Artificial Intelligence in Social Media: University Students' Experiences Across AI-Driven Platforms

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Abstract: The rapid integration of artificial intelligence into social media platforms has fundamentally transformed the nature of digital participation, raising critical questions about user autonomy, information exposure, and platform governance. This study examines the extent to which artificial intelligence influences the social media practices of university students, a group characterized by intensive platform use and formative information consumption. Data were collected from 750 undergraduate students (aged 18–22) of Turkish cultural background residing in Northern Cyprus, Türkiye, Germany, the United Kingdom, and 15 additional countries. Contemporary social media platforms operate as AI-driven environments that shape what users see, how they engage, and how they interpret information. This study demonstrates that university students are deeply embedded in AI-driven social media environments, where algorithmic systems play a central role in shaping engagement, information exposure, and everyday digital practices. However, this integration does not translate into meaningful user control. The findings reveal a consistent pattern in which higher levels of AI-Driven Engagement & Personalization, AI Influence on Social Media Habits, and AI and Misinformation Exposure coexist with significantly lower levels of AI Awareness & Control, indicating a structural imbalance between user participation and user empowerment. The strength and direction of these relationships suggest that the limitations users experience are not solely individual but are closely linked to the design and operation of AI-driven platforms. Despite increased awareness, users remain constrained in their ability to interpret, question, and influence algorithmic processes. This challenges the assumption that awareness alone is sufficient to foster autonomy in digital environments.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Social Media, Algorithmic Curation, University Students, Digital Literacy, Misinformation, Perceived Control, User Agency, Regression Analysis

1. Introduction

The integration of artificial intelligence into the structural architecture of social media platforms represents one of the most consequential transformations in the recent history of digital communication. Recommendation and personalization engines, operating largely beyond user visibility, have rendered AI an ambient structuring force in everyday mediated experience (Pariser 2011; Gillespie 2014). Where earlier platforms relied on chronological ordering, contemporary systems deploy machine learning algorithms that can infer preferences, predict engagement, and curate personalized information streams in real time. University students occupy a particularly significant position within this landscape. As habitual users of platforms including Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X, they are exposed to AI-driven systems at a critical juncture in their intellectual and civic development. The cumulative consequences of sustained interaction with algorithmic personalization—for political orientation, epistemic habits, and information consumption patterns—have attracted growing scholarly scrutiny (Bail et al. 2018; Sunstein 2017), yet the subjective dimensions of these consequences remain empirically underdetermined. Three substantive gaps motivate the present study. First, empirical investigations of AI-mediated social media experience have disproportionately centered on Western, English-speaking populations; the experiences of users from other cultural backgrounds dispersed across multiple national contexts have received limited systematic attention. Second, the relationship between users' awareness of algorithmic systems and their perceived capacity to influence them has not been quantitatively modeled across a large, cross-contextual sample. Third, the intersection of AI-generated content exposure, digital literacy, and perceived agency in young adult populations has not been examined using multivariate statistical approaches. The present study addresses these gaps by analyzing the AI-mediated social media experiences of 750 Turkish university students residing across more than 19 countries. Employing the AI-SMEQ (Tuncay 2025a) alongside Pearson correlation analysis and OLS multiple regression, the investigation provides quantitative insight into four interrelated dimensions: engagement and personalization driven by AI, behavioral change attributable to algorithmic influence, misinformation exposure, and perceived user agency.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Algorithmic Curation and User Experience

The replacement of chronological content feeds with algorithmic alternatives constitutes a structural intervention with far-reaching consequences for user information environments. Recommendation systems trained on granular behavioural data determine the content users encounter, its sequencing, and its affective register (Resnick and Varian 1997; Linden, Smith and York 2003). While this approach increases engagement, it simultaneously narrows the breadth of information and reinforces existing attitudes through filter-bubble mechanisms (Pariser 2011). Bakshy, Messing and Adamic (2015) demonstrated that algorithmically curated feeds reduce cross-cutting ideological exposure relative to organic social networks. The resulting algorithmic opacity has been linked to diminished critical evaluation of content and elevated susceptibility to manipulative framing (Diakopoulos 2016). Bibliometric mapping of the AI-social media domain confirms sustained growth in scholarly attention to personalization, datafication, and platform governance (Tuncay 2025b). More recent scholarship has extended this line of inquiry by examining the ethical dimensions of algorithmically personalised decision-making. Haim et al. (2024) demonstrate that delegating content selection to AI systems may progressively erode user autonomy by generating self-reinforcing loops that narrow the informational self and diminish users' capacity for independent evaluation. Gagrczin, Naab and Grub (2026) provide an integrative review of algorithmic media use, establishing that algorithm literacy — the capacity to understand, evaluate, and strategically respond to algorithmic systems — has emerged as a distinct and measurable competency that mediates the relationship between exposure and agency. Zhao and Zhou (2023) further show that university-age users generally adopt pragmatic stances toward recommendation systems, engaging in both algorithmic resistance and domestication in order to restructure content feeds for personal ends. These findings collectively suggest that the impact of algorithmic curation on young adult users is not passive but is modulated by awareness, competency, and active navigation strategies.

