

Exploring Adolescents' Experiences with Personalized Content on Social Media: A Qualitative Study

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Work-in-progress

Qualitative study on adolescents' experiences with personalized content on social media, and their reflections on how it influences them

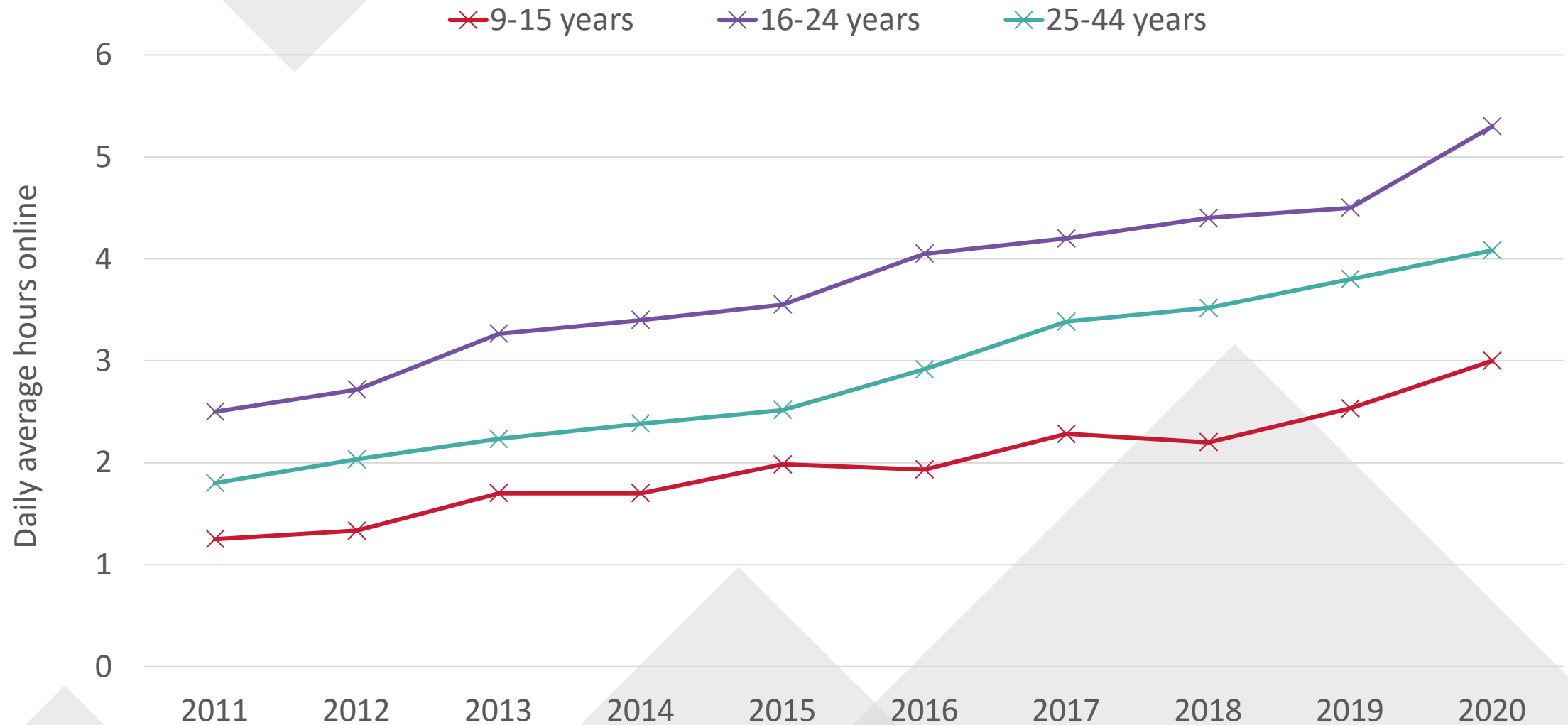
- Awareness
- Comprehension
- Emotions

Focus groups with Norwegian youth

- 48 participants: 20 male, 28 female
- Aged 15-19 years



Time online on the rise



(Statistisk sentralbyrå [Statistics Norway], 2021)

Background and motivation

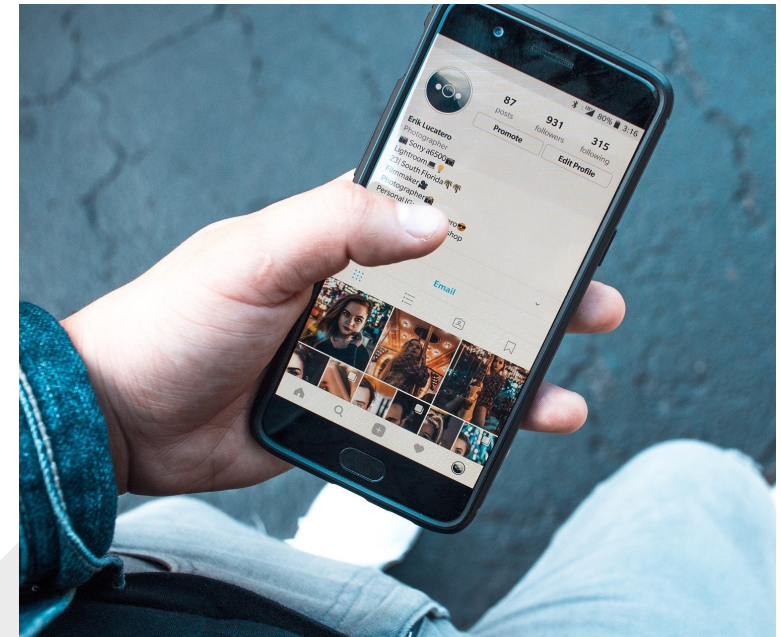
Attention to adolescents' use of social media, in media and research alike (Bakken, 2021; Medietilsynet, 2020)

