Pariser argues that all these processes might create a unique *filter bubble* for each individual. According to Pariser, filter bubble concept “fundamentally alters the way we encounter ideas and information”¹¹⁹ since the users are presented with content that reinforces their existing opinions, limiting their exposure to differing viewpoints and information. Filter bubble becomes kind of a comfort zone for the users since it provides the content or the information that they want to see, watch, read, or hear rather than the contradicting or challenging contents or viewpoints. If the content or the information is only limited to user preference, users might end up in isolation according to him. The filter bubble effect can reinforce and amplify their biases, leading to a homogenized worldview that can affect their ability to think critically and make informed decisions.

¹¹⁷ Eric SCHMIDT, as cited in, Jason DEANS (2010). <<Google chief warns on social networking dangers>>, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2010/aug/18/google-facebook> (18.08.2010)

¹¹⁸ Eli PARISER (2011). Op.cit. p.25.

¹¹⁹ Eli PARISER (2011). Op.cit. p.10.

“Democracy requires citizens to see things from one another’s point of view, but instead we are more and more enclosed in our own bubbles. Democracy requires a reliance on shared facts; instead we are being offered parallel but separate universes.”¹²⁰ Our universes are parallel but separate because of the filterings and their profiling about us. According to Pariser, when two users do the same query, they might see completely different results since the search engine is personalized to user interests. Natalia Stanusch’s google query about Qatar World Cup in 18 different countries would be an example of this argument of Pariser. Stanusch asks her friends from 18 different countries (Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, India, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Qatar, Spain, the UK, the USA, and the UAE) to google Qatar World Cup in the official language of the country they are based in and to minimize personalization effect she also requests to do this search either in a new browser or incognito mode. Her main concern is to see if Google would show some search results about human rights violations as it was considered as a focal point for many in the Qatar World Cup. In the end, the search results of participants are different one another; moreover, while some see many results related to human rights violations, others see almost none, regardless of countries qualifying for the World Cup.¹²¹

We argue that the same situation exists for the social media accounts of two different users. One might see a totally different news feed or explore tab than the other user since their likes, comments, interactions, engagements, or platform using habits inform different things about themselves to the algorithms. According to algorithms what is newsworthy for one user might not be for the other user and since the algorithms do not think a viewpoint is worthwhile to show because they do not find it relevant to the user, they might hide it from the user even if it is important. Pariser argues that even if users think that they have total control of their choices, the filter bubble effect might have significant implications for their understanding of the world, their political beliefs, and their ability to make informed decisions. Users’ past inputs affect their upcoming outputs

¹²⁰ *ibid.* p.8.

¹²¹ Natalia STANUSCH (2022). <<What Happens If You Google ‘Qatar World Cup’ in 18 Different Countries>>, <https://dataethics.eu/what-happens-if-you-google-qatar-world-cup-in-18-different-countries/> (22.11.2022)

as it is described as “a Web history you’re doomed to repeat”¹²² by Pariser. Users might find themselves in an infinite “you-loop” which is a static, constricted version of oneself.¹²³ Gillespie also agrees the existence of filter bubble effect and thinks that the users are guided into filter bubbles by algorithms and their own inclination for the like-minded, where they only get the news they anticipate and the political opinions they already hold.¹²⁴

Pariser reveals three dynamics of filter bubbles and the first one is the fact that users are all alone in their bubbles, so to say in their small worlds, which poses an obstacle for the shared information and experience.¹²⁵ Since the “culture isn’t experienced in solitude”¹²⁶, users might want to consume some things for just being able to share some mutual experiences with the rest of the society. We can watch a movie, read a book, or listen to a song just out of “social need, as a way of participating in society”¹²⁷, even if it does not appeal to our interests. The two remaining dynamics are the invisibility of the filter bubbles and the fact that users do not choose to enter in them.¹²⁸ Therefore, it is really difficult to escape from the filter bubble effect.

This choice narrowing but also view narrowing filter bubbles function as “isolated audience clusters”¹²⁹ and “monocultures”¹³⁰ and might pose a challenge for the serendipitous encounters which contributes to individuals in self-development, and for the creativity which is enriched with the combination of viewpoints stemming from different backgrounds and cultures.¹³¹

¹²² Eli PARISER (2011). Op.cit. p.14.

¹²³ *ibid.*

¹²⁴ Tarleton GILLESPIE (2014). Op.cit. p.188.

¹²⁵ Eli PARISER (2011). Op.cit. p.10.

¹²⁶ Clive THOMPSON (2008). <<If You Liked This, You’re Sure to Love That>>, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/23/magazine/23Netflix-t.html> (21.11.2008)

¹²⁷ *ibid.*

¹²⁸ Eli PARISER (2011). Op.cit. p.11.

¹²⁹ Mariella BASTIAN & Mykola MAKHORTYKH & Tom DOBBER (2019). “News personalization for peace: how algorithmic recommendations can impact conflict coverage”, **International Journal of Conflict Management**, 30(3), p.319.

¹³⁰ Engin BOZDAĞ (2013). “Bias in algorithmic filtering and personalization”, **Ethics and Information Technology**, 15(3), p.209.

¹³¹ Eli PARISER (2011). Op.cit. p.13.

Referring to the Robert Putnam's terms bonding capital, which can be created during an alumni meeting, for example, and bridging capital, which can be created during a meeting where people from different backgrounds gather to meet each other, Pariser, like Putnam, thinks that bridging capital is important because it enables creating and expanding your network to whom you can ask for help when you need it. Even though it was expected the Internet would foster the bridging capitals, Pariser believes that users' real and virtual acquaintances are increasingly looking like for the users' and while bonding is growing, bridging is diminishing. "And this is important because it's bridging that creates our sense of the 'public'—the space where we address the problems that transcend our niches and narrow self-interests."¹³²

An empirical study among 120 Facebook users that investigates the filter bubble effect on the Facebook newsfeed, shows that who use social media heavily experience the filter bubble effect more frequently than others who just sometimes use the platform in their everyday lives. Additionally, the study reveals that the perception of the filter bubble is significantly influenced by the education level. Moreover, the impression of the filter bubble has been shown to have a major impact on unfavorable behaviors toward the filter bubble, such as being on guard out of mistrust.¹³³ Another similar study realized among 140 Facebook users from Germany shows that the awareness of filter bubble is related to the professional and heavy use. On the one hand, there are users who are not only aware of filter bubble but develop counter strategies such as deleting cookies or browser history, and on the other hand, there are users who are aware of filter bubble and want to overcome it, but do not have enough knowledge or motivation to do this.¹³⁴

¹³² *ibid.* p.14.

¹³³ Katharina KLUG & Charlotte STRANG (2019). "The Filter Bubble in Social Media Communication: How Users Evaluate Personalized Information in the Facebook Newsfeed", in Thomas Osburg & Stephanie Heinecke (eds.), **Media Trust in a Digital World**, Springer, p.172.

¹³⁴ Nils PLETTENBERG & Johannes NAKAYAMA & Poornima BELAVADI & Patrick HALBACH & Laura BURBACH & André Calero VALDEZ & Martina ZIEFLE (2020). "User Behavior and Awareness of Filter Bubbles in Social Media", in Vincent G. Duffy (ed.), **Digital Human Modeling and Applications in Health, Safety, Ergonomics and Risk Management Human Communication, Organization and Work**, Springer, p.89.

To sum up, filter bubbles have the risk of “fragmentation, radicalization, and polarization of the public sphere”¹³⁵ as well as “fewer unplanned encounters, less shared experience, decreasing social cohesion and increasing a sense of control on individuals with less privacy and freedom”¹³⁶. According to a case study on minorities performed for Turkish and Dutch Twitter users, shows that although the media should represent societal preferences, it should also grant equal access to everyone, including those whose shared social location tends to preclude them from political engagement. Different voices from various backgrounds must be heard in public life, not simply the majority.¹³⁷

2.3.2. Echo chamber effect

“If you believe that the most serious problem is gun control, or climate change, or terrorism, or ethnic and religious tension, or the latest war, you might spend most of your time reading about that problem - if you wish from the point of view that you like best.”

*Cass R. Sunstein*¹³⁸

As discussed above algorithmic and individual filtering have significantly improved the capacity of users to filter what they want to see, read, watch, or hear, in brief what to consume and to choose how they want to navigate themselves in social media. Users have the ability of viewing precisely what they want, nothing more or nothing less without any obstacle or difficulty. Discovering what similar users enjoy or dislike has become so simple. Users can pay more attention to what people like them enjoy, and they can easily escape from what they dislike. They have the power of creating something that

¹³⁵ Jernej KALUZA (2022). “Far-reaching effects of the filter bubble, the most notorious metaphor in media studies”, **AI & SOCIETY**, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-022-01399-x>

¹³⁶ Natascha JUST & Michael LATZER (2016). “Governance by algorithms: reality construction by algorithmic selection on the Internet”, **Media, Culture & Society**, 39(2), p.254.

¹³⁷ Engin BOZDAĞ & Qi GAO & Geert-Jan HOUBEN & Martijn WARNIER (2014). “Does offline political segregation affect the filter bubble? An empirical analysis of information diversity for Dutch and Turkish Twitter users”, **Computers in Human Behavior**, 41, p.415.

¹³⁸ Cass R. SUNSTEIN (2007). Op.cit. p.2.

closely resembles their own communications realm, and it can be perfectly designed for them if they struggle to design it.¹³⁹

We would like to discuss about two phenomenon, filter bubble and echo chamber, that both complement and reinforce each other, and can be also used interchangeably. The filter bubble effect refers to the personalized algorithms used by social media platforms that curate the content that individuals see based on their preferences in order to reinforce their existing views, while filtering out information that contradicts them as we discussed above. On the other hand, the echo chamber effect refers to the social dynamics where individuals are surrounded by like-minded people and are repeatedly exposed to the same opinions and beliefs. It means that individuals are primarily exposed to information that reinforces and echoes their existing views, while being isolated from dissenting opinions. The filter bubble might be considered as a technological phenomenon facilitated by algorithms, whereas the echo chamber is a social phenomenon shaped by individual choices and peer groups. However, both filter bubbles and echo chambers can lead to an isolated and polarized worldview.

Sunstein argues that having various communication options and a wide range of choices is a necessity of democratic countries since where “people do not live in echo chambers or information cocoons”¹⁴⁰. Nonetheless, he thinks that the situation even in democratic societies is far beyond it in a negative way. It is stemming from several reasons such as the intense tendency of the algorithms towards similarity and relevancy in order to reduce the choice overload, correspondingly an increased user control over content by the filtering and content curating, a commensurate decline in the influence of general-interest intermediaries, and the user’s willing to interact with like-minded people. Individuals ache to avoid situations, contents, opinions that contradict themselves; therefore, they tend to create a network with users just lookalike to them and to interact primarily with individuals and information that confirm their existing beliefs, ideologies, and prejudices. Since these similar individuals regularly affirm their own viewpoints, whilst interaction with others who have opposing views is being ignored. In the end,

¹³⁹ *ibid.* p.3.

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.* p.xi.

“people are mainly listening to louder echoes of their own voices. A situation of this kind is likely to produce far worse than mere fragmentation.”¹⁴¹

According to Stark and Stegmann, even if filter bubble and echo chamber effect try to put into the question of challenging side of the personalized environment which immerse users in a universe where the latest information just confirms what they already know, there is something different between these two: Through algorithmic recommendations, filter bubbles, which describe how information is disseminated and used, grow around a single user, potentially cutting them off from important societal debates. On the other hand, one is never alone in an echo chamber because the term refers to communication conditions where one is only exposed to viewpoints that concur with their own.¹⁴²

Bruns argues that “echo chamber emerges when a group of participants choose to preferentially connect with each other, to the exclusion of outsiders (e.g., by friending on Facebook, following on Twitter, etc.)”¹⁴³. These individual choices can lead to the fragmentation of the public sphere according to Sunstein. Even though social media can be used to find some inspiring and stimulating content since there exists a serious abundance both in terms of number and diversity with the democratization of content production and distribution, users often choose to create a ‘Daily Me’. Sunstein does not ignore the social function of the Internet which allows individuals to form networks across the world whom they are less or no accessible to each other. In fact, it enables to create echo chambers on many topics ranging from health to magazine, gaming to politics where individuals can express their opinion and love towards something. However, since the same voices are repeated over and over again and more individuals getting into the chamber forms a bigger voice, “this is the foundation for the concern about the risk of fragmentation”¹⁴⁴.

¹⁴¹ *ibid.* p.13.

¹⁴² Birgit STARK & Daniel STEGMANN & Melanie MAGIN & Pascal JÜRGENS (2020). *Op.cit.* pp.14-15.

¹⁴³ Axel BRUNS (2019). **Are Filter Bubbles Real?**, Polity, Cambridge, p.29.

¹⁴⁴ Cass R. SUNSTEIN (2007). *Op.cit.* p.52.

According to a study realized by Batorski and Grzywińska about the Polish users' activity on the Facebook pages of political parties and politicians, only a small percentage of Facebook users participate in open political debates on political Facebook pages; however, users are more engaged during election campaigns since the level of engagement relies on the current political events taking place in the offline public realm. Finally, they declare that Sunstein's echo chambers theory is supported by the fragmented and homogeneous political groupings of the online public on Facebook.¹⁴⁵

Another recent study which demonstrates how various platforms encourage varying degrees of segregation in online communities, analyzes more than 100 million pieces of content including posts and user interactions on debatable issues such as abortion, vaccinations, gun rights, and US presidential elections on Facebook, Twitter, Reddit and Gab and searches for indications of echo chambers. Applying the same definition of echo chamber to each platform results in different social dynamics such as the segregation in Facebook was higher than the other platforms.¹⁴⁶

Another study focusing on the 2019 mayoral elections in Turkey draws attention to online political fragmentation, echo chamber effect and polarization. Hashtag and geographical analyses showed that the mayoral elections contributed significantly to the online political polarization, as two hashtags, #mazbatamiziverin and #hirsizchpkk blaming the other side with electoral fraud and stealing the elections, became extremely popular by supporters of CHP and AKP respectively. Moreover, it showed that political polarization resulting from local elections in a region can spread throughout the country.¹⁴⁷

In brief, social media platforms might create an environment where individuals tend to interact with like-minded individuals or groups, which leads to further reinforcement of their biases and beliefs. In such an environment, individuals can become

¹⁴⁵ Dominik BATORSKI & Ilona GRZYWINSKA (2017). Op.cit. 359.

