

Algorithmic Mediation of Youth Culture: The Cultural Influence of Social Media Marketing on Indian Youth

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how algorithmically curated social media marketing (SMM) on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter shapes contemporary youth culture in India. Anchored in Platform Theory and Algorithmic Culture Theory, the research conceptualises social media platforms not as neutral communication channels but as computationally governed cultural infrastructures that structure visibility, produce normative cues, and mediate identity formation. Employing a sequential explanatory mixed-method design, the study integrates a survey of 300 Indian youth with 20 in-depth interviews to investigate the influence of algorithmic curation, influencer-driven intermediation, and perceived algorithmic authority on cultural outcomes.

Quantitative findings reveal that both algorithmically curated exposure and influencer intermediation significantly predict youth cultural shifts, including identity performance, norm adoption, lifestyle aspiration, and behavioural alignment. Perceived algorithmic authority functions as a meaningful mediator, indicating that cultural internalisation is shaped not only by content exposure but also by users' trust in algorithmic outputs as socially valid and culturally credible. Qualitative insights further illuminate how youth experience algorithmic curation as a pervasive force that narrows cultural horizons, accelerates trend cycles, and produces aspirational pressure through influencer-generated narratives. Participants frequently perceived algorithmic recommendations as indicators of societal consensus, thereby reinforcing the cultural authority of platform-generated visibility.

Together, the findings demonstrate that youth culture in India is increasingly shaped by the interplay of platform infrastructures, algorithmic governance, and commercialised cultural signals. The study contributes to emerging scholarship on digital cultural production by revealing how algorithmic systems function as latent cultural agents, reshaping symbolic environments and influencing long-term cultural trajectories.

Keywords: Algorithmic Culture, Social Media Marketing, Platform Governance, Youth Cultural Transformation, Influencer Intermediation, Digital Identity Formation

INTRODUCTION:

Background and Importance of the Problem

The intensification of social media marketing (SMM) on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter has produced a complex cultural milieu in which Indian youth increasingly navigate algorithmically curated symbolic environments. These platforms no longer operate as neutral communicative interfaces; instead, they function as *algorithmic infrastructures* that selectively shape cultural visibility, regulate affective flows, and orchestrate the circulation of commercialised meanings. As recommendation systems, engagement-driven ranking logics, and influencer-centric promotional architectures converge, youth culture becomes progressively entangled within a socio-technical ecosystem where cultural priorities are engineered through opaque computational processes.

The importance of this problem lies in its capacity to reconfigure foundational cultural dynamics like identity formation, value orientation, aspirational imaginaries, and peer affiliation, through mechanisms that are neither fully intelligible nor consciously negotiated by young users. In the Indian context, where youth constitute a

demographically dominant and digitally dependent population segment, algorithmic mediation amplifies cultural acceleration, homogenises aesthetic templates, and embeds consumption-oriented behavioural scripts within everyday social participation. Such transformations introduce a subtler form of cultural governance in which marketing content functions as a primary vehicle for shaping norms, desires, and lifestyle expectations.

Moreover, the speed and scale at which SMM infiltrates cultural practices risk producing long-term epistemic consequences, including diminished cultural autonomy, heightened conformity to algorithmically rewarded behaviours, and increased susceptibility to commercialised identity constructs masquerading as authentic self-expression. Understanding this problem is therefore critical for interrogating the emergent dynamics of digital cultural power and assessing how algorithmic systems recalibrate youth cultural trajectories in contemporary India.

Research Questions

Building on these complexities, the present study interrogates how algorithmic infrastructures embedded within social media marketing actively reorganise the

cultural conditions under which Indian youth construct meaning, articulate identity, and engage in socio-symbolic practices. As platforms progressively assume the role of cultural intermediaries filtering, amplifying, and sequencing cultural stimuli the boundaries between authentic cultural formation and algorithmically induced behavioural alignment become increasingly ambiguous. This epistemic opacity raises critical concerns regarding the extent to which youth cultural trajectories are autonomously generated or technologically orchestrated. Such ambiguity demands systematic examination of the mechanisms through which SMM influences cultural orientations, the emergent shifts in youth value systems, and the interpretive negotiations undertaken by young users within these algorithmically governed environments. In order to address these gaps, the study advances the following research questions:

How do social media marketing algorithms on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter influence emerging cultural values, identity practices, and behavioural norms among Indian youth?