2.2 AI-Generated Misinformation and Amplification Dynamics

Artificial intelligence both enables the detection of misinformation and facilitates its production and distribution at an unprecedented scale. Generative adversarial networks have dramatically lowered the barrier to producing deepfakes—synthetic audiovisual content visually indistinguishable from authentic recordings (Chesney and Citron 2019; Vaccari and Chadwick 2020). Vosoughi, Roy and Aral (2018) established that false information spreads more rapidly on social media than accurate content, a disparity attributed to novelty and emotional salience. The illusory truth effect compounds this vulnerability: repeated exposure to a claim increases its perceived truthfulness regardless of its veracity (Pennycook and Rand 2019). Together, these mechanisms create an information environment in which young users face persistent and underrecognized epistemic risk. The rapid advancement of generative AI tools after 2022 has substantially intensified these risks. Feuerriegel et al. (2023) demonstrate that AI-generated content exhibits greater scalability, multilingualism, and multimodality than earlier synthetic media, significantly complicating detection strategies previously employed by platforms and users alike. Chu-Ke and Dong (2024) show that social bots and AI-generated deepfakes now operate synergistically, amplifying the reach of misinformation networks and targeting vulnerable populations including adolescents who spend disproportionate time on algorithmically curated platforms. Sanchez-Acedo et al. (2024) argue that the deepfake challenge represents a critical test for media and information literacy frameworks, finding that hyper-realistic audiovisual manipulations are frequently indistinguishable from authentic content even by media-literate young adults. At the regulatory level, Burnat and Davidson (2026) document a growing accountability paradox in which EU Digital Services Act mandates for algorithmic transparency are systematically undermined by platform API restrictions, creating audit blind spots in precisely the content moderation and amplification systems most implicated in misinformation spread.

2.3 Digital Literacy, Perceived Control, and the Limits of Awareness

Digital literacy has long been positioned as the primary individual-level response to the harms of algorithmically mediated environments (Hobbs 2010; Buckingham 2006). However, platform design features such as infinite scroll, push notifications, and variable reward scheduling are engineered to sustain attention in ways that may override even well-developed critical awareness (Schreiner 2018). Perceived control — the subjective sense of capacity to shape one's information environment — has emerged as a psychologically meaningful complement to literacy measures (Bandura 2001; Brundidge 2010), and validation studies of the AI-SMEQ confirm that higher awareness paradoxically correlates with greater frustration about limited algorithmic modifiability (Tuncay

2025a). Recent work has extended these insights. Sun et al. (2024) find that algorithmically aware university students exhibit increased information dissemination alongside maladaptive behavioural tendencies, suggesting that awareness without accompanying control capacity may amplify rather than mitigate algorithmic influence. Burén, Nutley and Thorell (2023) further show that screen time alone is a poor predictor of harm; it is the negative consequence dimension of heavy involvement that independently predicts psychological deterioration, underscoring the value of multidimensional instruments such as the AI-SMEQ. At a theoretical level, Turtle et al. (2024) conceptualise an emerging Algorithmic Self — a digitally mediated identity actively co-constructed by AI feedback — framing AI Awareness & Control not as a peripheral variable but as a structural feature of contemporary platform engagement.

3. Methodology

A cross-sectional survey design was employed to document the prevalence and co-occurrence of AI-mediated social media experiences across a geographically dispersed population, though the design precludes causal inference. All participants provided informed consent and data were fully anonymized in accordance with established ethical guidelines.