¹⁴⁶ Michele TRAVIERSO (2021). <<Measuring magnetism: how social media creates echo chambers>>, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d43978-021-00019-4> (23.02.2021)

¹⁴⁷ Seval YURTÇIÇEK ÖZAYDIN (2021). "Hashtag Wars, Online Political Polarization and Mayoral Elections", **Social Sciences Research Journal**, 10 (3), p.554.

dismissive of other viewpoints, values, or lifestyles. This can further contribute to the division and can often lead to social and political polarization.

2.3.3. Homophily

“Similarity begets friendship.”¹⁴⁸

All individuals possess different kind of characteristics and unique personalities depending on both sociodemographic, environmental, cultural, behavioral, or genetic factors and in the previous sections we discussed that individuals often tend to communicate and interact with others who look like more to them. Therefore, anything that they experience because of their possessions and positions gain strength and it reveals a typification of “people like us”.¹⁴⁹

Just as individuals tend to be friends, meet and bond with people they think they have common feelings, similar characters, and similar or similar interests in real life, in the same way, they tend to interact with and befriend users on social media that they think they are similar or to follow such social media accounts. “Homophily is the principle that a contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people.”¹⁵⁰ Homophily is the tendency of individuals to form social connections with others who are similar to themselves. Homophily has been observed in numerous social contexts, including neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, and online networks. In the context of social media, homophily might have a significant impact on users' behavior. Social media algorithms are designed to show users content that is relevant and engaging to them as we have intensely discussed above, based on their past behavior and preferences. These algorithms tend to reinforce homophily by showing users posts, articles, and recommendations that align with their interests and beliefs.

¹⁴⁸ Plato (1968). **Laws**, (Translated by R.G. Bury), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, p.837.

¹⁴⁹ Miller MCPHERSON & Lynn SMITH-LOVIN & James M. COOK (2001). “Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks”, **Annual Review of Sociology**, 27 (1), p.416.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*

As we went over it above, since the attention is a scarce commodity and is getting increasingly difficult to grab the attention of users, there is a race for the attention in the social media where we witness an immense amount of content production and circulation. Thereupon, the tendency of individuals to turn to opinion-reinforcing content and connections brought by homophily accompanies the tendency to stay away from opinion-challenging content in order to avoid any conflict. “Therefore, fragmentation derives from two processes: homophily and selective exposure.”¹⁵¹ Homophily can have implications for online communities. Users who are part of a homogenous group may feel more comfortable sharing their views and opinions, leading to the formation of echo chambers. This can be beneficial for fostering a sense of belonging and mutual understanding within the group but can also make it difficult for outsiders to join the conversation or challenge existing viewpoints.

Two social scientists, Paul Lazarsfeld & Robert K. Merton present two types of homophily which are status homophily and value homophily. Status homophily signifies the informal, formal, ascribed, or acquired status whereas value homophily is mainly grounded on values, attitudes, beliefs, abilities and aspirations. Status homophily can be described as the main sociodemographic factors which contribute to fragmentation of the society combining assigned qualities such as race, ethnicity, sex, or age, and acquired qualities like religion, education, occupation, or behavior patterns. These two have the power of influentially shape individuals’ future behaviors and the environments that they would like to be within.¹⁵²

All the algorithmic filterings, recommender systems, and algorithmic gatekeeping by exposing individuals viewing similar ideologies, opinions, viewpoints, and emotions in social media platforms contribute to creation of individual filters as well. It is believed that individuals who are in the act of avoiding the fact, situation or idea that make them feel uncomfortable by their nature, being exposed to similarities and relevancies through personalized algorithms increase homophily in social media. Even in real life, it is possible

¹⁵¹ Dominik BATORSKI & Ilona GRZYWINSKA (2017). “Three dimensions of the public sphere on Facebook”, **Information, Communication & Society**, 21(3), p.360.

¹⁵² Miller MCPHERSON & Lynn SMITH-LOVIN & James M. COOK (2001). Op.cit. p.419.

to encounter and meet individuals with different backgrounds, ideologies, experiences, and to self-develop with different perspectives, while the presence of algorithms in social media can limit this opportunity considerably. Since there exists homophilous tendencies in many social media platforms, they can be seen as the engines of homophily.¹⁵³ Such a tendency can be seen in the study of Chong¹⁵⁴ who aims to explore how users use Twitter hashtags to get political information and how these platform and hashtags enable political conversation amongst users who have lookalike or different political views. Study, investigating 18.000 tweets, reveals that the nationalists and ultra conservative users who supports Donald Trump gathers around the #MAGA (Make America Great Again!) whereas the liberal, activist, and anti-Donald Trump users gathers around #Resist. Another related study which predicts that individuals with various political ideologies would have systematically varying degrees of political homophily, tested its proposition on Twitter and found out that more extreme and conservative individuals tend to be more homophilous than more liberal and moderate ones.¹⁵⁵ A study conducted in Turkey also reveals that a significant majority of the users they interviewed in-depth stated that they follow accounts that match their own framework and worldview. Even, as an example of selective exposure, which we will discuss in the next section, it is stated in the same study that users might mute or block some accounts that they come across frequently if they conflict with some of their frameworks and their worldviews. Related study underlines once again that the tendency to follow accounts with similar views causes homophily networks to form on Twitter, and the presence of homophily networks causes echo chambers.¹⁵⁶

It can be referred as an algorithmically induced homophily¹⁵⁷ that is seen on social media platforms. Individuals can find themselves in homogeneous interaction structures

¹⁵³ Axel BRUNS (2019). Op.cit. pp.4-5.

¹⁵⁴ Miyoung CHONG (2018). “Analyzing Political Information Network of the U.S. Partisan Public on Twitter”, **Lecture Notes in Computer Science**, p.460.

¹⁵⁵ Andrei BOUTYLINE & Robb WILLER (2016). “The Social Structure of Political Echo Chambers: Variation in Ideological Homophily in Online Networks”, **Political Psychology**, 38(3), p.551.

¹⁵⁶ Burak POLAT & Necmi Emel DİLMEN & Cem Sefa SÜTÇÜ (2021). “Türkiye’de Twitter Kullanıcılarının Retweet Pratikleri Üzerine Kullanımlar ve Doyumlar Paradigması ile Bir Karma Araştırma”, **Yeni Medya Elektronik Dergisi**, 5 (2), p.126.

¹⁵⁷ Jonas KAISER & Adrian RAUCHFLEISCH (2020). “Birds of a Feather Get Recommended Together: Algorithmic Homophily in YouTube’s Channel Recommendations in the United States and Germany”, **Social Media + Society**, 6(4), p.2.

for example in school, workplace or neighborhood which is coined as induced homophily¹⁵⁸. Algorithmically induced homophily carries out this understanding from social to technological side and fosters homophily in the digital world as well. There are some studies revealing that homophily enables algorithms to make predictions and do profiling about other users and to recommend relevant contents. According to one study that investigates if it is possible to deduce the qualities of different users from the traits of a portion of the users in a social networking site, users with shared characteristics are more likely to be friends and create communities; besides, some user characteristics can be deduced with high accuracy from data on as little as 20% of users.¹⁵⁹

To summarize, we can say that both the algorithms and features of social media platforms that promote similarity and homogeneity, and users' tendency towards seeking out reinforcing perspectives and avoiding challenging opinions, intensify the homophily on social media platforms.

2.3.4. Selective exposure and selective avoidance

Pariser discusses that algorithms do not conflict with opinions that users already have and present them what they already believe; therefore, they end up in a filter bubble on their own. It also brings along the risk of overlooking of the important social issues by the user because algorithms can hide some topics from the user since they think they are irrelevant. However, "Facebook declares that 'individual choice' matters more than algorithms do — that people's friend groups and actions to shield themselves from content they don't agree with are the main culprits in any bubbling that's going on."¹⁶⁰ Pariser admits that it is obviously important with whom users choose to be friends or who they choose to follow on social media; nevertheless, it is also worth discussing according to

¹⁵⁸ Gueorgi KOSSINETS & Duncan J. WATTS (2009). "Origins of Homophily in an Evolving Social Network", *American Journal of Sociology*, 115(2), p.407.

¹⁵⁹ Alan MISLOVE & Bimal VISWANATH & Krishna P. GUMMADI & Peter DRUSCUHEL (2010). "You are who you know: inferring user profiles in online social networks", *Proceedings of the third ACM international conference on Web search and data mining*, p.251.

¹⁶⁰ Eli PARISER (2015). <<Did Facebook's Big Study Kill My Filter Bubble Thesis?>>, <https://www.wired.com/2015/05/did-facebooks-big-study-kill-my-filter-bubble-thesis/> (07.05.2015)

him that algorithms' narrowing effect is as strong as users' avoidance of views they disagree.¹⁶¹

Nicholas Negroponte mentions that there would be a natural difference between what an individual wants to read in a newspaper on a Monday morning and on a Sunday afternoon, changing accordingly to one's time available, mood and topics. Individuals might want "lesser or greater degrees of personalization"¹⁶². Negroponte calls it "the Daily Me" which can be created personally by the algorithms within just seconds for the user, but the user also has the power to personalize which news to see on its own.

It is possible to discern between two types of personalization: pre-selected and self-selected.¹⁶³ While pre-selected personalization is done for the user by without its intention and consent by websites, search engines, social networking sites or advertisers, self-selected personalization includes circumstances in which individuals opt to meet only lookalike viewpoints.¹⁶⁴ Meaning that if a user is an abortion rights defender, a LGBT rights activist, or an anti-vaxxer, that user probably would not want to be friends or follow another user on social media which has a complete counterview. "Selective exposure is the idea that people purposefully select information matching their viewpoints."¹⁶⁵

Although selective exposure, which is the process of seeking out and focusing on content that confirms or reinforces one's existing beliefs, values, and attitudes, and has reached its top level both through individual preferences and algorithms, this behavior actually dates back to Festinger's "Cognitive Dissonance" Theory in the 1950s. Festinger explains that if the two pairs of cognitions that an individual has conflicts and arises a dissonance, the individual would feel psychologically uncomfortable and to reduce the dissonance, the individual tend to avoid the information creates the dissonance. The

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*

¹⁶² Nicholas NEGROPONTE (1995). **Being Digital**, Hodder and Stoughton Great Britain, p.154.

¹⁶³ Frederik J. Zuiderveen BORGESIUUS & Damian TRILLING & Judith MÖLLER & Balázs BODÓ & Claes H. de VREESE & Natali HELBERGER (2016). "Should we worry about filter bubbles?", **Internet Policy Review**, 5(1), p.3.

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Natalie Jomini STROUD (2010). "Polarization and partisan selective exposure", **Journal of Communication**, 60(3), p.556.

pressure to eliminate dissonance increases in parallel with the size of the dissonance.¹⁶⁶ In simple terms, it means choosing to follow pages or accounts on social media that align with user views, beliefs, and preferences. For example, if someone is interested in politics and supports a particular party or candidate, they are more likely to follow social media accounts that share similar views or opinions.

Selective exposure does not necessarily mean that a view cannot coexist with its counterview, yet users might actively and consciously reduce their exposure to unwanted dissonance both present and future by deliberately severing connections with sources of opposing views, like forming an online gated community where one is protected from the diverse outside world, and this tendency is defined as selective avoidance.¹⁶⁷ Selective avoidance is when individuals choose to ignore or avoid content that contradicts their beliefs or challenges their existing opinions. For instance, if a user strongly opposes a particular ideology or viewpoint, he/she may choose to avoid social media accounts that promote or support that ideology. As Festinger describes the removing dissonant cognitions as a way of reducing the uncomfortable dissonance, users develop some strategies in social media in order to avoid opinion challenging contents. “They would actively have to both seek out engagement with like-minded others (in other words, pursue selective exposure), and stay away from those who might introduce them to alternative views (that is, practice selective avoidance).”¹⁶⁸

According to a study realized in the context of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement protests in 2014 with a survey of 769 students from Hong Kong to examine politically motivated selective avoidance on Facebook, 15.6% of the participants of survey declared that they removed content and/or unfriended a Facebook friend during the protests.¹⁶⁹ According to another study that examines selective exposure based on partisan affinity shows that if the news organization’s political preference challenges with the

¹⁶⁶ Eddie HARMON-JONES & Judson MILLS (2019). “An introduction to cognitive dissonance theory and an overview of current perspectives on the theory”, in Eddie HARMON-JONES (eds.), **Cognitive Dissonance: Reexamining a Pivotal Theory in Psychology**, American Psychological Association, p.3.

¹⁶⁷ Qinfeng ZHU & Marko SKORIC & Fei SHEN (2016). “I shield myself from thee: Selective avoidance on social media during political protests”, **Political Communication**, 34(1), p.113.

¹⁶⁸ Axel BRUNS (2019). “Filter bubble”, **INTERNET POLICY REVIEW**, 8(4), p.4.

¹⁶⁹ Qinfeng ZHU & Marko SKORIC & Fei SHEN (2016). Op.cit. p.112.

consumer's, consumer avoids reading it. Study revealed that while conservatives and Republicans preferred to read news of Fox News and to avoid news of CNN and NPR, democrats and liberals declared vice versa.¹⁷⁰

Bypass of the undesired content, information, or opinion in social media is either done by the algorithmic filters or individual filters. Yang et al. declare that there is on the one hand algorithmic filtering that removes the undesired content in favor of the user, and on the other hand it is the selective affiliation and selective avoidance that are user-driven processes in order to eliminate unwanted content and add that these processes can lead to a homogeneous social world. Selective affiliation refers more of a pre hoc filtration which includes the decision process of who and what to follow initially, whereas selective avoidance refers to post hoc filtration which is the removal of contradicting content or individual on social media.¹⁷¹

Users tend to befriend individuals or follow accounts on social media with whom they share “sociodemographic, behavioral, and intrapersonal characteristics”¹⁷². However, some factors can lead them to a kind of post hoc filtration such as unfriending or unfollowing. Users can sometimes feel social media fatigue which can be described as the unfavorable emotional responses that users may have as a result of engaging in social network activities, such as weariness, boredom, burnout, apathy, and decreased interest¹⁷³ stemming from choice overload because of the numerous content to consume as we have discussed in the first chapter. To cope with the limitless options available on social media, users might need to limit the exposure by managing the information sources like unfollowing, unfriending, or blocking other users, hiding their posts or comments, or disregarding the information they receive.¹⁷⁴ On the other hand, they can also take these

¹⁷⁰ Shanto IYENGAR & Kyu S. HAHN (2009). “Red Media, Blue Media: Evidence of Ideological Selectivity in Media Use”, **Journal of Communication**, 59(1), p.19.