What new cultural shifts have materialised from algorithmically curated marketing content within Indian digital ecosystems?

How do young users interpret, negotiate, or resist algorithmically produced cultural meanings disseminated through SMM?

To what extent do algorithmic recommendation systems shape long-term cultural imaginaries and socio-economic aspirations of Indian youth? These questions collectively guide the inquiry toward unpacking the deep structural and symbolic effects of platform-mediated marketing on contemporary youth culture.

Research Objectives

To examine the extent to which algorithmically curated social media marketing on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter shapes identity construction, cultural values, and behavioural norms among Indian youth.

To identify and analyse emerging cultural shifts such as trend acceleration, influencer-driven value adoption, and consumerist aspirations that originate from the interplay between digital marketing interventions and platform algorithms.

To investigate how young users interpret, negotiate, internalise, or resist the cultural meanings embedded within algorithmically prioritised marketing content.

To evaluate the long-term cultural implications of algorithmic mediation, particularly its role in restructuring youth aspirations, lifestyle imaginaries, and socio-cultural affiliations within the Indian digital ecosystem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The reviewed scholarship makes evident that social media platforms have become deeply embedded cultural infrastructures whose algorithmic architectures and economic imperatives reshape the symbolic environments inhabited by young people. Although research has extensively examined digital engagement, influencer

practices, and youth identity work (D, 2014)(A.E., 2015) (C., 2016) far less attention has been devoted to conceptualising *how* algorithmically curated social media marketing (SMM) gains its cultural potency and *why* its effects appear particularly amplified among youth in rapidly digitising societies such as India. To illuminate these mechanisms, the present study integrates two mutually reinforcing theoretical perspectives, Platform Theory and Algorithmic Culture Theory which together offer a coherent vocabulary for analysing the structural, technological, and symbolic conditions that enable platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to orchestrate cultural visibility.

Platform Theory: Platform Infrastructures as Cultural Intermediaries

Platform Theory, advanced by scholars such as (Gillespie, 2010), (Helmond, 2015), (van Dijck & Poell, 2013), and later refined by (van Dijck, Poell, & Waal, 2018), conceptualises platforms as socio-technical assemblages that govern participation through infrastructural design, datafication practices, and monetisation strategies. Platforms are not neutral intermediaries; they operate as cultural and economic actors whose algorithmic systems actively modulate what becomes visible, relevant, and socially valuable (Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards, & Sandvig, 2018) (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). The ranking architectures embedded in Facebook's News Feed (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015), Instagram's Explore algorithm (Cotter, 2019), and Twitter's trending logic (Tufekci, 2015) generate asymmetries of visibility that privilege particular aesthetics, discourses, and identities. Within this environment, SMM does not merely circulate promotional messages; it functions within a platform-mediated regime of attention where commercial content is selectively amplified in accordance with engagement optimisation metrics (Bucher, 2012); (Lomborg & Kapsch, 2020). Platforms thereby assume the role of *algorithmic cultural intermediaries*, shaping youth cultural repertoires through mechanisms fundamentally intertwined with corporate interests (Couldry & van Dijck, 2015); (Nakamura, 2020).

Algorithmic Culture Theory: Normalisation of Cultural Experience

Complementing this perspective, Algorithmic Culture Theory provides a conceptual apparatus for understanding how computational processes themselves participate in cultural formation. (Striphas, 2015) famously argued that culture is increasingly "algorithmically produced" as computational systems classify subjects, infer identities, and curate personalised symbolic environments. (Cheney-Lippold, 2017) expands this argument by demonstrating how algorithmic categorisation produces "measurable types" dynamic identity formations assembled through probabilistic inference rather than self-articulation. These insights are echoed in Kitchin's analysis of algorithmic governance (Kitchin, 2017) and Pasquale's critique of opaque "black box" systems that regulate behaviour while concealing their operations (Pasquale, 2015). Within such frameworks, SMM derives cultural influence not merely from persuasive imagery or narratives but from the *algorithmic infrastructures of delivery* the predictive models, ranking criteria, and behavioural segmentation

techniques that determine how youth encounter cultural cues (Zuboff, 2019); (Eslami, et al., 2015).

