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“Good Social Media?”: Underrepresented Youth Perspectives on the Ethical and Equitable Design of Social Media Platforms

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Abstract

This study investigates underrepresented youths’ perspectives on social media design and how these may inform the development of more ethical and equitable social media apps. In contrast to the tradition of universal design in the field of human–computer interaction, this study centers difference to investigate how users’ perspectives and expectations, shaped by their identities, help determine the affordances of social media and their ethical implications. Twenty-five in-depth interviews and youth-guided “think aloud” social media tours were carried out with a diverse range of young people from underrepresented groups. Findings illustrate how young people perceive and experience empowering and disempowering aspects of social media design. Interviewees expressed a palpable sense of underrepresentation in the digital technology design sector and noted several ways in which design elements of social media can exacerbate a sense of inadequacy. The negative implications of user profile design and popularity rating systems that encourage conformity were found to be of particular concern for low-income youth, youth of color, and other underrepresented groups. However, our findings also illuminate youth perspectives on how social media can sometimes serve as a tool to counter negative stereotypes and build social capital. The analysis includes concrete suggestions from underrepresented youth for more ethical and equitable social media design.

Keywords: youth, social media, design, ethics, equity, qualitative research

Introduction

WHILE THE AMOUNT of time spent on social media has increased dramatically over the past 10 years for all groups, youth remain the largest segment of users in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2019). Social media platforms are significant places for young people to form identities, and create and sustain relationships (Rice & Barman-Adhikari, 2014; Way & Malvini Redden, 2017). Youth understand their cultivated identities and experiences on social media apps as occurring in distinct digital neighborhoods (Stevens et al., 2016), and research has shown that these digital neighborhoods tend to mirror offline inequities (Abbas & Mesch, 2018; boyd, 2011; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Nemer, 2016). However, the ways in which the design of these platforms may come to bear on these inequities is less widely understood. Further exacerbating this knowledge gap, people of color, women, and other non-dominant groups are underrepresented in the technology design sector (United States

Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). In addition to diversifying the pool of social media designers, the distance between designers and users—particularly underrepresented users—must be narrowed so that the interests, needs, and identities of underrepresented youth is factored into design (Cho, 2018; Hersh, 2013; Reich & Ito, 2017).

This research investigates underrepresented youths’ perspectives to understand how social media design impacts their lived experiences, and to inform more ethical and equitable design. In doing so, this article builds on a prior phase of research about youth perspectives on social media (Literat & Brough, 2019), which was based on autoethnographies carried out by underrepresented college students studying their own digital technology use. In this second phase of research, we delve further into the topics raised in the auto-ethnographies, through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that allowed for deeper investigation of emergent themes. This article shares key findings of both empowering and disempowering aspects of social media design from the perspectives of underrepresented youth, including how the design of social media platforms may exacerbate feelings of inadequacy or, in contrast, counter negative stereotypes and help increase social capital—all of which are of particular concern to underrepresented youth. In addition, the interviews yielded several design suggestions for what underrepresented youth perceive as more ethical and equitable social media.

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

With the proliferation of online social media networks, a growing body of research has examined how youth rely on social media to maintain and develop connections (Ito et al., 2019; Rice & Barman-Adhikari, 2014; Way & Malvini Redden, 2017), and how the use of these platforms influences youth development, identity, relationships, civic engagement, and more (Way & Malvini Redden, 2017). Young people’s social experiences and relationships play a crucial role in their decision to use certain social media platforms and their modes of engagement in these spaces (boyd, 2011; Magee et al., 2017). Stevens et al. (2016) describe young people’s online communities as their digital neighborhood; within these carefully curated digital neighborhoods, social media can also be seen as a “super peer” that has the ability to influence behavior, shift attitudes, and shape cultural norms.

Although the use of social media has risen among all demographics, important differences persist in regard to online participation, social capital exchange, and

visibility (Micheli, 2016). While social media may provide “affinity spaces” (Gee, 2004) for diverse participants and allow youth to connect with one another (Ito et al., 2019; Way & Malvini Redden, 2017), they often reproduce offline inequities (Abbas & Mesch, 2018; boyd, 2011; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Nemer, 2016), reflecting broader dynamics of marginalization, such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, or citizenship status. As Hargittai and Hinnant (2008) explain, those young people “who are already in more privileged positions are more likely to use the medium for activities from which they may benefit” (p. 615); furthermore, the very choice of which social media they use often reproduces class and racial/ethnic inequalities through what boyd (2011) calls a process of online “self-segregation.” Youth identities and practices on social media are thus shaped by cultural and socioeconomic factors (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2017; Way & Malvini Redden, 2017), and although online spaces offer the opportunity to adopt an identity radically different from their own, research has found that young people’s online selves tend to correlate closely with their offline selves (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2017). As Hargittai (2013) aptly puts it, the social media interactions of youth do not exist in a void and cannot be seen as “tabula rasa activities independent of existing offline identities” (p. 213). This offers an important lens to consider how biases and inequities that shape youths’ offline lives are perpetuated in online spaces, and foreground the need for empirical research that more explicitly centers the lived social media experiences of underrepresented youth (Cho, 2018; Micheli, 2016; Way & Malvini Redden, 2017).