¹⁷¹ JungHwan YANG & Matthew BARNIDGE & Hernando ROJAS (2017). “The politics of ‘unfriending’: User filtration in response to political disagreement on social media”, **Computers in Human Behavior**, 70(1), p.22.

¹⁷² Miller MCPHERSON & Lynn SMITH-LOVIN & James M. COOK (2001). Op.cit. p.415.

¹⁷³ Shuwei ZANG & Ling ZHAO & Yaobin LU & Jun YANG (2016). “Do you get tired of socializing? An empirical explanation of discontinuous usage behaviour in social network services”, **Information and Management**, 53(7), p.906.

¹⁷⁴ *ibid.* p.1460.

actions because of holding different views on conflictual topics. Social media platforms give users the freedom of filtering and curating content according to their personal wishes, established beliefs, needs and so on even if this can lead to filter bubble or echo chamber effect, or to an homophilous environment as discussed above. It is only one click away for users to do so. By enabling personalized content curating through actions like hiding posts, unfollowing, unfriending, and blocking other users, social media can underpin this propensity.¹⁷⁵

Even though individuals tend to choose to befriend or follow others that look like to them, they might build casual relationships, in other words weak ties, due to the easiness of friending or following on social media platforms. “With more weak ties online we have access to more diverse news, opinions and information in general.”¹⁷⁶ Therefore, they are also easy to be unfollowed or unfriended as well as be blocked even. It is usually more difficult to block someone with whom users have stronger relationships with since it is a more of an intense act and the user blocked might be aware of it. That’s why instead of it, users may mute the accounts which from they do not want to see anything.

Examples of the two modes of non-algorithmic, manual configured strategies, which are either hiding a content or dissolving the social ties by unfriending or unfollowing, done by the user in order to remove dissenting content¹⁷⁷ can be seen in following studies. The survey realized among 1013 Jewish Israeli Facebook users during the Israel–Gaza conflict of 2014 showed that 16% of users unfriended or unfollowed a Facebook friend during the fighting and the act of unfriending was more widespread among more ideologically extreme and more politically active Facebook users.¹⁷⁸ Results from an online study conducted in 36 countries reveals that more than half of all social media news users employ personal news curation practices. Activities that increase news coverage are more prevalent than those that decreases it. Adding or following a user or

¹⁷⁵ Qinfeng ZHU & Marko SKORIC & Fei SHEN (2016). Op.cit.112.

¹⁷⁶ Desislava HRISTOVA & Mirco MUSOLESI & Cecilia MASCOLO (2014). “Keep your friends close and your facebook friends closer: A multiplex network approach to the analysis of offline and online social ties”, **Proceedings of the Eighth International AAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media**, p.206.

¹⁷⁷ *ibid.* p.113.

¹⁷⁸ Nicholas A. JOHN & Shira DVIR-GVIRSMAN (2014). “I Don’t Like You Any More’: Facebook Unfriending by Israelis During the Israel–Gaza Conflict of 2014”, **Journal of Communication**, 65, p.953.

organization because of the news they have posted is the most common curation activity across all countries surveyed, followed by deleting a user or an organization and changing settings to see less news. Changing settings to see more news content is the least common curation action.¹⁷⁹

Another study shows that one of the reasons users deciding to unfollow, unfriend, block, hide or mute someone is hate speech. According to research, users who frequently encounter hate speech directed towards particular groups or relevant problems are more inclined unfriend, unfollow or block people on social media. It also shows that users who unfriend others are less likely to discuss public and political issues with individuals who hold divergent ideas, but they are more likely to engage in political discussion with individuals who share their views.¹⁸⁰

A recent study, a survey conducted with the participation of 419 users to measure the effects of political and personal affiliates on false information and fake news reactions on social media reveals that the users, in their actions against the person or accounts that generated posts that they think as false information/fake news, make a distinction in the form of who they knew/ did not know or who had/did not have political closeness. While users prefer to ignore or warn by private message when people or accounts they know or have the same political views share false information/fake news, when it comes to people or accounts they do not know or have different political views, they mostly tend to unfollow, warn by public comment or block. Another interesting finding is that it has been showed that the behaviors of the participants who define themselves as conservative/religious, nationalist, social democrat and secular/kemalist, towards blocking and unfollowing are more dominant. Liberal and apolitical identities, on the other hand, react more moderately.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Lisa MERTEN (2020). “Block, Hide or Follow—Personal News Curation Practices on Social Media”, **Digital Journalism**, 9(8), p.11.

¹⁸⁰ Bumsoo KIM & Yi WANG & Janggeun LEE & Yonghwan KIM (2022). “Unfriending effects: Testing contrasting indirect-effects relationships between exposure to hate speech on political talk via social media unfriending”, **Computers in Human Behavior**, 137, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2022.107414>

¹⁸¹ Selman Selim AKYÜZ & Gönül AKPINAR (2023). “Politik ve Kişisel Yakınlıkların Sosyal Medyada Yanlış Bilgi ve Yalan Habere Verilen Tepkilere Etkisi”, **Yeni Medya Elektronik Dergisi**, 7 (2), p.171.

In conclusion, selective exposure and selective avoidance are common practices on social media platforms. While they can be useful in making social media experiences more enjoyable and validating opinions, it can also hinder growth and progress. It seems essential to strike a balance and remain open to different perspectives. Increasing media literacy and exposing oneself to alternative points of view might provide a more well-rounded understanding of the world.

2.3.5. Dataveillance and privacy concerns

An Instagram post about the city you want to visit soon, a reels video about a recipe you want to try, a Tweet about your sports team... All users either consciously or unconsciously, pay a price for these recommendations that will make them satisfied: they share their personal data with algorithms, perhaps in a way that will never be deleted. Algorithms and therefore social media companies possess a huge amount of personal data gathered from numerous sources in order to have a comprehensive, 360-degree perspective of each customer.¹⁸² As Bauman and Lyon point out, they gather personal data on a huge scale, concatenate these data sets, classify, and treat different categories of users accordingly to their profile.¹⁸³ The new opportunities of collecting, storing, processing and personalizing data enabled with the Web 3.0 technology comes along with the persistent threat of data breaches, data misuse, and data privacy violations. To identify the benefits and costs of personalization, Treiblmaier and Pollach conducted 25 qualitative interviews to determine the advantages and disadvantages of personalization and the results show that the advantages include decision support, special offers and gifts, faster and more relevant communication while the disadvantages include invisible and ongoing data collection, insufficient information, loss of control and an increase in unsolicited communication.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Elizabeth AGUIRRE & Anne L. ROGGEVEN & Dhruw GREWAL & Martin WETZELS (2016). "The personalization-privacy paradox: implications for new media", **Journal of Consumer Marketing**, 33(2), p.98.

¹⁸³ Zygmunt BAUMAN & David LYON (2013). Op.cit. p.113

¹⁸⁴ Horst TREIBLMAIER & Irene POLLACH (2007). "Users' Perceptions of Benefits and Costs of Personalization", **Twenty Eighth International Conference on Information Systems 2007 Proceedings**, 141.

Dataveillance is one of the most critical issues when it comes to social media usage and data privacy concerns. It involves the systematic surveillance and monitoring of personal data, usually done by governments, corporations, or other entities for various purposes. Dataveillance practices take numerous forms, from data sharing between social media companies to the collection of data from user accounts without explicit consent, to the creation of extensive profiles and predictive algorithms based on user data. Fuchs underlines “personal mass dataveillance”¹⁸⁵ as Web 2.0 enabled both individual and mass surveillance and as personal targeting affects a sizable portion of users, besides they often consent to the monitoring of their personal information. Since users often share their personal information voluntarily with the rest of the world stemming from the motivations that we have discussed in the first chapter, Bauman and Lyon think that there is a "silent or vociferous, conscious or inadvertent, intentional or by default, but undoubtedly massive cooperation of the surveilled”¹⁸⁶.

This valuable personal data either shared voluntarily or not, might preoccupy users since they do not know how this data is collected and how it is being used. However, users might keep sharing personal data even though they feel uncomfortable doing it because of the privacy concerns, and that actually creates a paradox. On the one hand, according to a study that investigates factors affecting consumers' acceptance of mobile marketing across U.S. and Pakistan markets reveals that a privacy calculus is in question for the users because they weigh dangers of losing their privacy against the profits gained such as more personalized offers and discounts.¹⁸⁷ According to another study build on a qualitative comparative analysis on 182 customers showed also that if the users are happy with the offered services, it can compensate their privacy concerns.¹⁸⁸ On the other hand, another

¹⁸⁵ Christian FUCHS (2011). “New Media, Web 2.0 and Surveillance”, **Sociology Compass**, 5(2), p.138.

¹⁸⁶ Zygmunt BAUMAN & David LYON (2013). Op.cit. p.110.

¹⁸⁷ Fareena SULTAN & Andrew J. ROHM & Tao GAO (2009). “Factors influencing consumer acceptance of mobile marketing: a two-country study of youth markets”, **Journal of Interactive Marketing**, 23(4), p.318.

¹⁸⁸ Ilias O.PAPPAS (2018). “User experience in personalized online shopping: a fuzzy-set Analysis”, **European Journal of Marketing**, 52(7/8), p.1693.

experimental study realized by Tsai et al. on a shopping search engine showed that customers are willing to pay extra on medium or high privacy protecting websites.¹⁸⁹

There are also different perspectives on the privacy concern. According to an experimental study on user privacy habits, online users lose sight frequently of their privacy concerns and communicate even the most private information without good justification.¹⁹⁰ If users discover that other users are also sharing similar information, they have a tendency to share more of it themselves.¹⁹¹

Solove points out to an important attitude regarding government surveillance and data mining that is ‘I’ve got nothing to hide’ behavior. The problematic part in here is that individuals think only criminals have something to fear or hide because they have nothing delicate, humiliating, or unlawful. He thinks that privacy should not be reduced to simply having to hide something evil because that presumption means conceding too many core things.¹⁹²

Another important issue that should not be forgotten about privacy is that no data shared in the digital world, even data that users will regret sharing later, is not deleted. Even the users with no social media accounts might find themselves in the contents shared by the acquaintances. A 24-year-old Australian law student wants to access all the data Facebook has stored about him and he gets a CD covering more than 1,200 pages of data activity that includes wall posts, messages, removed friends, and pokes that he thought they would have been deleted.¹⁹³ Users should remember that the content they post on

¹⁸⁹ Janice Y. TSAI & Serge EGELMAN & Lorrie CRANOR & and Alessandro ACQUISTI (2011). “The effect of online privacy information on purchasing behavior: an experimental study”, **Information Systems Research**, 22(2), p.254.

¹⁹⁰ Bettina BERENDT & Oliver GÜNTHER & Sarah SPIEKERMANN (2005). “PRIVACY IN E-COMMERCE: Stated Preferences vs. Actual Behavior”, **Communications of the ACM**, 48(4), p.103.

¹⁹¹ Alessandro ACQUISTI & Laura BRANDIMARTE & and George LOEWENSTEIN (2015). “Privacy and human behavior in the age of information”, **Science**, 347(6221), p.511.

¹⁹² Daniel J.SOLOVE (2007). “‘I’ve Got Nothing to Hide’ and Other Misunderstandings of Privacy”, **San Diego Law Review**, 44(4), p.764.

¹⁹³ Tehmoor KHAN (2011). <<How private is your Facebook data?>>, <https://www.channel4.com/news/how-private-is-your-facebook-data> (24.10.2011)

social media has the power to get them fired, subject them to discrimination, and even have their bank loan application denied.¹⁹⁴

Moreover, the use of algorithmic filters has been criticized for compromising user privacy and promoting targeted advertising. Social media platforms collect vast amounts of data on users' behaviors and preferences, which they use to personalize their online experience. This data can also be sold to third-party advertisers who use it to target users with specific ads. We should also add that most users never read the terms of service before consenting to them or alter their default privacy settings.

The relationship between social media usage and data privacy is complex and multifaceted, with dataveillance being one of the most significant concerns. While social media users may enjoy the benefits of online connectivity and socialization, they also unknowingly surrender vast amounts of personal information and become targets for data collection and exploitation. At this point, transparency about how the personal data is collected and how it will be used and an explicit and informed consent of the user gain importance. Thus, users would fully understand what data they are providing and what they are receiving in exchange. Maybe they would prefer to stay anonym or leave the platform or not taking any action at all.

Digital media literacy is crucial in today's digital age as social media platforms have become an integral part of our lives. It is important to understand the basics of social media and to have various cognitive, sociological, and emotional skills to make the most of its opportunities and avoid its pitfalls. As being a “survival skill in the digital era”¹⁹⁵ digital literacy helps individuals protect their privacy, avoid online dangers, identify misinformation and fake news, and use social media effectively for personal and professional purposes. As social media continues to evolve and play an increasingly significant role in our lives, it is vital that individuals take the time to become socially media literate and understand the implications of their online actions.

¹⁹⁴ Sandra GARCIA-RIVADULLA (2016). “Personalization vs. privacy: An inevitable trade-off?”, **International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions**, 42(3), p.235.

¹⁹⁵ Yoram ESHET-ALKALAI (2004). “Digital literacy: A conceptual framework for survival skills in the digital era”, **Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia**, 13(1), p.102.

In the beginning of these chapter, we tried to convey the beneficial aspects of all these algorithmic and individual filters by discussing more in detail how and why they are applied. However, all these filterings have for sure some challenges. We tried to explain the tendency of users to be friends with individuals who are similar to them, to follow accounts that will not conflict with their ideas, and to curate social media platforms because they only want to see the content that interests them and the risks, through the concepts of filter bubble and echo chamber effect as well as homophily, selective exposure and selective avoidance. In the next chapter, we will discuss the findings we have obtained as a result of semi-structured in-depth interviews with our sample, which we have chosen considering that their literacy is high.