The sample comprised 750 Turkish undergraduate students (aged 18–22) recruited voluntarily via institutional emails, social media announcements, and snowball sampling. Participants were drawn from Northern Cyprus, Türkiye, Germany, the United Kingdom, and 15 additional countries. Data were collected using the AI-SMEQ (Tuncay 2025a), a validated 37-item instrument measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaire comprises four factors: AI-Driven Engagement & Personalization ($\alpha = 0.95$), AI Influence on Social Media Habits ($\alpha = 0.92$), AI and Misinformation Exposure ($\alpha = 0.90$), and AI Awareness & Control ($\alpha = 0.89$). The survey was administered online, with an estimated completion time of 20 minutes. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, and Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) simple and multiple linear regression were used for analysis.

4. Findings

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all four AI-SMEQ factors. AI-Driven Engagement & Personalization scores were notably high (M = 4.054, SD = 0.625), consistent with 98% of participants (n = 735) reporting pervasive AI influence on their social media experiences. AI Influence on Social Media Habits (M = 1.913, SD = 0.788) and AI and Misinformation Exposure (M = 2.027, SD = 0.786) were moderate on the five-point scale. AI Awareness & Control scores were markedly low (M = 1.384, SD = 0.243), with a compressed range (0.736–2.225), indicating that high perceived agency was rare across the full sample. The overall mean for all AI-SMEQ items was moderate (M = 2.837, SD = 0.658).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for AI-SMEQ Constructs (N = 750)

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max
AI-Driven Engagement & Personalization	4.054	0.625	1.831	5.000
AI Influence on Social Media Habits	1.913	0.788	0.000	3.856
AI and Misinformation Exposure	2.027	0.786	0.000	4.286
AI Awareness & Control	1.384	0.243	0.736	2.225
Overall AI-SMEQ Scale Score	2.837	0.658	0.942	4.871

4.2 Pearson Correlation Matrix

Table 2 presents the full Pearson correlation matrix. The most pronounced association was the strong negative correlation between AI-Driven Engagement & Personalization and AI Awareness & Control ($r = -.875$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .766$), indicating that users with higher recognition of AI's role in their feeds report systematically lower perceived agency. AI-Driven Engagement & Personalization was positively correlated with both AI Influence on Social Media Habits ($r = .340$, $p < .001$) and AI and Misinformation Exposure ($r = .446$, $p < .001$). AI Awareness &

Control was negatively correlated with AI and Misinformation Exposure ($r = -.382$, $p < .001$) and AI Influence on Social Media Habits ($r = -.226$, $p < .001$). All associations were statistically significant at $p < .001$, with the exception of the Overall AI-SMEQ Scale Score–AI and Misinformation Exposure correlation ($r = .071$, $p < .05$).

Table 2: Pearson correlation matrix for AI-SMEQ constructs (N = 750)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. AI-Driven Engagement & Personalization	—	.340***	.446***	−.875***	.175***
2. AI Influence on Social Media Habits		—	.376***	−.226***	.183***
3. AI and Misinformation Exposure			—	−.382***	.071*
4. AI Awareness & Control				—	−.215***
5. Overall AI-SMEQ Scale Score					—

4.3 Prevalence of AI-Driven Engagement, Behavioural Change, and Misinformation Exposure

Table 3 summarises the principal descriptive findings. The near-total (98%) recognition of AI influence was uniform across all 19+ countries represented, suggesting that AI-platform effects are primarily architectural rather than culturally contingent. Approximately 50% of participants (n = 375) reported noticeable behavioural changes attributable to AI-driven features, most notably extended passive scrolling and heightened reliance on automated content recommendations.

Table 3: Summary of Principal Descriptive Findings (N = 750)

Finding	Result	Implication
AI influence on social media use	98% (n = 735)	Near-universal AI shaping across all countries
Changed social media behaviour	~50% (n = 375)	Shift toward passive scrolling and automated discovery
Exposure to AI-mediated misinformation	70% (n = 525)	Deepfakes and biased content most prevalent types
Awareness of algorithmic curation	80% (n = 600)	Cognitive awareness high; effective control remains low
Perceived control over AI systems	M = 1.38, SD = 0.24	Engagement-agency paradox confirmed statistically

Table 4 presents the distribution of AI-mediated misinformation types among the 70% of participants (n = 525) who reported frequent exposure. Deepfake audiovisual content was the most prevalent category (78%), followed by algorithmically reinforced biased narratives (71%). Table 5 displays the awareness-versus-perceived-control gap across four AI competency dimensions, with awareness rates consistently exceeding perceived control rates by 33 to 67 percentage points.