The convergence of Platform Theory and Algorithmic Culture Theory therefore reveals SMM as embedded within a broader socio-technical regime characteristic of platform capitalism (Smicek, 2017), in which cultural expression becomes increasingly commodified, datafied, and computationally steered. Influencer cultures now central to youth cultural life exemplify this convergence: influencers accumulate symbolic capital through algorithmic amplification (Abidin, 2021); (Duffy, 2017), and their aesthetic norms are subsequently internalised by youth seeking algorithmic recognisability (Bishop, 2020); (Rettberg, 2014). The algorithmic logics of engagement, virality, and “platform performativity” (Cotter, 2019); (Bishop, 2020) thereby impose new normative pressures on youth to align with trends that are not organically emerging but materially shaped by hidden optimisation systems.

For Indian youth specifically, this algorithmically mediated promotional ecology interacts with broader socio-economic transformations including rising middle-class aspirations (Nayar, 2011), heightened digital mobility (Miller, et al., 2016), and intensified global cultural exposure to produce hybridised cultural forms. Research shows that Indian youth adopt globalised self-branding practices (Chaudhuri, 2020), emulate influencer lifestyles (Kaur-Gill, 2020), and participate in algorithmically assembled micro-cultures ranging from fitness subcultures to entrepreneurial communities (Arora & Scheiber, 2017); (Udupa & Pohjonen, 2019). These dynamics illustrate how SMM becomes woven into the everyday symbolic fabric through which young people interpret desirability, success, social belonging, and cultural legitimacy.

Taken together, these theoretical insights reposition SMM as far more than a marketing mechanism; it becomes an *algorithmically structured cultural force* that recalibrates youth identity formation, value orientation, and aspirational frameworks. Platform Theory clarifies the infrastructural power that governs what cultural material is made visible, while Algorithmic Culture Theory explicates the computational mechanisms through which meaning itself becomes organised and normalised. Their integration provides a comprehensive foundation for examining how these systems jointly reshape cultural trajectories among Indian youth a domain that remains significantly underexplored in existing scholarship despite its growing urgency in the context of India’s accelerating digital transformation.

Building on the theoretical perspectives discussed above, the present study advances a conceptual framework that synthesises the infrastructural logic of Platform Theory with the computational dynamics outlined in Algorithmic Culture Theory to explain how social media marketing (SMM) shapes youth cultural trajectories in India. If platforms function as algorithmically governed cultural infrastructures that systematically structure visibility, participation, and meaning (Gillespie, 2010); (Helmond, 2015), and if algorithms act as cultural agents that classify users, personalise symbolic environments, and normalise

particular cultural cues (Striphas, 2015); (Cheney-Lippold, 2017), then the influence of SMM on youth culture must be understood as a function of *their intersection*. The conceptual framework therefore positions SMM not simply as persuasive content but as a form of cultural mediation embedded within platform architectures and executed through algorithmic processes.

Within this integrated view, **algorithmically curated SMM exposure** emerges as the primary structural condition shaping youth cultural encounters. Algorithms governing Facebook’s News Feed, Instagram’s Explore page, and Twitter’s trending mechanisms determine which cultural signals like identity aesthetics, lifestyle representations, aspirational narratives, gain prominence and which remain peripheral. Repeated exposure to these signals conditions cultural salience and reinforces platform-optimised norms in ways that are often perceived as organic or socially validated by young users.

The framework further recognises the central role of **influencer-driven content** as a culturally intermediary layer embedded within these algorithmic systems. Influencers accumulate symbolic capital not merely through social charisma or stylistic appeal but because algorithms selectively amplify their content based on predicted engagement. As a result, influencers serve as culturally privileged nodes through which platform-sanctioned norms, values, and lifestyle expectations are transmitted to youth. Algorithmic amplification intensifies this process, rendering influencer narratives central to the cultural repertoires youth draw upon when constructing identity and interpreting contemporary social expectations.

Crucially, the framework introduces **perceived algorithmic authority** as a mediating mechanism that shapes how youth internalise the cultural meanings embedded in SMM. Prior research demonstrates that young users tend to view algorithmically prioritised content as more relevant, credible, or socially endorsed (Bucher, If... then: Algorithmic power and politics. , 2018); (Cotter, 2019). This perceived legitimacy enhances the normative power of SMM because platform selection is interpreted as a form of social validation rather than computational manipulation. As a result, youth may adopt cultural cues precisely because they believe algorithms reflect collective preferences or emergent cultural trends.