CHAPTER III: EXAMINING THE FILTERING PRACTICES OF USERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

3.1 Methodology of the research

The purpose of our study, of which research question is “Do social media users benefit (can benefit) effectively from the content abundance stemming from the democratization of content production and distribution?”, is to evaluate to what extent users can benefit from the richness and diversity of content in social media, through algorithmic and individual filters. For this purpose, we collected data through semi-structured in-depth interviews. We conducted 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews in total between December 19th and April 15th. Semi-structured in-depth interviews are a qualitative research method that involves conducting interviews with individuals to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences and perspectives on a particular topic or phenomenon. This method allows the researcher to follow up on interesting or unexpected responses and to ask more probing questions to elicit more detailed and nuanced responses. Since we want to explore a complex topic in a more thorough and comprehensive way than can be achieved through surveys or other quantitative methods, we chose this research method.

We chose a sample that we assume has high social media literacy because we wanted to discuss the issues we covered throughout the research in more depth. We are aware that it is difficult and partially possible to study the effect of algorithms with social sciences research methods; therefore, the fact that the individuals we interviewed were aware of the filtering features offered by the applications made us think that we could get more proper answers. In addition, algorithmic filtering, which is an important pillar of our

thesis, is the invisible gatekeepers of the digital world, as we mentioned in the first chapter, so both the processing of algorithms and the effects of filtering can be difficult to understand and notice. In order to better discuss these issues, we thought that users with high awareness would be more appropriate. Besides, the users we interviewed are individuals who can approach the issues we are discussing both academically and professionally, which definitely bring depth to our study, because most of them are already working in the relevant sector.

We used snowball sampling which begins with the initial selection of a few individuals who fit the criteria for the study. After conducting interviews with 2 individuals from both public and private universities, we asked them to refer other individuals who meet the same criteria. These newly referred participants are then asked to refer more individuals, and the process continued until the desired sample size is reached. This sampling method helped us a lot since the participants could have been hesitant regarding the content of our topics and questions or unwilling to spare 1 hour. However, since we have the referrals, they were willing to participate and make a contribution to study. We planned the first 4 semi-structured in-depth interviews as pilot interviews to ensure and finalize the topics and questions. Each interview provided us with clues about questions we should deepen, questions we should take out, or questions we should reformulate as they were understood differently by the participants. After we were sure of the semi-structured in-depth interview questions, we contacted the pilot participants and went over the revised questions again so that they would not be missing.

To give a brief overview about the demographical data of our participants, 10 of them are women, and 10 are men. Their age varies between 23 and 43. Our sample consists of graduate students from 2 different universities. 10 of them are from a state university and 10 are from a private university. In order to add different perspectives to the study, we wanted to create a sample consisting of students from a state university and a private university. While we anticipated that there would be no significant difference in terms of social media literacy, we anticipated that it would provide us with diversity and richness in terms of user experience. Ultimately, our research resulted in the way we predicted, in terms of public university and private university participation. While 5 of the participants

are doctoral students, the remaining 15 are master's students. 7 of the master's students who participated in our semi-structured in-depth interviews from the state university are studying in the Strategic Communication Management Master's Program with Thesis and 3 of them are studying in the Media and Communication Studies Master's Program with Thesis. 5 of the graduate students who participated in our semi-structured in-depth interviews from the private university are studying in Advertising and Public Relations Doctorate Program, 2 of them are studying in Marketing Communications and Public Relations Master's Program with Thesis, 2 of them are studying in Advertising and Brand Management Master's Program with Thesis and 1 of them is studying in Digital Media Management Master's Program with Thesis. Since the names of the participants are kept anonymous in our research, the table below has been added in the analysis section to make it easier to follow.

Figure 25: PARTICIPANTS' INFORMATION

PSEUDONYM	AGE	GENDER	UNIVERSITY	GRADUATE PROGRAM
P1	24	FEMALE	State University	Media and Communication Studies Master's Program
P2	23	FEMALE	State University	Strategic Communication Management Master's Program
P3	28	FEMALE	State University	Media and Communication Studies Master's Program
P4	29	FEMALE	State University	Strategic Communication Management Master's Program
P5	26	MALE	State University	Strategic Communication Management Master's Program
P6	26	FEMALE	State University	Strategic Communication

				Management Master's Program
P7	26	FEMALE	State University	Strategic Communication Management Master's Program
P8	31	MALE	State University	Media and Communication Studies Master's Program
P9	29	MALE	State University	Strategic Communication Management Master's Program
P10	27	FEMALE	State University	Strategic Communication Management Master's Program
P11	28	FEMALE	Private University	Advertising and Public Relations Doctorate Program
P12	27	FEMALE	Private University	Marketing Communications and Public Relations Master's Program
P13	29	MALE	Private University	Advertising and Public Relations Doctorate Program
P14	30	MALE	Private University	Advertising and Public Relations Doctorate Program
P15	25	MALE	Private University	Digital Media Management Master's Program
P16	28	FEMALE	Private University	Advertising and Public Relations Doctorate Program
P17	28	MALE	Private University	Advertising and Brand Management Master's Program
P18	43	MALE	Private University	Advertising and Public Relations Doctorate Program
P19	30	MALE	Private University	Advertising and Brand Management Master's Program

P20	28	MALE	Private University	Marketing Communications and Public Relations Master's Program
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Our semi-structured in-depth interviews lasted approximately 1 hour. 4 of our interviews were conducted face-to-face, while 16 were conducted online. Since almost all of our participants both work and attend graduate courses, they stated that the online environment would be more suitable to allocate time for a 1-hour interview.

During our semi-structured in-depth interviews, we progressed through 5 topics. In order for our participants to warm up to the interview and better understand their user profiles, we first asked them general questions about their use of social media. Then we asked questions to examine content production practices in order to be able to discuss them in the context of individual filtering. We tried to shape our questions by assuming that the users we interviewed could adopt individual filters, especially to produce political content. As this assumption was confirmed, we were also able to understand more clearly the individual filtering reasons of the participants due to our questions in this section. In the next section, we tried to understand the individual filters of the participants during content consumption. We asked our questions by assuming that users will have homophilic tendencies while following an account or liking a content, and by thinking that unfollowing / muting / blocking other users due to their posts will be an example of selective avoidance. Although our first assumption in this context is appropriate, we saw that our second assumption was not valid for our sampling, and due to the questions in this section, we had the opportunity to discuss in depth the strategies that users develop to avoid possible negative effects of filters. Next, a power point presentation was shown to the participants while addressing questions about algorithmic filtering. It was not just simply questions and answers. We are aware that we cannot fully measure the impact of algorithms through semi-structured in-depth interviews. However, there are some filtering features offered by the applications where algorithms get involved in order to show the relevant content to the users such as the Instagram or Twitter feed preview preference. To better understand the extent to which these features have been adopted or how the user

practices are, we asked users questions about these features. As a guidance, we showed a power point presentation including example screenshots to all our participants. Our main assumption was that algorithms prolong time spent on social media platforms. We can say that it was affirmed since we combined interview and observation. During our semi-structured in-depth interviews, we asked users to open the Instagram and Twitter applications and simultaneously evaluate the content being shown on the “Explore” tab and “Trend Topics” being shown in Twitter if they appeal to them and make them spend more time on the platform. Then we asked them to take a screenshot and share it with us. We also included some of these screenshots in the analysis section. Last topic that we interviewed was about digital surveillance and privacy. Our questions were concerning the assumption that the users would have a negative perception regarding digital surveillance and adopt strategies in order to protect their privacy. However, it was seen that the issue of digital surveillance is taken for granted, contrary to our assumption, and that the strategies developed are not directly related to privacy concerns.

3.2. Social Media Usage

Regarding the social media usage of the graduate students that we interviewed semi-structured in-depth in terms of the time they spend on social media, it can be said that most of them spend at least 1 or 2 hours in a day, although the time varies depending on different parameters.

During our interviews, when we asked graduate students which social media applications they had accounts on, we got their answers as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, TikTok and YouTube. Participants stated that although all of them have accounts on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, they almost never use their Facebook accounts, but rarely when they receive notifications or when they need to read the contents of the groups for pragmatic purposes. While those who have a LinkedIn account among the participants stated that they opened an account here after stepping into the business world, it was observed that they generally did not create or consume content very actively. It has been observed that TikTok, which is predicted to be one of the actively used applications, is not popular in the selected sample, and only 4 people have an account in

this application solely to consume content. It can be said that the most actively used social media platforms are Instagram and Twitter. They are followed by YouTube and TikTok. When we examined the answers we received from the participants, it turned out that the platform where most of the time being consumed, so to say most favorite platform to interact is Instagram. “Instagram has become something like a virtual rosary. I'd say it's an addiction. Sometimes, even in things that do not interest me, if I can't find anything, I open Instagram out of boredom to have fun.” (P1)

In order to provide more detailed information about the profiles of the participants we interviewed semi-structured in-depth, it is possible to say that these individuals are generally active in terms of content consumption. In particular, it is possible to say that users who have an account on Twitter generally do not tweet nor retweet, they only consume content to follow the agenda through the tweets of other users. It is possible to say that the majority of the interviewed users do not share posts or stories very often on Instagram, which is the platform they spend the most time with, and although they have more content production practices compared to Twitter, they are still generally positioned on the side of content consumption.

When we asked the participants how long their accounts have been in the social media applications they have specified, it is possible to say that most of them have been users of the relevant applications for a long time to witness the change of these applications and the addition of new features. Considering that Instagram was published in 2010 and Twitter was published in 2006 and considering also the age range of the individuals we interviewed, we can say that users have been on these platforms for an average of 7-8 years. Facebook, which was published in 2004, seems that became a platform where most of the interviewed users deactivated their accounts or even forgot their passwords as it lost its popularity in Turkey gradually among the interviewed age range. It is possible to see examples of users interacting with newly released social media applications with Snapchat and TikTok. Users who stated that they used Snapchat intensely when it was popular in Turkey, told that it was among the applications that they gave up using over time. TikTok, whose popularity peaked in 2019, was downloaded and used by a small portion of the users interviewed in this period.

In terms of the number of followers, when we examine the Instagram profiles of the interviewed users, it is possible to say that the number of followers and the number of followings is at the maximum limit of 1,000. In this context, it is possible to say that when these users create content, they appeal to a certain number of relatively small audiences, and that they are not influencer or public figure accounts with huge number of followers. In terms of the number of accounts they follow, it is a productive area in terms of observing the effect of algorithms, as they are exposed to a high number of produced contents. On Twitter, on the other hand, the fact that the number of followings of the most users is by far more than the number of their followers, underlines once again that they use Twitter mainly for content consumption.

Another important point about the profiles of the interviewed users is that these users have high social media literacy, and some users are also professionals working in the field. Among them there are digital marketers, social media specialists, news-editors, corporate communication executives and software engineers. It enables to evaluate the questions both in terms of professional and user and enriches the research.

It is also important to look at the motivational factors of the users behind the social media usage and also platform preference. Getting information and following the news are main motivations of using social media for all the users that we have interviewed semi-structured in-depth. We can say that social media is a great resource for the participants in order to get information about what piques their curiosity either about the country's agenda or their acquaintances. We observed that, especially Twitter plays a crucial role in news consumption. Participants stated that they can access the news really fast, even most of the times faster than traditional media; thus, they can keep themselves up to date.

“I can say that my favorite aspect of social media is to be able to get ideas. Twitter and Instagram have their agendas. There are topics that emerge and go around there. Plus, there's also the algorithm effect. According to your algorithm, an agenda consisting of popular content is presented to you. It is framed differently in the world of Instagram and of Twitter. Twitter is more likely to keep up with political news. What motivates me, what I like, is that I can get an idea about the agenda and hot topics even faster than news sites at some points, but the reliability of these news is often contestable. However, even it is not pass through the credible filters, how can I say, before a fire starts, you first notice the smoke, as if it gives such a signal about the news. You say that something is going on.

After that I am trying to authenticate that news as a conscious user. I refer to sources I trust. In the means of ringing up the curtain and presenting me instantly the popular topics, I really like social media.” (P13)

Above mentioned comment of one of the participants indicates not only the motivational factor of using social media but also the platform preference when different types of information come in to question. “For me, Twitter means the political part, while Instagram means the more social and fun part.” (P11) While the participants stated that they obtained more information about the agenda, politics and other users' perspectives on political events, they stated that they obtained more social information about other users they knew before or did not meet before through Instagram.

“I use Twitter a lot, especially to follow the agenda. I don't want to miss the jokes that become popular, so FOMO is a driving force I can say. Thus, I don't become stranger when a topic comes up in a circle of friend. On the other hand, I like the visuals of Instagram. I think it is good to follow what people are doing, where they are going, what they are eating and drinking. I spend a lot of time there too.” (P17)

As seen in the first chapter where we discussed that Kietzmann et al. refers to social media as a honeycomb, users can monitor what other users are doing, whether they are acquaintances or influencers they follow, and see if they are available, due to Instagram.

Regarding the answers we get from the participants about following the news show that they are conscious users with high social media literacy regardless of state or private university, which was the main point while we were choosing our sample.

“There may be information pollution, of course, but it's actually about how users use the platform. If every social media user becomes conscious and aware that not every news they see will be true, and needs to investigate the accuracy of the news, the problem will disappear. For sure, a lot of fake and false news is produced, but it is in our hands to consume them. I do not agree with the idea that disinformation, that we are constantly exposed to misinformation, and that all these affect our opinions, because if there is information presented to us, we should confirm its accuracy with our own efforts.” (P19)

When it comes to news consumption through social media platforms, the graduate students that we chose as a sample, mentioned that they are aware of misleading information and that they do not solely consume the content they receive but instead they question its accuracy.

One last point that we want to mention about the motivations of social media usage of our sample is they prefer these platforms in order to keep in touch with acquaintances but also meet new people by forming groups and socialize.

“I use Instagram a lot to message my friends. This is my first favorite aspect of these applications. The second is cat and dog videos. There are some cat and dog accounts that I follow both on Instagram and Twitter. I meet people there and make friends. In fact, I had not come together before, but there were even those who met there, became friends and met physically. You know, a community was built there. On the other hand, adoption and help announcements are circulating in those accounts. When you post on one of them, these announcements spread very quickly. I like that part. I also use these applications to have fun.” (P10)

With the above-mentioned example, it is possible to say that social media brings together individuals who do not know each other at all, and most likely would not even be able to meet in any other way. Moreover, it enables individuals to meet virtually, allows users with similar interests to form groups, and even enables friendships to be moved from virtual to physical environment.