Table 4: Types of AI-Mediated Misinformation: Frequency of Reported Exposure (n = 525)

Misinformation Category	Frequency (%)	Description
AI-generated audiovisual media (deepfakes)	78%	Synthetic video/image indistinguishable from authentic content
Algorithmically amplified biased narratives	71%	Recommendation systems surfacing emotionally resonant misinformation
AI-generated textual news articles	58%	Machine-produced content distributed via platform channels
Coordinated inauthentic sharing patterns	53%	Amplification of false content via recommendation infrastructure

Misinformation Category	Frequency (%)	Description
Decontextualized authentic media	44%	Genuine recordings reframed to support misleading narratives

Table 5: Awareness–Agency Gap Across AI Competency Dimensions (N = 750)

AI Competency Dimension	Awareness Rate (%)	Perceived Control Rate (Est. %)
Awareness of algorithmic feed composition	98%	~31%
Recognition of content curation practices	80%	~25%
Knowledge of platform setting options	62%	~18%
Capacity for algorithmic customization	45%	~12%

The data reveals a striking awareness–agency gap across all four AI competency dimensions, where users consistently demonstrate high awareness of algorithmic systems but perceive far less control over them. This disconnect is most pronounced in algorithmic feed composition, where awareness reaches 98% yet perceived control sits at just ~31%, suggesting that knowing how these systems work does not translate into meaningful user empowerment.

4.4 Multiple Regression Analyses

Three OLS multiple regression models were estimated. In each model, the coefficient vector was solved via the normal equations

Table 6: Multiple regression analysis: predictors of passive consumption (N = 750)

Predictor	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*t*	*p*
(Constant)	2.778	0.031	—	88.743	< .001
AI-Driven Engagement & Personalization	−0.339	0.008	−.870	−44.159	< .001
AI Influence on Social Media Habits	0.000	0.006	.000	0.009	= .993
Overall AI-SMEQ Scale Score	−0.007	0.007	−.020	−1.068	= .286

Overall AI-SMEQ Scale Score exerted a significant negative effect (B = −0.266, SE = 0.041, β = −0.222, t = −6.46, $p < .001$). AI Awareness & Control was non-significant ($p = .993$). Table 7 presents the model predicting AI and Misinformation Exposure, $F(3, 746) = 85.49$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .256$. Both AI-Driven Engagement & Personalization ($\beta = .385$, $t = 5.81$, $p < .001$) and AI Influence on Social Media Habits ($\beta = .253$, $t = 7.54$, $p < .001$) were significant positive predictors. AI Awareness & Control was not significant in this model ($p = .665$), due to high multicollinearity with AI-Driven Engagement & Personalization ($r = −.875$).

Table 7: Multiple Regression Analysis: Predictors of Misinformation Exposure (N = 750)

Predictor	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*t*	*p*
(Constant)	−0.543	0.604	—	−0.900	= .369
AI-Driven Engagement & Personalization	0.484	0.083	.385	5.809	< .001
AI Awareness & Control	0.091	0.210	.028	0.434	= .665
AI Influence on Social Media Habits	0.253	0.034	.253	7.543	< .001

4.4 Correlation Scatter Plots

Figures 1 and 2 display scatter plots for the two focal bivariate relationships, each overlaid with an OLS regression line and a 95% confidence interval band. The OLS regression analysis revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between AI-Driven Engagement & Personalization and AI Influence on Social Media Habits ($r = .340$, $p < .001$), with AI-Driven Engagement & Personalization explaining approximately 11.6% of the variance in AI Influence on Social Media Habits.