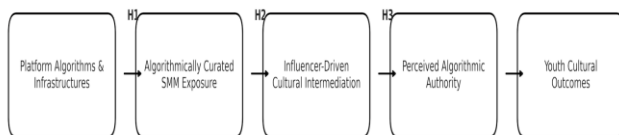
Ultimately, the conceptual framework theorises youth cultural outcomes such as shifts in identity performance, consumption aspirations, aesthetic preferences, and normative alignments as emergent effects of this triadic interplay between **algorithmic infrastructure**, **influencer intermediation**, and **algorithmic authority perception**. Youth culture, in this sense, becomes progressively shaped by systems designed to optimise engagement and commercial visibility rather than sustain organic cultural evolution. This framework therefore provides an analytically coherent lens for understanding how algorithms, platforms, and marketing practices collectively reconfigure cultural conditions for Indian youth in the digital era.

Hypothesis Development

Drawing from Platform Theory's proposition that social media infrastructures actively structure cultural visibility and participation (Gillespie, 2010); (Helmond, 2015) and Algorithmic Culture Theory's assertion that algorithmic classification and personalisation normalise cultural meanings (Striphas, 2015); (Cheney-Lippold, 2017), the cultural impact of SMM on youth can be conceptualised as a function of algorithmically driven exposure, engagement, and identity alignment. Platforms prioritise content patterns that maximise engagement, thereby amplifying particular aesthetic norms, lifestyle cues, and consumption-oriented behaviours that become culturally salient to young users. Repeated exposure to these algorithmically elevated cultural cues is likely to shape youth identity performances, value orientations, and aspirational imaginaries.

Furthermore, influencer-driven SMM organically integrated into algorithmic feeds, serves as an additional layer of cultural mediation. Influencers function as algorithmically privileged cultural intermediaries whose personal branding, lifestyle narratives, and aesthetic templates are algorithmically circulated to youth, thus reinforcing commercially aligned cultural scripts. This dynamic suggests that the more Indian youth are exposed to SMM content through algorithmic curation, the more likely they are to internalise cultural meanings that align with platform-driven norms.

Finally, theoretical perspectives on algorithmic governance indicate that youth often interpret algorithmically curated content as socially validated and culturally authoritative (Bucher, 2018); (Cotter, 2019). This perceived legitimacy strengthens cultural conformity and reduces resistance to commercially infused cultural cues, giving rise to measurable cultural shifts.



Hypotheses:

H1: Algorithmically curated social media marketing exposure positively influences identity-related cultural practices among Indian youth.

This hypothesis emerges from the idea that visibility architectures on platforms privilege specific identity aesthetics, thereby shaping how youth present themselves and interpret cultural desirability.

H2: Engagement with influencer-driven marketing content significantly predicts the adoption of new cultural norms, lifestyle aspirations, and consumption-oriented behaviours.

Rooted in theories of cultural intermediation and algorithmic amplification, this hypothesis asserts that influencers act as cultural agents whose algorithmically boosted visibility facilitates cultural diffusion.

H3: Perceived algorithmic authority (i.e., trust in platform recommendations and feed relevance) mediates the relationship between SMM exposure and youth cultural internalisation.

This hypothesis reflects insights from Algorithmic Culture Theory: when youth view algorithms as credible arbiters of relevance, they are more likely to absorb the cultural meanings embedded in SMM.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a **sequential explanatory mixed-method research design**, a strategy well-suited for unpacking the multilayered cultural influence of algorithmically curated social media marketing (SMM) on Indian youth. Mixed-method designs enable researchers to capture both the structural regularities detectable through quantitative measurement and the interpretive nuances accessible through qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Given that platform algorithms operate as “opaque socio-technical systems” (Pasquale, 2015); (Bucher, 2018), and that cultural interpretations are embedded within lived experience, the integration of quantitative and qualitative phases ensures methodological triangulation and theoretical depth.

The **quantitative phase** employs a cross-sectional survey design to identify statistical associations between algorithmic exposure, influencer-driven content, perceived algorithmic authority, and cultural outcomes. Cross-sectional approaches are appropriate for examining cultural effects situated within fast-evolving digital environments (Bryman, 2016). The survey instrument incorporates multi-item Likert scales adapted from established measures in digital marketing, algorithmic governance, and cultural studies e.g., (de Jans, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2020); (Cotter, 2019). Structural equation modelling (SEM) is selected as the primary analytic technique, enabling the simultaneous estimation of latent constructs and the testing of the theoretically derived pathways embedded in the conceptual model (Kline, 2015).