As we have mentioned the social media profiles, social media usage and motivations, preferred social media platforms and social media literacy of the users we interviewed, in the next sections we will examine in more depth how individual and algorithmic filtering reflects on the content production and consumption of these users.

3.3. Individual Filtering on Content Production

As we have already discussed in the first chapter, with the proliferation of digital devices we have witnessed to the democratization of content production. In the Web 2.0, we see the rise of producers conceptualized by Bruns, in order to define users who are

not solely limited to content consumption but also can create or contribute to content production.

“The second thing I like the most about social media is being free. In the end, we receive what is presented to us in traditional media, but in social media, everyone can present something, and we are not at the mercy of journalists and traditional media owners. Everyone can produce news there, and everyone can access that news.” (P19)

As one of our participants stated, the most important feature that distinguishes digital media from traditional media is that content production is no longer reserved for professionals only, and the distribution of the produced content is not only in certain groups' power. Yet, a considerable part of the society can generate content on social media if they have access to a digital device.

It can be thought that everyone is free to create the content they want and share it with other users. Technically yes, if the user doesn't violate the social media platforms' guidelines and the rights of others. However, do users really feel free and are not really overwhelmed with any pressure? In order to understand if users adopt any individual filtering while posting a content on Instagram or tweeting on Twitter, we asked our participants what they usually post about and if there exists any topics that they want to create content, but they avoid of because of any reason.

We can vary the subjects that the users we interviewed prefer to share on Instagram are about themselves, their friends and families, the events or festivals they attend, the places they go, their trips abroad, the projects they carry out in the business, nature, landscape and street photos, sports, technology and some humorous content. On the other hand, none of the users we interviewed prefer to tweet on Twitter. However, a small proportion of them retweet some content without adding their personal opinion about topics such as sports, technology, culture, inspirational or business-related things.

Rather than the topics on which they produce content, it is important to focus on the topics they do not choose to create content on to examine the effects of individual

filtering. There is a common topic for all the users we interviewed, that they all avoid producing content, expressing opinions and sharing for different reasons: politics.

“People are being arrested because of their thoughts in our country. I’m worried by thinking such as ‘I’m going to like this or I’m going to share this, but will anything happen to me?’ It just happened to me the other day. I try not to post such content if it criticizes the government too harshly, if I risk being put in jail, or if it contains obvious insults.” (P4)

“When I look back at my Facebook account, I was sharing a lot of political content because Facebook was popular at that time. Caricatures, news citations, my own ideas... I see that there are things that I can never share today. I posted content that I criticized very harshly. I self-censor now and use social media as if I have no political views. I'm not expressing any opinion.” (P8)

“I do not express my opinion on political matters. I am afraid of being imprisoned because there have been people around me who were detained for questioning for this reason, even though they wrote something not too harsh. Frankly, I don't want to deal with these things just because I shared a thought. I actually have a lot to share if we lived in a more free country.” (P19)

Above-mentioned comments demonstrate that politics is definitely a redline for the users we interviewed with in terms of creating any kind of content either it is a photo/video or a tweet. One of the main reasons behind they remain silent is the oppressive attitude of the government on freedom of thought and the danger of being faced some legal processes. On the other hand, one of the reasons for this silence and drawback is to have received before or might being received in the future a negative reaction.

“I am a little hesitant to use expressions that shows too much about my own feelings and thoughts, and to post about political content, because there is a certain lynch culture on social media. For example, if I were to make a political post, I would prefer LinkedIn. The profile on LinkedIn and the environment of LinkedIn seem more dignified and more professional to me. So, while I can predict the reaction I will get when I say something there, I cannot predict the reaction I will get on Instagram or Twitter.” (P2)

“I feel uneasy about posting content even about the Boğaziçi University resistance on Instagram. I feel the same way about posting LGBT-related content. When I posted this kind of content before, 1 or 2 of my friends wrote to me such as ‘Why did you share? Who needs it now? Why are you saying it?’. You know that Gülşen was arrested recently. I posted a content about that. One of my friends wrote to me immediately saying that ‘I

would say don't share it'. However, there is nothing annoying. What will I post if we are not even share that too? I feel under pressure. I say to myself, 'I guess there is no need. Never mind; do not express your opinion especially on political issues.'" (P8)

Above-mentioned statements of the participants show the fact that even though content creation and distribution democratization enabled a considerable amount of the society to express their opinions and even produce a mass effect with the quick spread of a single post or a tweet, this power of being able to express such opinions openly might sometimes lead to negative impact. As one of the participants stated, the lynching culture can be caused by the fact that users can easily say things that they would hesitate to say or never say in face-to-face communication, with the effect of being in the virtual world or sometimes with the power of being anonymous. Negative reactions that the users may get from other users that they do not know can have an influence on the reproduction of silence, as well as the reactions that the users refrain from getting from their acquaintances, and sometimes the comments written so that the users do not get into trouble also cause an individual filtering in the content production of the users. Social media platforms' own dynamics, language, profiles of users who have an account in those media, and the nature of the generated content are also effective in applying individual filtering in content production.

Politics or politically attributed protests or arrests are not the only issues that users avoid from producing content, commenting, or expressing opinions, and the only reason for users to apply individual filterings in their posts is not the fear of putting in prison or the hesitation of getting negative reactions.

"I think no one is comfortable about sharing sexuality related content. For example, when you post something a little erotic or a revealing photo, people may look at you differently. I think most people are not free in this regard. Very few people are free. I think there is a lot of pressure on people. People are beware of other people making an analysis of them based on their profile presented in social media. For example, when I was younger, I was able to share more revealing content. Even if I say I don't care, I do. They identify a profile about you based on your posts, a profile far from your personality.'" (P10)

“For example, you want to say something or post a photo or a funny video, but you can't feel free enough because everyone doesn't know you well enough. Social media, which should be areas of so-called freedom of expression, can also create the opposite situation. Sometimes you feel like writing something, something funny or something ridiculous. Sometimes you are bored with something and want to share it. Happens to me too. I have a lot of drafts of 3-4 floods on Twitter, but then I draw myself away by thinking that someone can say something stupid or no one will care about my opinion.” (P3)

“I used to post on social media more freely in the past. Now I can't post everything I want because of the pressure. For example, I find something funny and I want to share it on my Instagram story. However, I'm friend with the professors I work with on Instagram. I think that they may misunderstand. After all, they do not know me very well, they do not know my sense of humor. Then I give up. I was more liberal, now I'm conservative in posting something. Especially on political posts or abusive jokes.” (P9)

The examples above, and indeed much more, reveal that the users we interviewed do not adequately take advantage of the opportunities and diversity offered by the democratization of content production. There are topics that users are beware of generating or sharing content such as sexuality, sexual orientation, protests, humorous posts containing swearword This drawback is stemming from many reasons. In social media, which is considered as areas where individuals can freely express their thoughts, some users feel pressure while producing content. This pressure is related to the restrictive policy of the government, as well as the fear of being judged individually by other users, which prevents users often from producing content. Another reason why users prefer to remain silent about certain issues and not share anything is the risk of being misunderstood by other users. Some of the participants stated that a large part of communication consists of facial expressions, tone of voice and body language; however, also stated that we are only comprised of words and emojis in social media. Even, since there exists character limit on social media platforms, we might not explain ourselves in detail even if we want to or sometimes, we don't event put extra effort to explain ourselves. These can cause some misunderstandings. Some users also give up, thinking that the content they produce, or share will not be worth to attention by other users.

One of the most frequently mentioned reasons for individual filtering in users' content production is to form certain opinions about individuals only through their production or sharing on social media, without really getting to know them. As we have

discussed in the first chapter, social media profiles give some clue inevitably about recognizing an individual; therefore, users filter themselves individually. Sometimes the content they produce, sometimes the content they like, sometimes the content they retweet, cause the user to be understood by other users in an undesired way, and sometimes they can be judged for a content they do not share.

“Someone who sees my Instagram, for example, may say that this man is not even aware of the earthquake because she/he does not see that I have posted anything about the earthquake. Singer x or football player y did not post anything about this earthquake. On the other hand, the person z, who was constantly posting about the earthquake is attributed as a respectable person. Social media should not provide us with a roadmap for personality. It's a different place.” (P4)

Every behavior on social media can cause other users to make inferences about personality. Therefore, while some users filter themselves and their thoughts by not producing content, others prefer not to interact with some content consciously in order to avoid reaction or vice versa. It is possible to say that the users we interviewed have developed some filtering strategies for who can see the content that these users produce or share.

“I hid my relatives from my Instagram stories because I often share from the nightclub. I live in Turkey. Moreover, I was born in Sivas, and I grew up in Sivas. Since our family structure is closer to conservatism, unfortunately, I had to prevent my relatives seeing my stories because I did not think that they would have respect for my job. I didn't want to experience the thing that my mother calling me and saying, ‘My son, your aunt saw this post and she's telling me this’. I didn't want to experience this.” (P15)

“Now, for example, I am changing 'close friends' according to what I am going to share. For example, if I want to post something about the school, I can add my friends from school. If I'm going to share my very private, I add my core group of friends. If it's work related, sometimes I can add a few people from work. Although I have a core 'close friends' group, I can still add and remove according to the content.” (P6)

As users can filter themselves, they can sometimes bypass other users that they want or do not want to see the content they produce through the filtering features offered by the applications. Sometimes this can be to hide from a niche audience so they cannot

see Instagram stories, and sometimes it is to use the "close friends" feature in Instagram stories so that only a niche audience can see them.

3.4. Individual Filtering on Content Consumption

As we have discussed in second chapter, individuals tend to be friends with individuals like them in terms of interests, characteristics, feelings, opinions and so on. This tendency of being surrounded with opinion-reinforcing information might end up in an isolation stemming from homophily and selective exposure. At this point, individual preferences and filterings become very important. Either the users might find themselves trapped in an echo-chamber where they only read or hear the similar or the same ideas, or they might benefit more from the abundance and diversity of content on social media brought about by the democratization of content production and distribution. In terms of individual filtering and selective avoidance, following and unfollowing motivations offer an effective strategy. In order to better understand the user practices in terms of the individual filtering effect on content consumption, we first asked if there exist any criteria while they decide to follow an account on social media.

“For sure, I generally follow people that reflect my own thoughts and that I like. This is actually so natural. I think we shouldn't blame social media too much because of this. It is in human nature. They call it echo chambers etc. After all, even before social media, people were together with people who were more like themselves and adopted their own ideas. Social media should not be blamed.” (P5)

“For sure, although not exactly the same, I mostly follow people with whom we share the similar environment, or who are close to my own neighborhood.” (P3)

We observed that the lifestyle, point of view, world view, political view presented on a social media account can be effective for the users we have interviewed. However, the fact that their social media literacy is high is revealed here once again regardless of state or private university because they are aware of the effects of echo chamber and most of them intentionally follow the accounts that have opponent views. There is a point that we should make a distinction here. They do not follow by pressing the follow button. In other words, we can't see accounts that have views that contradict their own views in the

following list of these users. However, they visit the accounts of those users with oppositional lifestyles, political views, and worldviews on purpose and check their posts or read their tweets.

“I don't follow because those you follow also give a message to others about you. I filter it to avoid any false impressions. If I'm going to follow accounts like that, 90% of them are already public accounts, so I visit that way and have an idea.” (P13)

“I also like to read accounts that have the opposite view to me, especially on Twitter accounts that share news. I wonder ‘What are they thinking? Why do these people think like that?’” (P8)

“No time passes without stalking. That's why I spend a lot of time on Instagram. You know, even though I don't follow those people on my own account, I stalk a lot. So let's say someone is subjected to a storm of criticism, I wonder the reason.” (P16)

“For example, incels who are extremely opposite to my point of view – a community of virgin men who are incredibly aggressive towards women, have never actually had sexual or emotional experiences with any women, and they see the reason for this as women – there is also a Turkish version of those communities. I had followed them for a while. Sometimes I follow on Twitter to keep a close rein on accounts that are the exact opposite of me, like following some influencers on Instagram.” (P3)

“I don't follow, but I have a Twitter list called ‘Pelicanists group’. The opponent accounts are there. I check on that list just to get out of the echo chamber and see what they share, but I don't follow it.” (P9)

Based upon the above-mentioned comments we can say that even though the users we have interviewed semi-structured in-depth act with some homophilous tendencies and with motivations of selective exposure while they decide to follow accounts, since they are aware of the echo-chamber effect of being exposed constantly to same contents, they developed their own strategies in order to take advantage of the diversity of opinion and content on social media. We received the opinions of the users, whom we observed the effects of individual filtering while following an account, also about their motivation to

unfollow as a filtering and selective avoidance strategy. They may adopt some filtering while following a new account, but what if they see content that may be offensive to them on an account they already follow?

“For example, I unfollowed people I met because of their posts after the general elections. It had happened once. That's why I pay attention to the characteristics and posts of the person, but I do not maintain such a radical stance at the moment. I'm not inclined to completely remove a person from my circle or my followers just because of her/his political views, but I've done this before. That's why I involuntarily pay attention to what that person is sharing and whether what she/he posts is close to me or not.” (P1)

“If my friends have opposing views, they can still be my friends. I don't voluntarily follow an unfamiliar person if they are opposing, but if they are my friend and we have opposing views, they still remain my friend. The people I unfollowed because of their posts only happened once.” (P4)

Only two of the users we interviewed stated that they unfollowed other users they already know due to their contradictory posts. The fact that we have received such a response from only two user and that these two users have done this only once even they have accounts on these platforms for a long time, reveal that these literate social media users do not adopt unfollowing as a selective avoidance strategy to bypass thoughts that contradict their own thoughts. Unfollowing is not a common behavior among the users we interviewed semi-structured in-depth. We can share the general reasons given for deciding to unfollow an account as follows; the account no longer attracts the attention of the user (e.g., following some accounts that may be useful while preparing for the YDS exam and unfollowing when the exam is over), or the account no longer posts content (e.g., it shares motivational quotes normally but no longer posts at all), or when the account is sold and the shared content is changed (e.g., becoming an account with violent or sexually oriented posts), or if it is an influencer account, when it shares a lot of swipe up links.