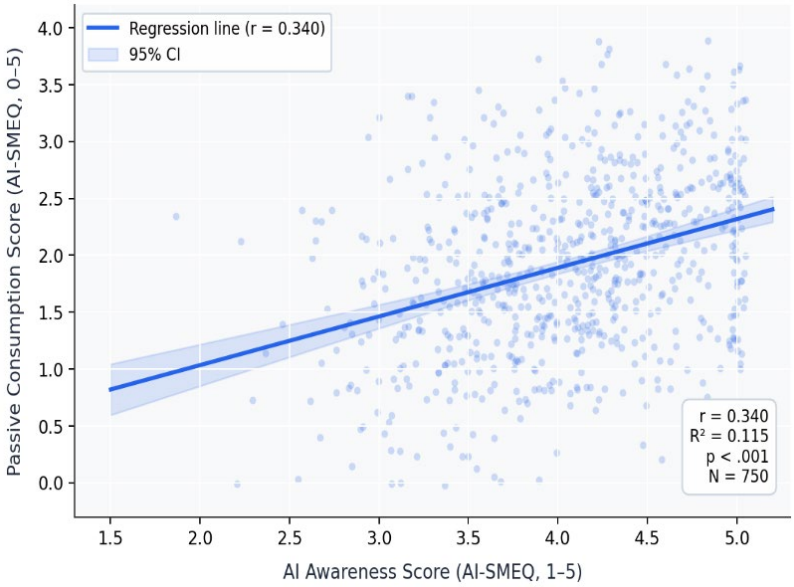

Figure 1: Scatter Plot of AI-Driven Engagement & Personalization Scores and AI Influence on Social Media Habits Scores (N = 750)

These findings align with automation bias theory (Parasuraman & Manzey, 2010), which posits that heightened AI-driven engagement paradoxically reinforces habitual social media consumption rather than prompting active algorithmic resistance, an effect that warrants further investigation into the cognitive mechanisms mediating engagement and behavioural agency. Negative linear relationship ($r = -.382$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .146$). The OLS regression equation is $\hat{y} = 2.564 - 0.391x$. A one-unit increase in Perceived Control is associated with a predicted 0.39-unit decrease in Misinformation Exposure.

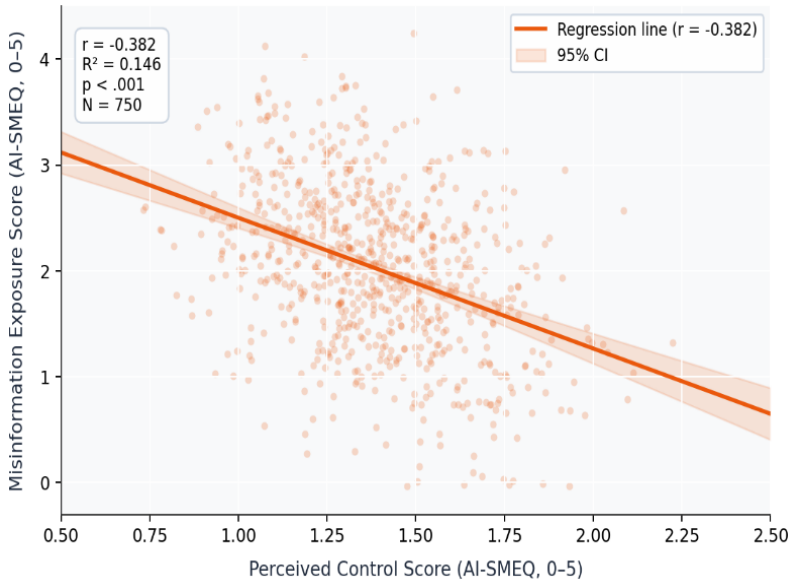

Figure 2: Scatter Plot of AI Awareness & Control Scores and AI and Misinformation Exposure Scores (N = 750)

Perceived agency accounts for approximately 14.6% of the variance in misinformation exposure in the bivariate model, indicating a practically significant protective effect of user self-efficacy over information environments.

5. Discussion

5.1 The Engagement-Agency Paradox: Statistical and Theoretical Dimensions

The study's defining finding, a pronounced dissociation between high AI-supported engagement and limited perceived agency, constitutes a statistically robust engagement-agency paradox. This is consistent with theoretical accounts suggesting that structural features of platform design constrain the translation of awareness into effective self-determination (Schreiner 2018; Diakopoulos 2016). The near-universal (98%) recognition of AI influence marks a significant departure from earlier research in which algorithmic curation was largely invisible to users (Eslami et al. 2015). The convergence of journalistic investigation, academic research, and platform transparency disclosures has elevated the cultural salience of algorithmic presence. Yet this collective awareness has not led to corresponding gains in perceived control, challenging the assumption that transparency is sufficient as an empowerment mechanism.