- Due to the time spent (Orben et al., 2019)
- Due to the prominence of social influence and social comparison in adolescence (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014)
- And due to indications that this age group might be less digitally competent than they believe themselves (Khan & Vuopala, 2019; Porat et al., 2018)

Adolescents have been largely unaware of how personalization shapes their everyday life, which makes this age group particularly vulnerable to targeted and personalized online content (Bakken, 2021; Eslami et al., 2015; Powers, 2017)

Research biased in a negative direction (Livingstone et al., 2018)

Need nuanced studies on the impact of social media, including potential positive effects (Schønning et al., 2020)



Qualitative studies needed

Substantial body of research on adolescents' use of social media (Valkenburg et al., 2022)

Recent criticism stresses the methodological limitations of many of quantitative studies (Orben, 2020)

- Correlations between screen time and mental health measures
- Small effect sizes
- Contradictory findings

A few recent qualitative studies on adolescents' experiences with social media and their impact

- Targeted advertising (Van den Broeck et al., 2020; Youn & Kim, 2019)
- Curated news stories (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Srinivasan, 2021; Powers, 2017)
- Reasoning about social media algorithms, no focus on adolescents as a separate group (Alvarado & Waern, 2018; Bucher, 2017; Eslami et al., 2015; Eslami et al., 2016; Swart, 2021)



Data collection

8 group interviews with 6 at a time

- 2 researchers, always the same interviewer
- Duration between 42 and 91 minutes

48 students from two schools in a town 1 hour from the capitol Oslo

- Lower secondary school
 - 15-16 years (grade 10): 12 males, 12 females
- Upper secondary school
 - 16-17 years (grade 1): 6 males, 6 females
 - 17-18 years (grade 2), 1 male, 5 females
 - 18-19 years (grade 3), 1 male, 5 females
- One participant excluded due to older age



Preliminary findings

Three themes:

1) Encounters, awareness, and comprehension

Participants encountered personalized content on their most popular social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube)

2) Emotions

Enjoyment of interesting and relevant content, but also unease and annoyance

3) Increasing use and appreciation

Some ambivalence, but little use of «opt-out» options; mostly acceptance and appreciation



1) Encounters, awareness, and comprehension

Broader comprehension and greater awareness of personalized content among the older participants (17-19) compared to the younger participants (15-16)

- Same pattern for females compared to males

Several participants mentioned explicitly TikTok's 'For You' page, and other sources of recommendations, revealing their reflections on personalized content

They also expressed that content on their social media platforms was uniquely selected for them

- "It's of course very different the content we get, because it [TikTok] tries to like show you videos that it thinks you will like" (girl, 15-16)

Many had noticed advertisements related to their previous actions



2) Emotions

Several participants expressed that personalization brought relevant and interesting content, regular and commercial

- “It’s nice, then only content you like to watch appears” (girl, 16-17)

Participants also shared feelings of unease towards personalized content

- “It’s like seeing my phone predict my next choice [...]. It's a little, or it's not a little, it's very scary” (girl, 15-16)

Annoyance was mentioned by a few

- “... it can sometimes be a bit too much [...] if I search for a hoodie I want, then advertisements come up all the time» (boy, 16-17)

Some gave examples of how the phone could monitor conversations, which they perceived as the scariest thing about personalization – these sentiments represent personal theories

- “It has happened to me, that I have talked about one thing, and then a few days later a lot of advertisement has shown up for that thing. Then I’m like, was I kind of monitored now?” (girl, 15-16)



3) Increasing use and appreciation

Participants who expressed how personalization improved their experiences, shared an appreciation for the nice and easy experience social media provide

- “It’s actually very impressive. They find out what I like very fast” (boy, 16-17)

Participants’ reflections on personalized strategies indicate not only influence, but also increase in social media usage

- “If I only got content on my phone that wasn’t interesting to me, I probably would have used social media much less” (girl, 16-17)

A few participants mentioned the options to unselect or block content, but added that they used it only if the content was especially disturbing, they usually scrolled on instead

- “... they make sure that the content gets taken away from your feed” (girl, 15-16)



Conclusions

Adolescents use social media actively and personalized content is typically appreciated

Personalized content tends to improve social media experiences, which in turn tends to increase social media use

Yet some feel unease, particularly for targeted advertisement

Others say they do not care, they ‘just accept it’

The acceptance of algorithmic intervention may be partly driven by superficial comprehension of the technology and the influence from personalized content (Khan & Vuopala, 2019; Porat et al., 2018)

It may also be motivated by benefits that are perceived to outweigh the cost of giving up personal data (Bol et al., 2018)



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