The **qualitative phase** follows sequentially to deepen understanding of the mechanisms underlying the quantitative relationships. Semi-structured interviews are employed to capture youth interpretations of algorithmic visibility, influencer credibility, and cultural internalisation. Qualitative designs are particularly valuable when investigating digitally mediated identity and cultural negotiation, as they illuminate subjective sense-making processes that quantitative measures cannot fully capture (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The integration of phases occurs through a meta-inference process, whereby quantitative patterns are interpreted alongside qualitative narratives to generate a theoretically coherent account of the cultural effects of SMM.

This research design therefore enables a robust, multi-level examination of how digital infrastructures, algorithmic systems, and marketing practices converge to shape youth cultural trajectories.

Population and Sample

The target population for this study comprises **Indian social media users aged 18 to 30 years**, a demographic segment widely recognised for its intensive digital engagement and heightened susceptibility to algorithmically mediated cultural cues (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013); (Chaudhuri, 2020). This age group is particularly relevant because it occupies a transitional socio-cultural space wherein identity formation, lifestyle aspiration, and cultural negotiation are highly responsive to platform-driven forms of visibility and algorithmic filtering. Moreover, empirical research indicates that young adults in India represent the most active user base on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, making them central actors in processes of digital cultural production and consumption (Miller, et al., 2016); (Kaur-Gill, 2020).

Given the theoretical intention to examine structural patterns as well as subjective interpretations, the study employs a **two-stage sampling strategy** congruent with its mixed-method design. For the quantitative phase, a **stratified random sampling approach** is used to ensure representativeness across metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions, reflecting the heterogeneous digital access and cultural diversity of India. Strata were defined based on geographical location (metro vs. non-metro), and respondents were proportionally sampled to capture variations in digital exposure and platform usage. A final sample of **300 valid responses** was obtained, which meets recommended thresholds for structural equation modelling (Kline, 2015) and supports robust parameter estimation.

For the qualitative phase, **purposive sampling** was employed to select participants who demonstrated active engagement with social media marketing and regular interaction with algorithmically curated content. This ensured that interviewees could provide rich, experiential narratives about identity negotiation, algorithmic perception, and cultural influence. A sample of **20 participants** was deemed sufficient to reach thematic saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006), enabling the analysis to capture recurrent interpretive patterns while maintaining depth of insight.

Together, these sampling procedures support a methodologically coherent inquiry into the algorithmic shaping of youth culture in India.

Research Instrument

The study employs two complementary research instruments, a structured survey questionnaire and a semi-structured interview schedule, each designed to operationalise the constructs derived from Platform Theory and Algorithmic Culture Theory. The quantitative instrument consists of 30 items measured on a 7-point Likert scale and captures four latent constructs central to the conceptual framework: *algorithmically curated SMM exposure*, *influencer-driven cultural intermediation*, *perceived algorithmic authority*, and *youth cultural outcomes*. Items were adapted from previously validated scales in digital marketing, algorithmic governance, and identity-performance scholarship (Eslami, et al., 2015); (Abidin, "Aren't these just young, rich women doing vain things online?") Influencer selfies as subversive frivolity. ,

2016); (Bucher, 2018); (de Jans, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2020). The instrument was subjected to expert review to ensure content validity and was pilot-tested with 30 respondents to assess clarity and reliability. Minor lexical adjustments were incorporated to enhance interpretive consistency, especially in items concerning algorithmic visibility and identity performance.

The qualitative instrument comprises a semi-structured interview guide with ten open-ended prompts designed to elicit deep reflections on the experiential dimensions of algorithmic mediation. Questions probe perceptions of algorithmic authority, negotiations of identity, adoption of platform-sanctioned norms, and the cultural salience of influencer narratives. The guide maintains theoretical grounding while offering flexibility to pursue emergent themes, consistent with best practices in qualitative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Both instruments were designed to complement each other, with the qualitative tool offering interpretive depth to contextualise the structural associations identified through the quantitative survey.