In addition to unfollowing, muting or blocking is also an option in order not to be exposed to the contents of an account. When we asked users if they took these two actions, we observed that muting is more common than blocking or unfollowing. There is an important difference between muting and unfollowing or blocking someone.

“Blocking someone is a very clear message. He/she doesn't want you in his/her life anymore, he/she doesn't want to see you. I think it means he/she doesn't want to be exposed to you or he/she's expressing his/her reaction to you publicly. On the other hand, muting someone respects a certain sharedness with you, maybe he/she is offended, maybe he/she doesn't have enough problems to block you, or maybe he/she doesn't want to send a message at the level of blocking.” (P13)

“I muted a lot of people on Instagram. I don't like that person, but on the other hand, we have a business relationship, an educational relationship. It would be a shame if I remove that person completely. In a way, you are connected to that person. You may need that person's help one day. That person can promote you in the market or remove you from the market. That's why you can't completely block or unfollow. So, I take advantage of the beautiful blessings of Instagram.” (P10)

In this sense, there must be some personally disturbing situations to the extent of cyberbullying such as an insistent request to follow or to contact via DM, for the users we interviewed to block an account. Some participants stated that they blocked fake accounts that secretly stalked them, while others stated that they blocked some users because their romantic relationships ended within the scope of private life. On the other hand, when we asked what kind of profiles they prefer to mute, we understand that they mute the ones that are not as close friends as they used to be, the ones they should see the next morning because they work together, friends who post frequently because they are newly married or new parents, friends or family members whose content they do not like, friends who are trying to be an influencer, thus constantly share their daily lives. It is possible to say that the contents reported by the users we interviewed are similar to each other. Posts containing hate speech, racism, homophobia, sexism, bullying, violence, insults, threats, incitement, or misdirection are reported by users.

In summary, users tend to be friends and bond with users with similar habitus, and when they follow a new account on social media, having similar interests, tastes, and views emerges as a criterion. In this sense, while users are subject to the echo chamber effect and miss certain content, consciously following the accounts that are opposite to them due to being users with high literacy and awareness, albeit not in an explicit way, allows them to access different content. On the other hand, while users do not cause a serious narrowing in the scope of the content they are exposed to by unfollowing, blocking

or reporting content, they bypass a certain number of contents through the accounts they have muted and filtered individually.

Another point we would like to mention about the effect of individual filtering on content consumption is the role the user plays in the distribution of content. When we consider how much content is shared on social media in a day or even a minute, it is possible to say that users are exposed to only a very small portion of it, and they might miss many contents. At the point of circulation of content, users themselves appear as important actors.

“Unless something extraordinary happens, there is not much news on the agenda on Instagram due to the nature of the platform. Sometimes I share the tweets I see on Twitter on Instagram so that my followers on Instagram can see a subject that the audience on Twitter is already aware of. For example, I take a screenshot of the tweet and then share it on Instagram story. I did it the other day, so that it would appear there too. I think like ‘Friends, there is such a fact, such a situation. For your information. The election is approaching, you know.’” (P10)

“I share the murders of women on Instagram. Sometimes I share such content as a reminder or reaction on Instagram. Instead of sharing them myself, I quote the posts of different accounts to my story.” (P4)

“I share about social responsibilities and aid campaigns to support them. I would be very happy. I also share about the illness of a person for treatment purposes. To reach them more. It is important that even one of my followers is informed and helps. It can be a Red Crescent donation. I like this kind of help and sharing. I like to mobilize people.” (P16)

As it can be understood from the examples above, users can actually act as gatewatchers conceptualized by Bruns, in the sense that the existing material is presented to other users and other users can be informed about these issues even if they do not produce new content by quoting important news, incidents that should be in the public consciousness, social responsibility or aid campaigns in their stories. Even if popular posts or tweets will come before the user at some point, the fact that users act as gatewatchers in order to increase the possibility of the users get informed and speed up this process provides convenience in the social media world where content abundance and diversity is

experienced. Users also use the private messaging feature of the platforms to share content with their friends, family, close circle and acquaintances in a way that no one can see, and thus, they do a kind of social gatewatching.

“For example, I judge a content and send that content to my friend via DM. We talk about it and judge it together. Yet, we do not interact with that person in any way. For example, if I like something or it gives a reference about my conversation with a friend, if it reminds me of something, I immediately send that thing to my friend.” (P1)

“I also share when I see something positive, but I think I am more likely to share something negative. I say like ‘I saw it, let my friends see it too.’ or I want to react to that content at that moment, I want to express my opinion, but I do it by sending it to my friend.” (P2)

“I have groups on Instagram that my friends and sometimes I opened. I share content related to them by saying ‘Did you see this?’” (P6)

“I share a lot of things with my friends on Instagram and Twitter very intensely. On Instagram, I mostly share fun content or the places we want to go, food content or funny videos. I also share a lot of funny content on Twitter with my friends. And news if it's just been shared. If it was shared 1-2 minutes ago and I think my friend didn't see it, I definitely share it.” (P7)

“I use it intensely. Especially with my cousin, it's like a reels rain. She sends it when she's free, me when I'm free. I look and I comment on all of them. Usually, they are reels. If there is someone who is getting married, we send each other saying that ‘Look, she/he is married’. We also send memes to each other with my close friends.” (P11)

“My favorite feature. I send content a lot to my friend group and family group. I've done this 12 times in the last hour.” (P14)

“I use it. We usually send funny content to each other. We share content to gossip about. “Oh, did you see that? For your information.” or, for example, if there is X person started in our gym, I let my friend know about it. News or funny content.” (P15)

The examples above can be multiplied even more because messaging and sharing content with each other, often on Instagram and sometimes on Twitter, is one of the most preferred and loved features on social media platforms. Obviously, the subject of the content changes according to the person to be sent. Sometimes it is a meme shared to make your friend laugh. Sometimes it is about a series that you both watch. Sometimes it is something related to your friend's interest, so you send it to inform. Sometimes it is some news to discuss on it. Sometimes it is about a trip that you will take on together. The list goes on and on because topics and content change depending on what you share in common with the person you're sending. Whether it's Instagram or Twitter, users can comment freely because that is a private field, and they can freely write what they want because they talk to their closest acquaintances.

To summarize, users send the content that they pass through their own filters and that they deem appropriate to share, to make it easier for their acquaintances to see, to keep them informed and to talk about it, and they can be decisive about the content that other users will consume, as well as contributing to the circulation of the content. In this sense, by showing them a content that other users may not see, it makes a small contribution individually to the user's benefit from the abundance and diversity of content in social media in terms of consumption.

3.5. Algorithmic Filtering Effect on Content Consumption

As we discussed in the first chapter, social media applications offer different features to improve the user experience and thus extend the time users spend in applications. Since it is up to the user's preference to use, activate or deactivate these features, it is possible to say that users can adjust individual filtering within the possibilities offered by the applications during content consumption. At this point, before moving on to the effect of algorithms, it would be appropriate to look at the preferences and individual filters of the users we interviewed on the application.

We asked users if they had customized the feed view on Instagram and Twitter, showing screenshots in case they were unfamiliar. Users have three options on Instagram

which are the main algorithmic Home feed, the chronological Following feed and Favorites feed that consists of accounts users choose, while on Twitter they have two options which are For You feed where algorithms are dominant, and again the chronological Following feed. Most of the users we interviewed were not aware that they could make such a customization, especially on the Instagram side. Only those who are professionally involved in social media, those who work in this sector, were aware of this feature offered. Those who are aware that they can make a choice in this way stated that they prefer the main algorithmic Home feed on both Instagram and Twitter.

“They placed that feature (he's talking about Instagram) to such a ridiculous place that people don't use it even if they know about it. They didn't know where to put it. It is situated bad in terms of user experience.” (P15)

“I use it as the algorithm offers. I like the thing that it leaves aside the account or person that I don't interact with much and doesn't show it to me. 'Oh,' I say, 'how quiet is that person'. After I say ‘Let's see what she/he's doing, she/he's already involved after checking her/his account. I tried this new feature they added, but it doesn't work. It is too manual. Add her, add him, etc. Also, switching from algorithm to the other options was tiring for me. We already use these platforms very often. Another distinction, click, division, management, editing makes me tired. I consume it directly.” (P13)

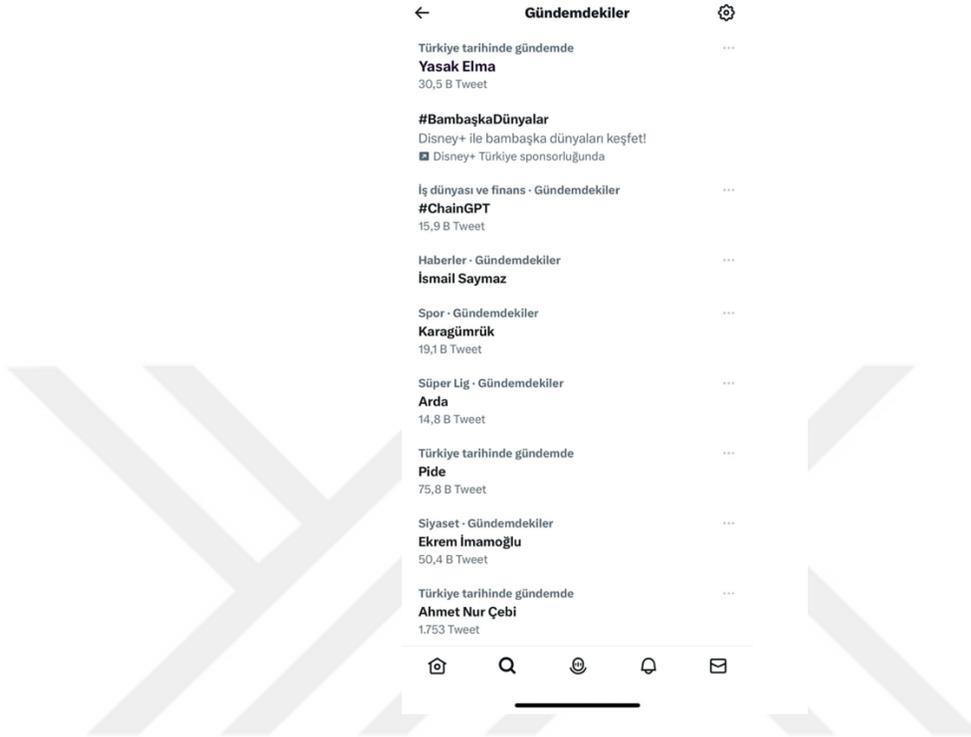
“There is main Home feed on Twitter, and also a feed where posts appear chronologically. Sometimes I switch to the chronological one but then I feel like I'm missing some of the topics discussed. For example, yesterday, a comedian named Nebiye Arı was lynched for an interview she gave. My friends made a joke about secularism today. If I hadn't seen that topic yesterday, if I had the option to show tweets chronologically, it wouldn't be on my homepage, and I wouldn't be able to understand that joke or topic being talked about today. That's when I realized I was always missing something. This could be about the political agenda, or it could be about a contestant in the Kismetse Olur program. When I realized this, I switched back to my echo chamber again.” (P3)

Users who do not know that there are feed change options consume contents through the main algorithmic Home feed on both Instagram and Twitter by default, while users who are aware of these options, as seen in the examples above, stated that they prefer the main algorithmic Home feed in both platforms. Users with a professional point of view stated that these features are not user-friendly enough in terms of user experience, as one

of the reasons for preferring the main algorithmic Home feed. Therefore, users who do not want to make extra clicks prefer to consume content in this feed since this is the first option they come across when they open the application. However, another reason why they prefer this feed view is that they think that the content they come across for consumption appeals to them more. They are likely to see more of the content of the accounts they follow in chronological order, but they think that they can see more attractive content in non-chronological order. In fact, they prefer this look because they do not want to miss popular or important content.

Apart from the feed view, we asked the users questions to understand whether they perform individual filtering through the different features offered by the applications. Since the users we interviewed generally spend more time on Instagram than Twitter, we noticed that they do not use Twitter's features such as personalizing trends, filtering topics, and creating lists. We observed that the Twitter trends part is not common among the users we interviewed. Users mostly prefer to consume content through the feed. When we told them about the trends personalization option and asked them to take a screenshot, most of them noticed that this personalization was deactivated. Therefore, in this part, the topics that are mostly on the agenda of Turkey appear. The screenshot below is from a user whose Twitter trend personalization is turned off. For this reason, there are trends that are on the agenda whether the user is interested or not. We would like to talk about the dialogue between us and this user while the user was viewing it to take a screenshot.

Figure 26: TWITTER TRENDS VIEW OF USER P9



P9: “I follow the Turkish agenda. I have personalization turned off. I don't really check the explore or trends tab anyway. Yasak Elma is on the agenda. I don't care about it.

Researcher: “If you had the personalization feature on, maybe you wouldn't have come across it.”

P9: “You are right. I'll turn it on then. However, this time I will be very cut off from the world outside myself.

Researcher: “But the Yasak Elma doesn't interest you either. What should we do?”

P9: “For example, İsmail Saymaz is also on the agenda. Though, if I turned on personalization, it would still be shown to me.”

Researcher: “Yes indeed, it would still be shown to you since you are interested in news or political tweets.”

As can be seen from the dialogue above, users are actually aware that consuming content constantly about their field of interests or other users with whom they frequently interact can have negative consequences, but it is still more important for them not to miss

content related to their own interests. When they feel that they are repeating themselves in any way or they want to see different profiles, they consciously make an effort to do so. Therefore, we can say that if they were more aware of the personalization features, they would apply individual filtering more.