5.2 AI Influence on Social Media Habits and the Delegation of Informational Agency

The approximately 50% rate of self-reported behavioural change toward passive consumption is contextualized by the regression results in Table 6. AI-Driven Engagement & Personalization was the strongest positive predictor of AI Influence on Social Media Habits ($\beta = .390$, $t = 5.62$, $p < .001$), a finding consistent with automation bias theory (Parasuraman and Manzey 2010): users who experience stronger AI-driven personalization may systematically delegate content discovery to those systems. Conversely, Overall AI-SMEQ Scale Score exerted a significant negative effect ($\beta = -.222$, $t = -6.46$, $p < .001$), indicating that users with stronger AI competencies resist passive algorithmic deference even under conditions of high AI-driven engagement. This divergence has important implications for intervention design: developing skill-based digital literacy, rather than merely raising awareness, appears to be the more effective lever for reducing passive consumption.

5.3 Misinformation Vulnerability and the Role of Perceived Control

The 70% rate of AI-mediated misinformation exposure is contextualized by the regression results in Table 7 ($R^2 = .256$). Both AI-Driven Engagement & Personalization ($\beta = .385$) and AI Influence on Social Media Habits ($\beta = .253$) were significant positive predictors of AI and Misinformation Exposure. The negative bivariate correlation between AI Awareness & Control and AI and Misinformation Exposure ($r = -.382$; Figure 2) did not survive as a significant independent predictor in the full regression model, due to multicollinearity between AI Awareness & Control and AI-Driven Engagement & Personalization ($r = -.875$). This underscores the importance of jointly interpreting regression and correlation findings: the bivariate protective effect of AI Awareness & Control is real and practically significant ($R^2 = .146$), but operates largely through the AI-Driven Engagement & Personalization–AI Awareness & Control pathway in a multivariate context.

5.4 Implications for AI Literacy Education and Platform Governance

The finding that the Overall AI-SMEQ Scale Score is the sole variable that positively predicts AI Awareness & Control in bivariate analysis carries the study's clearest pedagogical implication: programs oriented exclusively toward engagement-raising may inadvertently reinforce the paradox documented here. Effective AI literacy education must incorporate skill-building components that address algorithmic navigation competencies, including using platform settings to modify recommendation parameters, deliberate content diversification strategies, and structured habits of source verification (Hobbs 2010; Buckingham 2006).

6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how artificial intelligence shapes university students' social media experiences, and the findings point to a clear and concerning pattern. Although nearly all participants recognized that AI plays a significant role in determining what they see online, very few felt that they had meaningful control over this process. Rather than empowering users, awareness of algorithmic influence appears to deepen their sense of being subject to forces they cannot meaningfully redirect, a dynamic this study terms the engagement–agency paradox. This paradox has practical consequences. When users understand that their feeds are curated by AI but lack the tools or skills to intervene, awareness becomes a source of frustration rather than agency. The

problem, therefore, is not a lack of information but a lack of capacity to act on it. Digital literacy initiatives that focus solely on raising awareness may inadvertently reinforce this gap. What is needed instead are approaches that build concrete, usable skills, helping users navigate platform settings, seek out diverse content, and critically assess what recommendation systems present to them. The implications extend beyond education. Platforms and regulators share responsibility for this structural imbalance. Transparency measures that inform users about algorithmic curation are valuable, but they are insufficient on their own. Genuine user empowerment requires that platforms be designed and, where necessary, mandated by regulation to offer real, accessible mechanisms for users to shape their own information environments. Ethical AI design must treat user autonomy not as an afterthought but as a core objective. Future research should build on these findings through longitudinal and experimental designs that can trace how algorithmic influence evolves over time and test which interventions most effectively support user agency in AI-mediated environments.

Ethics Declaration

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee. All participants were informed of the study's purpose and participated voluntarily. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process.

AI Declaration

During the preparation of this manuscript, artificial intelligence (AI) tools (e.g., language models) were used to support language editing, clarity improvement, and text structuring. The authors critically reviewed, revised, and validated all AI-assisted content to ensure its accuracy, originality, and academic integrity. The final responsibility for the content of this manuscript lies entirely with the author.

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