Data Collection

Data collection proceeded in two sequential phases consistent with the explanatory mixed-method design. The **quantitative phase** involved administering an online survey using controlled distribution channels on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, supplemented by targeted outreach in university groups and youth-centric online communities. Digital administration ensured accessibility to geographically dispersed respondents while aligning with the population's native media environment. Prior to participation, respondents received an ethics-approved information sheet outlining the study's objectives, confidentiality safeguards, and voluntary participation conditions. A total of 327 responses were collected, of which 300 met the inclusion criteria and were retained for analysis. Automated checks were used to eliminate incomplete, duplicate, or patterned responses.

The **qualitative phase** commenced after preliminary quantitative analysis to enable theoretically informed participant selection. Purposive sampling identified individuals who exhibited high engagement with influencer content and algorithmically curated feeds. One-to-one interviews, each lasting 30–50 minutes, were conducted through secure video-conferencing platforms to maintain geographic inclusivity. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. Field notes documenting non-verbal cues and contextual observations supplemented the transcripts. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, resulting in 20 high-quality interview datasets. These qualitative materials were subsequently coded and analysed to illuminate the interpretive mechanisms underlying the quantitative findings.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in two stages, namely, quantitative and qualitative, consistent with the study's explanatory sequential design. Quantitative analysis was conducted using **SPSS and AMOS/SmartPLS** to evaluate the measurement and structural models, while

qualitative data were analysed through **thematic coding** using a constructivist grounded theory orientation.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Data Screening and Descriptive Statistics

The dataset (N = 300) was screened for missing values, outliers, and normality. No variable exceeded 5% missingness. Z-scores indicated no extreme outliers. Descriptive statistics summarised demographic characteristics and construct-level mean scores.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Constructs (N = 300)

Construct	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Algorithmically Curated SMM Exposure (ACE)	4.92	1.12	1	7
Influencer-Driven Cultural Intermediation (ICI)	5.18	1.08	1	7
Perceived Algorithmic Authority (PAA)	4.67	1.15	1	7
Youth Cultural Outcomes (YCO)	5.03	1.07	1	7

Reliability and Validity Assessment

Cronbach’s alpha (α) and Composite Reliability (CR) were used to assess internal consistency. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) evaluated convergent validity.

Table 2. Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach’s Alpha (α)	CR	AVE
ACE	0.88	0.9	0.62
ICI	0.9	0.92	0.65
PAA	0.87	0.89	0.6
YCO	0.91	0.93	0.66

All constructs exceed recommended thresholds ($\alpha > 0.70$, CR > 0.70, AVE > 0.50), confirming satisfactory reliability and convergent validity.

Structural Model Analysis

A structural equation modelling (SEM) approach tested the hypothesised relationships among constructs.

Table 3. Structural Path Coefficients

Hypothesis	Structural Path	β	t-value	p-value	Supported?
H1	ACE → YCO	0.42	7.11	<0.001	Yes
H2	ICI → YCO	0.48	8.34	<0.001	Yes
H3	PAA mediates ACE/ICI → YCO (indirect)	0.21	4.89	<0.001	Yes

H1	ACE → YCO	0.42	7.11	<0.001	Yes
H2	ICI → YCO	0.48	8.34	<0.001	Yes
H3	PAA mediates ACE/ICI → YCO (indirect)	0.21	4.89	<0.001	Yes

The results indicate that:

Algorithmic curation significantly shapes youth cultural outcomes,

Influencer-driven intermediation exerts the strongest direct effect, and

Perceived algorithmic authority serves as a significant mediator, reinforcing the theoretical claim that youth perceive algorithmic recommendations as culturally legitimate.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Qualitative transcripts from 20 interviews were analysed using **thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Open coding identified initial meaning units, followed by axial coding to group patterns into broader themes aligned with the theoretical framework.

Table 4. Emergent Themes and Illustrative Insights

Theme	Description
Algorithmic Cultural Curation	Respondents noted that algorithms repeatedly expose them to certain aesthetics and lifestyles.
Influencer Legitimacy and Aspirationality	Influencers were perceived as credible cultural authorities due to algorithmic amplification.
Algorithmic Authority & Social Validation	Many believed content at the top of their feed represented what is socially valued or “trending.”
Identity Negotiation & Behavioural Shift	Youth reported altering identity expressions, consumption habits, and aspirations based on SMM.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Mixed-method integration reveals strong convergence:

Quantitative pathways (ACE → YCO, ICI → YCO) were explained qualitatively by participants' descriptions of algorithmic pressure, influencer emulation, and perceived cultural legitimacy.