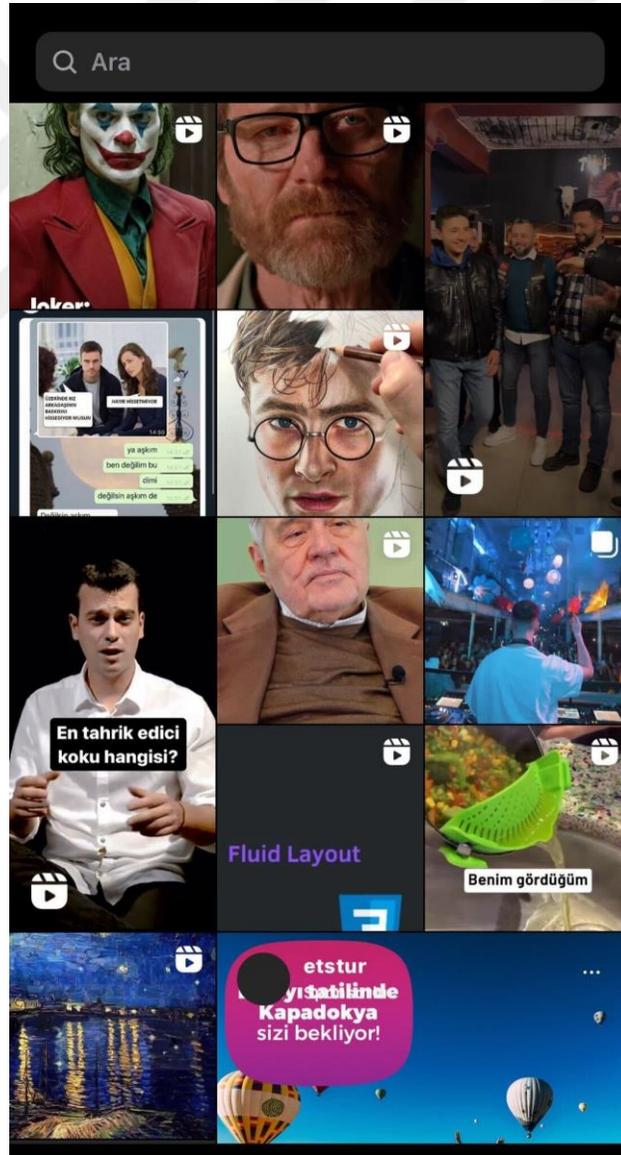
Another issue that we wondered if users applied individual filtering during content consumption was whether they took any action to prevent them from seeing similar content again when they see a content that neither does not interest them nor that they would not like or to interact with. It seems they do take action. “Yes, I use that feature. I don't want to deal with it. Like let the algorithm learn and do it.” (P12) Most of the users prefer to mark content that doesn't appeal to them as not interested on both Instagram and Twitter. “Sometimes I see content that does not interest me at all. Then I mark it as 'This content does not interest me.' and I try to train the algorithm.” (P10) This kind of individual filterings might have a negative impact on taking advantage from the abundance and diversity of content in social media.

Individual choices, preferences, as to say filterings, as well as the user practices, likes, comments, shares, saves, the time passed on a content have an impact to guide the algorithms in order to show the most relevant content to the user. Algorithms that learn what the users like, what type of content they spend more time on, who they communicate with more frequently, show and try to suggest the right content to the right user at the right time to improve the user experience, prevent the user from getting lost among the abundance and variety of content, and keep the user's attention longer on that platform. While we do not know exactly how the algorithms work in the background, we only know as much as the applications allow as we discussed in the first section, we asked users to evaluate the content that appeared in the Instagram Explore part in order to measure the filtering effect of the algorithms.

“A friend of mine asked, 'Why do you receive so many workshops content?' because there is no such thing in hers. There is a different world for her. Taking someone else's Instagram is like stepping into another world for me because it recommends different content to everyone and processes everyone's personalized data very differently.” (P1)

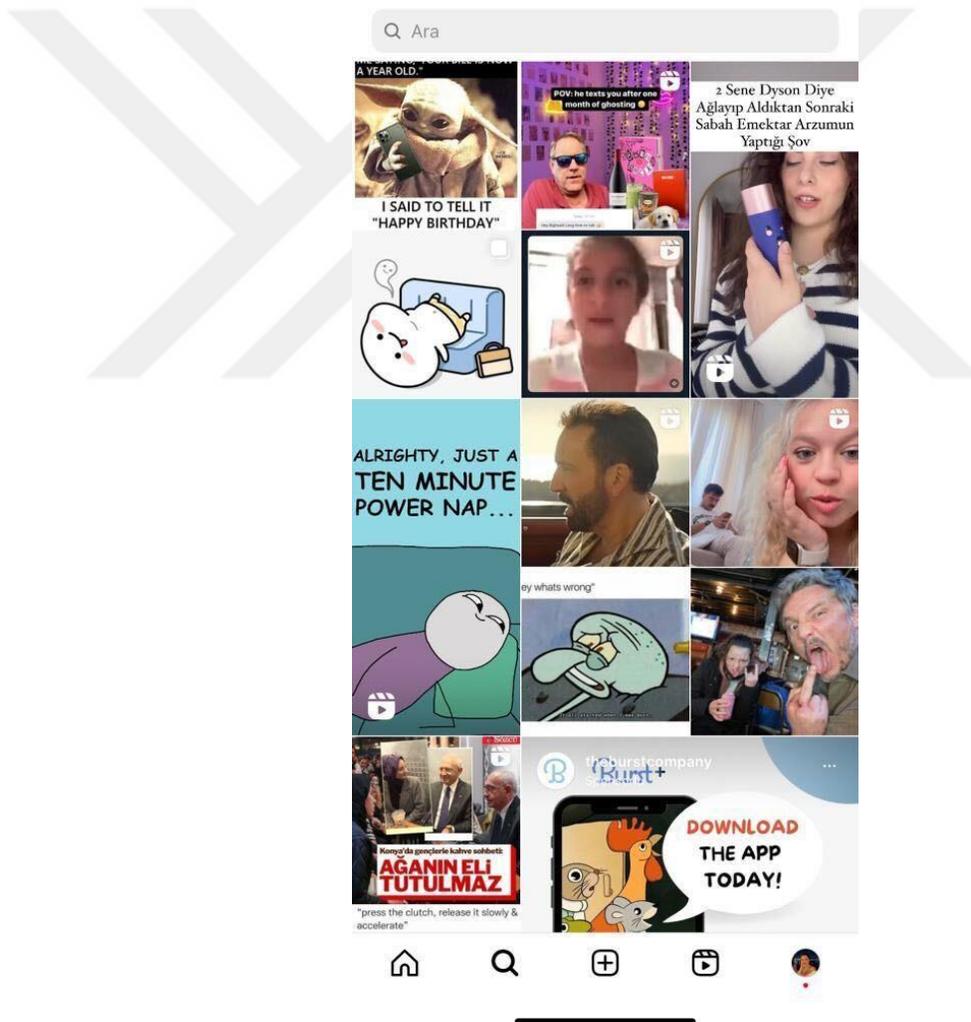
As one of our participants stated, since the recommendations that users come across differ depending on many different parameters, it is as if everyone has their own private world on social media. In order to partially understand the effect of the algorithms, we asked the users to look at the Explore part at the time of the interview, as well as we showed examples of personalized recommendations and wanted them to evaluate whether they find such experiences useful and whether they have an effect on the time they spend on the platform.

Figure 27: EXPLORE TAB VIEW OF USER P17



“I follow Breaking Bad closely; I saw a content about it. An İlber Ortaylı video is shown since I am interested in history. Recently, I am particularly interested in history. That's why, for example, I always like or save posts about history so that I can see them more. As a matter of fact, since I see more historical speeches, information, etc., it is fascinating for me. That's what makes me spend more time. I find it useful in that sense. It shows me different content on the same subject. Other than that, I see cooking videos. There are some content that we can describe as memes. I would definitely check this Explore tab. I would have tap on one of these contents and keep scrolling and spend some quality time.” (P17)

Figure 28: EXPLORE TAB VIEW OF USER P11



“Right now yes, I can say that this Explore tab definitely reflects me. There are two TV series I've been watching lately, Mandalorian and Last of Us. That's why I see a lot of Pedro Pascal content. I see also Baby Yoda content. There is also a political content. This is okay, this is me!” (P11)

We were only able to share two examples above, but almost all of the users we interviewed said that when they looked at the Explore tab, it reflects them and their interests on a high percentage. The content shown to every user varied according to their interests. It is possible to say that those who say that the contents on the Explore reflect them on a lower percentage, spend less time on the platform compared to other users. For this reason, we think that there may be a correlation between the appropriate targeting of the algorithms and the time spent by the user in the application, but we do not have enough data to support this and it requires further investigation.

“It definitely affects the time I spend because I’m literally hypnotized, and I keep watching.” (P10)

“Between our business meetings, for example, we unlock the phone by practice and log in to Instagram, you know. Even during that 10-minute break, I am so interested that I can even get away from the atmosphere of the meeting. It’s not good, but I can’t help myself sometimes. When I get stuck on any content, it can affect my half-hour connected with it.” (P14)

Users, who stated that personalized recommendations extend the time they spend in the application, also mentioned that they find these recommendations useful based on various examples.

“Suggestions similar to my interests are definitely useful. Even too much. (Shares his computer screen.) For example, this man is from the United Kingdom. For example, I got to know this man through Instagram. I also met Lex Fridman through Instagram. I mean, I actually got to know most people through Instagram. I got to know a lot of people just because these algorithms suggested me new people. So may God bless them. I can say they opened up my horizon.” (P5)

“Social media platforms are especially useful for macro targeting as well as micro segment targeting. I discovered and followed new people from the Explore tab. There was even some people I discovered from there and worked with. In terms of business, there have also been names that we have worked with by sharing the talents I found on Instagram with my colleagues and the agencies we work with and taking their opinions.” (P18)

“I have seen its advantages. An event that I would never see appeared on my page and I participated in that event. That personalized recommendation became an experience for me. I think it is beneficial in this respect. Sometimes I even watch stories just for the app suggest me something because it happens occasionally, for example, the publicity of a workshop. I just click and apply. Or sometimes I see a book suggestion, I look at it and buy it. Or sometimes I download or purchase some product that interests me.” (P1)

“I think it is useful. It really makes my time valuable. I can easily choose and shop the things that I would go around the store for 1-2 hours. It makes my life easier. But of course, it extends the time I spend on Instagram, but at least I don't get tired by going to the store, I shop from where I sit.” (P16)

As can be seen from the examples above, the users we interviewed are satisfied with the recommendations offered by the algorithms and state that it works for them in different ways. While some get to know new names in the field of technology due to the recommendations of the algorithm, some discover and participate in new workshops, some easily find a product they are looking for, and some discover a new talent with which they can collaborate in the business world. However, they mentioned that they can sometime feel overwhelmed with the recommendations.

“We decided to celebrate New Year's Eve outside. Some tavern, restaurant suggestions began to appear constantly. Menu, price information etc. We decided from Instagram where we would go. It is beneficial because it is target-oriented, but it also has a tiring side because even though the New Year's Eve has passed, I still receive such suggestions because the algorithm learned that way once.” (P4)

“For someone's birthday, for an animal lover friend for example, when I'm going to buy an animal related object, I search through Instagram pages. I find the object, and I order it. It comes and I give it to my friend as a gift but even though I haven't interested in animals, I always see that kind of posts for like 1 week, 15 days, or even 1 month after that.” (P14)

It seems that the problem is that the algorithm cannot detect when the user's interests have changed or may change as quickly as it learns what users are interested in. Users may have temporary interests, whims, or desires, or they may spend time on posts that are not always relevant to them. While this fact indicates that the adaptation process of algorithms to change takes longer than the learning process in some cases, it also points

to the success of microtargeting for the field of interest. We noticed also that some users mention personalized ads as an aspect they do not really like about social media platforms. In fact, one of our participants working in the sector evaluated this point as following from the perspective of both a communicator and a user:

“My interpretation as a user may differ from the one as a communicator. As a communicator, I may want more view, reach and interaction, but from the user's point of view, it bothers me when my experience is interrupted by an advertisement while I'm trying to get a specific and direct information. Therefore, it is important that it is based on preference. Like offering to switch between where you see ads and not. Especially the frequent advertisements in the story, in the feed, the intensity of them bothers me as a user.” (P18)

“Ads can actually stem from the algorithm, but the listening feature of the phones is also a big factor in the ads. Certain keywords are defined. When you get caught by that keyword limit, relationship, connection, these ads can appear on both platforms. Instagram starts to bother me when I search for a product that I am going to buy from Instagram because 'Oh my God', my feed and my stories are filled with advertisements afterwards. I try to clean them by hiding them or marking them as inappropriate for an average of 1 week.” (P13)

When evaluated in terms of user experience, personalized ads can be beneficial as well as have a negative effect on the user since they interrupt the experience. Many users have complained about the intensity of personalized ads on Instagram. The second comment above belongs to a participant who has been working in the sector for a long time. The point he indicates about ads is important. Even though advertisements are algorithm-related, factors such as media listening, and cookies are also very important. Although advanced filtering technologies have increased the microtargeting capability of ads and given a significant power in the abundance of consumption objects, we need to separate personalized recommendations and ads within the scope of this study. We do not prefer to discuss the effects of individual and algorithmic filtering in the context of personalized ads, as it is not entirely dependent on the user's experience and practices on social media, and there are different factors and financial concerns of companies are included.

Finally, we wanted to learn the perspectives of the participants regarding the consequences of individual filtering and algorithmic filtering that develops over user practices, trapping users in a possible echo chamber or a filter bubble, as we discussed in the second part. It is possible to say that the perception of the users about this situation is basically the same.

“Being exposed to a certain lifestyle or a certain thought may affect someone else, but not me. 1) He/she can say that 'So that's how it is.' 2) He/she can say that 'So that's what everybody thinks.' He/she may not be able to see different points of view.” (P2)

“Of course, it has some disadvantages. For example, my mother hears a lot of conspiracy theories. Then she sends it to me to confirm its accuracy because it is what is being talked around her. Maybe if the algorithm didn't exist and she would have also seen teyit.org content, then she would have say 'Oh okay, this isn't true'. However, I think that even without social media, we all continue to stay in various echo chambers. Before social media, we preferred certain people as our neighbors and friends. After all, we are human too. We have certain limitations, and it seems to me that it is not possible for us to socialize with everyone and to learn the ideas of everyone.” (P3)

“Sometimes, yes, I want to see different content, but when I see something that looks a little closer to me in that thumbnail in the Explore tab, I feel the need to click on it.” (P7)

“There are some examples. It was happened last time in America. Constantly showing certain content to people can cause people to change their political views or ideas in social life. This depends on the person consuming the content. If they see and believe it, and do not research the things behind it, then they may get affected. So I think I am a conscious consumer. That's why it doesn't affect me much, but of course, the number of people affected is also very high. It is up to the user to be manipulated or not.” (P19)

“I don't think it will affect it negatively because social media can create an encounter with the other, yes, but this is how our life goes, in this circle and in this bubble. Making room for the other is not just about social media pushing us away, but also about whether we are willing to make room for the other.” (P12)

The examples above and much more actually show that the users we interviewed are aware of the possible negative consequences of individual and algorithmic filtering

since they are individuals with high social media literacy, but they think that the possibility of being manipulated depends on the user's level of consciousness, education level and literacy. Even if they sometimes feel themselves in an echo chamber, filter bubble, or in a pool where similar contents circulate, they like not to get lost among the options that can be consumed, to easily access information that they can consume in a compact way, and to see content that reflects their interests. They are aware that they may miss some content and some ideas due to filtering, but at this point, in order to open slightly different doors for them, they developed strategies such as consciously following accounts with different views, searching for the views they are curious or information they want to find, consuming some content without opening an account, or connecting via VPN. Although they do not seem to be able to fully benefit from the abundance and diversity of content brought about by the democratization of content production and distribution, they think that it is natural since they are not also able to benefit from social diversity and abundance of opinion in daily life as well because they think that individuals become friends and spend time with others similar to them due to their individual filters. On the other hand, there is a serious abundance of content on social media, no matter how niche, about the interests of users. Therefore, as stated by the users we interviewed, it is very possible for them to discover new ideas or meet new people within their own fields of interest. Therefore, the abundance and diversity here should not be overlooked.

3.6. Privacy Concern

Personalized recommendations that extend the time users we interviewed spend on the platform and are useful for them in different ways, raise questions about digital surveillance and privacy. Because in order to make micro-targeting specific to user's interests, likes and preferences, algorithms should seriously monitor user behavior in the background. At this point, we wanted to learn about the opinions of the users, whose literacy we think is high and whose comments we gave as an example in the previous sections, on digital surveillance and privacy.

“I think I'm being watched, but I don't feel uneasy about it. ‘What could happen if they surveil me?’ I say. I don't do anything to break the law anyway on social media, or I don't shout what I think too much. I don't get into arguments.” (P1)

“It can be irritating, but it is an inconvenience that is taken for granted because everyone is using it. That makes me feel comfortable. If I don't use Instagram, I shop online and my data is already collected from there. I order books from Amazon, they collect it from there. I log into gmail account for work, they collect it from there. You turn on your location to look for something on the maps, they already collect it from there.” (P3)

“There is a comfort in using a private account. I don't feel uneasy because I usually share the things that through my own filter and don't share too much about my private life, home and myself.” (P7)

“I think we're definitely being spied on and listened to, but that doesn't bother me. ‘What can I do?’ Anyway, if I'm here one way or another, that information is already stored somewhere, whether I post and share it directly or not. If we open an account on social media, there is always such a risk. I also think that I am not a very important person. ‘What knowledge can I have?’ I say. The idea of being watched doesn't bother me much, but I think we are being watched and recorded.” (P8)

“It felt a little more uncomfortable at first, but now I think I'm taken for granted. I'm not stopping on it. In terms of social media, everything seems to be like an open book. People are now even sharing how they wake up in the morning. What else can I or anyone else see of those people?” (P11)

As seen in a few examples above, users are aware that they are being surveilled in order to provide them with a better social media experience. They think that the surveillance and storage of their data is an inevitable consequence of being on social media. Users, who were more concerned about this situation at the first time they were involved in social media, state that this feeling of anxiety gave way to a feeling of intimacy over time. The reasons why users may feel less concerned or not concerned at all about digital surveillance, that we discussed in the previous chapter, can be seen in the examples above and more. When users decide to exist on social media, they have to choose between processing their personal data by companies that can profit from them and their own social media usage motivations. Is it stay informed about the world, to message and share more

things with your loved ones, to see more interesting content about your interests or the security of your personal data? The users we interviewed know that algorithms want to get to know themselves more and acknowledge that there may be disadvantages in exchange for the advantages of algorithmic filtering.

Knowing that data mining is implemented constantly through different platforms, even if not on social media, and in fact, everyone in the digital world is exposed to this surveillance is another reason why users are less nervous about sharing their personal data. In other words, we can say that they are relieved because they know that other users also share their personal data. Another factor that reduces the uneasiness in sharing personal data is that users do not realize how valuable the information about them is and they do not care about how this data can be used by profit-making companies. Another important point to be mentioned is that they stated that they do not have anything to hide because they did not do anything that could cause problems, covertly, against the law or the social order, so they do not hesitate to be surveilled. At this point, we can say that individual filterings come to the fore again because we see that some of the users we interviewed for privacy purposes stated that they do not share some content or ideas.

“For example, I opened an account on Twitter in 2010. That me in 2010 and the me now are not the same, but the content I shared then never goes from the internet. Even if I delete it, it somehow remains in the archive. So I want this to be seen by as much of an audience as possible that I can control. This makes me feel more secure.” (P6)

“I’m not really worried about sharing my personal information, but I do have concerns about my posts on Facebook because of a possible archive investigation. We were sharing posts on Facebook when none of these apps were available. I had such a politicized high school and university life. Hesitating from the archive investigation, I deleted completely my Facebook account.” (P12)

“Because of the political content they share, people can be fired, exposed to mobbing, get reaction or encounter difficulties in their working or social life. Due to such concerns, I do not share such personal data.” (P9)

As we discussed in the previous section, there are strong assumptions that any personal data we share in the digital world – it can be photos posted, tweets sent, phone

number or e-mail address shared or more – is not completely deleted and is always accessible. Therefore, some of the users prefer to apply an individual filtering to themselves because they are concerned about social media posts that have been shared at the time or may be shared at the moment and that are actually personal data. In order not to be misunderstood by others, not to be subject to a legal process, and not to get the reaction of any environment, users either use private accounts or completely delete the accounts they use that might cause trouble, or do not share the content that they think may cause any reaction. All of the users stated that the only precaution they took to protect their personal privacy was to use a private account. Although these highly literate users do not have great concerns about the storage and processing of their personal data, they adopt some individual filtering strategies because they have privacy concerns about the content they produce and share.

CONCLUSION

The internet technologies and the advent of Web 2.0 revolutionized the way individuals consume and interact with media. The emergence of online social networks, blogs, video and photo-sharing sites, and other user-generated content platforms provided individuals with the ability to create and share their own media content. This shift in power from traditional media outlets to individuals has enabled individuals to become more influential in shaping public opinion, breaking news stories, and communicating their own perspectives on current events.

The rise of social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and so on has allowed individuals to easily share their experiences, thoughts, and opinions with a global audience. Individuals can now engage in discussions, debates, and share their views on various issues that affect their lives. With the increasing accessibility of the internet for a considerable amount of society, individuals can consume and create media content anytime, anywhere, without any limitations.

The traditional media outlets, who were once the primary source of information, now face a tough competition from user-generated content. With the democratization of content production and distribution, we witness to a shift from a few centralized institutions controlling the production and distribution of content to a more decentralized distribution model where more individuals can create and distribute content. In the past, only a few people or entities had the resources to create high-quality content, such as films, music, and news. However, with the advent of the internet, social media platforms, and other technologies, anyone with a smartphone or a laptop can create and distribute their content to a global audience without facing a gatekeeper obstacle. Therefore, individuals have gained immense power to create, consume, and share media content.

The fact that individuals have become co-producers and co-creators of media, has enabled an abundance of content both in terms of number and diversity on social media, with a never-ending stream of information and media. This content abundance is our main issue that our study and problematic is built on. Users can scroll through thousands of posts, photos, videos, and articles without ever reaching the end of their feeds. The sheer number of content available on social media is staggering, and it continues to grow every day since users now have the possibility of bypassing pre-filters.

However, the abundance of content on social media also has its drawbacks that we have discussed in the first chapter of our study. With so much information available at the click of a button, it can be overwhelming to filter through it all and find meaningful content. Users may also struggle with choice overload, feeling the need to constantly check for new updates and missing out on offline experiences. We have argued that algorithmic filters which use data to predict and prioritize what content a user may be interested in, can cause users to miss out on diverse opinions and perspectives and in addition, we have also argued that individual filters, such as unfollowing or muting accounts that do not align with one's beliefs, may also limit the diversity of content a user is exposed to. In order to better understand if this filtering mechanisms pose an obstacle for users to make the most of the content abundance on social media, we have conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 students with high level of literacy, studying in media and communication graduate programs of a state university and a private university.

The main motivations of our participants for using social media are to stay informed about what other users they know or do not know do, to follow the agenda and get latest news, to socialize and create new groups. Considering the number of followings of these users on Instagram and Twitter, there are many choices for consumption of news as well as the consumption of content shared by other users. In the same way, when we consider the number of users of social media platforms, users have many choices to socialize and establish new groups. That's why social media platforms offer productive research are to investigate the adoption of filters both algorithmically and individually.

In this context, we first tried to investigate the practices and thoughts of our participants about individual filtering. We thought it would be appropriate to consider individual filters in the context of both content production and content consumption, as we thought that although technically users are free to create content on the social media platforms, this situation may change in practice and, we received answers that confirm our argument. We observed that users avoid producing content on topics such as sexuality, sexual orientation, protests, humorous posts containing swearword, especially politics. The concern caused by the government's oppressive regime on freedom of thought and therefore the possibility of being subject of some legal processes, negative reactions they might get from other users they know or do not know, fear of being misunderstood by other users, and the thought that they will be profiled through the content they share, prevent users from producing content and they result in to not completely make use of democratization of content production and distribution. In addition, users who do not want the content they produce to be seen by certain people bypass these users with the features offered by the applications and prevent them from benefiting from the potential diversity and richness of the social media.

On the other hand, regarding individual filtering on content consumption, we observed that opinion reinforcing views and similar interests, therefore some homophilous tendencies and selective exposure motivations come prominent while the users make a decision about consuming a content or following an account. However, since we have interviewed with users with high social media literacy and awareness, they are aware of the echo chamber effect and therefore, they follow (but not by clicking on follow button, instead by kind of stalking) accounts that have opinion challenging views especially when it comes to politics. In this sense, it is possible to say that they are trying to benefit from the diversity in social media. Unfollowing or blocking other users because of the content or ideas they share, as well as hiding or reporting content are not common behaviors among the users we interviewed. However, we can say that the main action taken by the users in order not to be exposed to content choice overload is to mute, which they think will not attract the reaction of the other user. At this point, it is possible to say that users adopt a filtering again. In addition, we would like to mention that users filter not only what they see, but also what content other users they are friends with will see. Through DM,

they position themselves as gatewatchers by bringing content, topics and news that their friends may never see, and actually help them to benefit from the richness of content on social media.

Another challenging point that we have mentioned in the second chapter was algorithmic filtering effect on content consumption and therefore, we have tried to investigate if the users we have interviewed take advantage of filtering options offered by social media platforms. Although we know that it is not possible to fully reveal the impact of algorithms with social sciences research methods, we know that relevancy and similarity are two important concepts, as far as we know from accessible content about how algorithms work, and algorithms get to know users better and make suggestions based on their behavior and actions on the platform. Since the performance of the algorithms also depends on the preferences of the individuals, we have actually discussed individual filtering together at this point and we asked them if they make use of the features such as changing the Feed view on both Instagram and Twitter, personalizing Twitter trends, filtering Twitter topics, creating Twitter lists, or marking content as 'not interested' on both platforms. The two important points here are that users prefer the Feed view with algorithms enabled on both platforms, and when they come across content that they think is not relevant to them, they mark the content as not interested in order to train the algorithm. Therefore, we can think that they might miss some content shared on social media platforms; however, they are actually happy with their Feed view and Explore view and also recommendations tailored to them. When we asked users to evaluate the targeting accuracy of their Instagram Explore pages, we saw that each of the users' page was customized according to their own interests and users stated that they would definitely spend time among those contents. It is actually a win win negotiation for both the user and the platform. Users take what they need, and the platforms generate revenue by keeping users on the platform longer. The last point we would like to mention about the effects of algorithmic filtering in terms of narrowing the exposed content is that the users we interviewed are, of course, aware of the filter bubble and echo chamber effects since they are users with high social media literacy, as we always mention, and follow some strategies time to time to go away from this world; however, they remark that they can learn and discover new things in their fields of interests. At this point, we would like to

state that we should not ignore the potential diversity and richness in the interests of users, no matter how niche they are.

Regarding the last challenge that we have mentioned in the second chapter, we also tried to find out what users think about digital surveillance and data privacy. Users that we have interviewed are aware that social media platforms are constantly collecting, analyzing, and storing vast amounts of their data in order to show them more relevant content to overcome the choice overload and to provide a unique service quality to improve their online experience; moreover, it seems that many of the users are got used to it and stopped seeing it as a threat. It is possible to say that the only strategy adopted by the users for data privacy is to have a private account, in fact, the main concern here is not the storage and processing of personal data, but the idea that personally shared content or thoughts are never deleted from the internet, and that they may cause difficulties in their physical life. At this point, they use their accounts private and, as we mentioned before, they do not produce content on some issues and apply individual filtering.

In conclusion, post-filters that include both individual and algorithmic filtering can help users find relevant and meaningful social media content, while reducing the overwhelming amount of information available on these platforms. It definitely helps prevent users from being inundated with irrelevant content that may not be of interest to them. Even if the excessive filtering can lead to some challenges as limiting users' exposure to new ideas and perspectives, and preventing them from taking advantage of the abundance of content available on social media, ultimately, it is up to individual users to find the right balance that works for them in order to reap the benefits of social media content abundance, and it can be seen that the users we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews, are successful in keeping this balance since they have high social media literacy. In addition, while it seems unrealistic for users to consume all content on different topics on social media, due to the large amount of content produced, we should not consider that filters only distract the user from potential diversity and richness, but also allow users to discover new things in their own interests.

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BIOGRAPHY



TEZ ONAY SAYFASI

Üniversite : T.C. GALATASARAY ÜNİVERSİTESİ
Enstitü : SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ
Hazırlayanın Adı Soyadı : Mirey BAŞARAN
Tez Başlığı : Individual and Algorithmic Filtering in social media:
Practices and Literacy of Users
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Danışman : Doç. Dr. Tolga ÇEVİKEL

JÜRİ ÜYELERİ:

Unvan, Ad-Soyadı
Doç. Dr. Tolga ÇEVİKEL
Doç. Dr. Ece VİTRİNEL
Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Aylin SUNAM

İmza

Prof. Dr. Ulun AKTURAN
Enstitü Müdürü