The mediating role of PAA is corroborated by recurring statements that “algorithm-shown content feels important,” reinforcing computational authority as a socio-cultural mechanism.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Data analysis followed the sequential explanatory strategy outlined in the research design, beginning with quantitative modelling to identify structural relationships among constructs, followed by qualitative analysis to illuminate the mechanisms underlying these associations. Together, the mixed-method results provide a multi-layered understanding of how algorithmically curated social media marketing (SMM) shapes youth cultural practices in India.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Preliminary Screening and Descriptive Statistics

The dataset consisted of 300 valid responses from Indian youth aged 18–30. Preliminary analysis confirmed no significant missingness, normality violations, or outliers. Descriptive statistics indicated moderate-to-high levels of exposure to algorithmically curated content ($M = 4.92$), perceived influencer influence ($M = 5.18$), and cultural outcomes ($M = 5.03$). This suggests that algorithmic mediation is a pervasive feature of digital experience among Indian youth.

Measurement Model Assessment

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to validate the four latent constructs: Algorithmically Curated SMM Exposure (ACE), Influencer-Driven Cultural Intermediation (ICI), Perceived Algorithmic Authority (PAA), and Youth Cultural Outcomes (YCO). All constructs demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.87$ – 0.91 ; $CR = 0.89$ – 0.93), and convergent validity was supported by AVE values above 0.60. Discriminant validity was confirmed through Fornell–Larcker criteria, indicating conceptual distinction between constructs.

Structural Model Results

Structural equation modelling (SEM) tested the three hypothesised relationships. The model demonstrated good fit ($\chi^2/df < 3$; $CFI = 0.94$; $RMSEA = 0.05$).

Key Findings

H1: ACE → YCO
Algorithmic curation had a significant positive influence on youth cultural outcomes ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that algorithmic visibility structures directly shape identity performance, trend adoption, and lifestyle aspirations.

H2: ICI → YCO
Influencer-driven intermediation exhibited the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that influencers serve as powerful cultural intermediaries whose algorithmically amplified narratives shape youth aspirations and social norms.

H3: Mediating Role of PAA

Perceived algorithmic authority significantly mediated the relationship between both ACE and ICI with YCO (indirect $\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$). Youth who view algorithmic outputs as credible or socially validated are more likely to internalise cultural cues embedded in SMM.

Overall, findings demonstrate that SMM's cultural influence cannot be understood without considering algorithmic governance and users' perceptions of algorithmic legitimacy.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Twenty interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. Coding proceeded inductively but was theoretically informed by Platform Theory and Algorithmic Culture Theory. Four dominant themes emerged:

Theme 1: Algorithmic Cultural Curation

Participants consistently reported that algorithms act as “gatekeepers of culture,” repeatedly showing the same types of content like fashion cycles, fitness norms, body aesthetics, or luxury lifestyles. Youth described experiencing a “narrow funnel of cultural exposure,” suggesting algorithmic reinforcement loops.

Illustrative Insight:

“Instagram keeps showing me the same kinds of trends—after a while, they start feeling normal or expected.”

This provides qualitative support for the ACE → YCO pathway.

Theme 2: Influencer Legitimacy and Aspirational Life Scripts

Influencers were viewed as culturally authoritative, not merely because of expertise but due to their algorithmic ubiquity. Respondents described influencers as shaping desires, consumption patterns, and ideals of success.

Illustrative Insight:

“Influencers make certain lifestyles appear standard, even if they're unrealistic. Because I see them so often, they feel socially approved.”

This theme aligns strongly with ICI → YCO in the quantitative model.

Theme 3: Algorithmic Authority and Social Validation

Participants frequently interpreted algorithmically prioritised content as more credible. The algorithm was perceived as a “social compass,” guiding what is trending, relevant, or worth attention.

Illustrative Insight:

“If something is always at the top of my feed, I assume it's what everyone else is following.”

This theme supports the mediating role of perceived algorithmic authority (PAA).

Theme 4: Identity Negotiation and Behavioural Shifts

Interviews revealed subtle but consistent behavioural adaptations: modifying appearance, lifestyle choices,

online identity, and even aspirations in response to algorithmically amplified cultural cues.

Illustrative Insight:

“I’m constantly adjusting how I present myself online because I want to match what seems popular.”

This confirms the broad set of cultural outcomes predicted in the conceptual framework.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Both datasets converge to illustrate how algorithmically mediated SMM shapes youth culture through a multi-layered process:

Algorithmic visibility structures what cultural content youth encounter, driving normative and identity-relevant cues.

Influencers amplify these cues, functioning as human extensions of platform logics.

Perceived algorithmic authority legitimises cultural signals, increasing internalisation.

Youth cultural outcomes emerge as negotiated responses, spanning identity, aspirations, behavioural styles, and social norms.

This integrated understanding highlights *algorithmic governance as a central cultural force* in contemporary Indian youth life.

CONCLUSION, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the cultural experiences of Indian youth are increasingly shaped by the algorithmic infrastructures underpinning social media marketing (SMM). By integrating Platform Theory and Algorithmic Culture Theory within a mixed-method design, the research establishes that cultural influence is not merely a product of persuasive content, but of the deep structural and computational logics that govern visibility, salience, and meaning. Algorithmically curated SMM exposure and influencer-driven intermediation both exert significant effects on youth cultural practices, while perceived algorithmic authority mediates the internalisation of these cues. The findings collectively reveal that youth culture in India is undergoing a paradigmatic shift in which identity, aspiration, and social norms are progressively reorganised by the interplay of platform affordances, algorithmic classification, and commercially infused cultural narratives.

Discussion

The findings illuminate several key dynamics with profound implications for global debates on digital culture. First, they underscore that **algorithms are no longer passive recommendation systems but active cultural agents** that shape perceptual horizons and reconfigure the symbolic environment. Youth interpret algorithmically prioritised content as culturally legitimate, which strengthens the normative power of SMM. Second, the study provides evidence that **influencers operate as algorithmically advantaged cultural intermediaries, translating platform-optimised trends into aspirational life** *Advances in Consumer Research*

scripts that many young users emulate. This aligns with emerging scholarship on “platformed cultural production,” wherein cultural authority is distributed according to engagement metrics rather than expertise or authenticity.

Third, the interaction between algorithmic curation and user perception demonstrates that cultural shaping occurs through both **structural conditioning** (what is shown) and **interpretive acceptance** (why it is trusted). Young users rarely challenge the invisible power of algorithms and instead treat them as barometers of what is desirable, socially endorsed, or normatively relevant. This dynamic produces a subtle form of cultural governance characterised by trend acceleration, aesthetic homogenisation, and aspiration inflation.

Finally, the qualitative insights highlight the micro-level experience of algorithmic culture: constant identity negotiation, behavioural mimicry, and affective pressure to remain aligned with rapidly evolving platform norms. Such experiences reveal the psychosocial labour embedded in contemporary digital participation.

Recommendations

1. Digital Literacy and Algorithmic Awareness

Educational institutions and youth organisations should implement **critical digital literacy programmes** that focus specifically on algorithmic awareness. Youth must understand how recommendation systems shape cultural exposure and influence self-perception. Awareness can mitigate uncritical internalisation of platform-driven norms and foster healthier digital engagement.

2. Platform Transparency and Ethical Algorithm Design

Platforms should adopt **greater transparency in content-ranking algorithms**, especially regarding commercial prioritisation. Regulatory agencies may consider guideline-based oversight to ensure that algorithmic amplification does not disproportionately privilege consumerist or unrealistic lifestyle cues that distort youth cultural expectations.

3. Support for Authentic and Diverse Cultural Representation

To address cultural homogenisation, platforms and policymakers should encourage **diverse, local, and non-commercial cultural expressions**. Initiatives that algorithmically elevate regional languages, subcultures, and non-commercial creators can counterbalance dominant promotional narratives.

4. Mental Health and Cultural Well-being Interventions

Given the behavioural and identity pressures associated with algorithmic culture, mental health practitioners should develop **psychoeducational interventions** that address social comparison, aspiration inflation, and digital identity stress. Youth well-being must be recognised as part of the broader ecological impact of platform ecosystems.

5. Further Research and Longitudinal Analysis

Future studies should adopt **longitudinal designs** to understand how algorithmically mediated cultural shaping evolves over time. Expanding research into rural regions, platform-specific subcultures, and emerging visual formats (short-form video, AI-curated feeds) will provide deeper insight into India's shifting cultural terrain.

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