Given the significance of relational and bridging aspects of social media, the potential benefits of social media use for marginalized youth have often been examined using social capital frameworks (e.g., Abbas & Mesch, 2018; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Kim & Kim, 2017; Rice & Barman-Adhikari, 2014). Such studies have shown how social media can allow underprivileged youth to draw on resources from members of the networks to which they belong, make connections with people who may be helpful to them, and gain access to resources they might not have offline. Social media has also been identified as a potential site of empowerment and resistance for minority youth. For instance, Black Twitter has been written about as a “digital homespace” that offers underrepresented youth a space of resistance (Florini, 2014); in this sense, participation on Twitter can challenge “dominant (oppressive) cultural ideologies and norms, including racial bias” (Lee, 2017, p. 1).

However, most often, young people’s usage of social media platforms has been framed in protectionist terms, by focusing on the potential risks associated with these apps (Livingstone, 2016; Magee et al., 2017 see also Way & Malvini Redden, 2017). As Way

and Malvini-Redden (2017) conclude in their meta-review of relevant research, there is a need to better understand youth as agentic users of social media and center their own perspectives in regard to how they use, shape, and co-opt online resources.

Yet, while the ways in which young people use social media are a key factor in determining the impact of these platforms on the lived experiences of users, platform design also plays a significant role (see, for example, Bivens & Haimson, 2016; Cho, 2018; Lane, 2019). In an effort to move beyond the scholarly debate about technological determinism versus social constructivism, Nagy and Neff (2015) have convincingly argued that the “affordances” of communication technologies result from the interplay of (a) users’ perceptions, attitudes, and expectations; (b) designers’ perceptions, attitudes, and expectations; and (c) the materiality of the technology, which we can consider through the lens of design.¹ Drawing on psychology’s use of the term “affordance,” Nagy and Neff propose the concept of “imagined affordances” as better capturing this interplay, in part because user affect can influence how they perceive and use technology. We find this theorizing of affordances useful because it encourages consideration of the role of users’ and designers’ expectations and perceptions in shaping the social affordances of technologies *as well as* the materiality that results from design choices.

Research is increasingly engaging the question of social media design in relation to user experiences, particularly for non-dominant groups (Bivens & Haimson, 2016; Cho, 2018; Dragiewicz et al., 2018; Eubanks, 2018; Li & Literat, 2017; Literat & Brough, 2019; Massanari, 2017; Noble, 2018). For instance, analyzing the process of account registration and ad creation on the 10 most popular English-speaking social media platforms, Bivens and Haimson (2016) illustrate how gender is “baked into” these platforms via deliberate design choices that the user is presented with. This is one example of the ways in which social media design reproduces and reinforces existing social dynamics. (For further examples and analysis, see also Burgess et al., 2016; Eubanks, 2018; Noble, 2018.) Such examples also illustrate how platform owners and designers wield significant influence over the construction of online identity, while their own demographic makeup does not reflect the majority of their users and their primary design mandate is driven by commercial motives (Bivens and Haimson, 2016). A growing number of researchers and designers are calling for more “ethical software” to address these and other concerns of equity (e.g. Bosker, 2016; Harris, 2016; Reich & Ito, 2017).

In terms of a more specific focus on youth, while researchers have examined variations in youth social media use based on markers like race and ethnicity (see, for example, Cho, 2018; Hargittai, 2013; Matamoros-Fernandez, 2017), gender (e.g., Bivens & Haimson, 2016; Burgess et al., 2016; Dragiewicz et al., 2018), sexuality (e.g., Cho, 2018; DeNardis & Hackl, 2016; Shaw & Sender, 2016), or socioeconomic status (e.g., Micheli, 2016; Nemer, 2016), a closer investigation of the role of social media design in regard to the particular experiences of non-dominant youth in these online spaces is largely missing.

This research adds a nuanced, youth-specific perspective to our current understanding of these dynamics by centering the voices and experiences of youth themselves. In contrast to the historical association of “universal design” with equity in the human-computer interaction field (see, for example, Dix, 2009), we contend that centering difference and drawing attention to the subjective viewpoints of designers and users is crucial to more ethical and equitable technology design (Literat & Brough, 2019). What constitutes ethical technology design is necessarily subjective, as the literature on intercultural information ethics (e.g., Capurro, 2008; Hongladarom & Britz, 2010) has emphasized; thus, designers should “both be aware of and critique their own values and be able to widen their perspective to that of the ‘other’, i.e., marginalised and minority groups” (Hersh, 2013, p. 167). This research aims to contribute to this widening of perspective. We do not offer a singular, normative definition of what constitutes “ethical software” or “good social media,” but rather investigate these concepts through the eyes and voices of underrepresented youth.

Methods

In Phase 1 of this larger research project (see Literat & Brough, 2019), we analyzed 151 student autoethnographies that documented their use of a particular digital technology over the course of a semester. While this analysis represented a valuable starting point, in that it surfaced key ways in which young people engage with digital technologies in their everyday lives on their own terms, the focus of the autoethnographies was not on design nor specifically on questions of ethics or equity. The autoethnographies were completed prior to the beginning of the research, and thus, we were unable to delve further into specific questions and issues that arose in the students’ writing. To further investigate youth perspectives on questions of ethical and equitable social media design in a deeper and more nuanced way, we needed to pose such questions to youth themselves, so in this second phase, we conducted interviews with a group of 25 undergraduate students at a Hispanic and Asian

American, Native American, and Pacific Islander Serving Institution in the Southwestern United States. This was a new sample of students to expand our data pool and to continue to diversify the perspectives surfaced in our research.

The data from Phase 1 of the research were crucial in setting up this study; the semi-structured interview protocol was developed based on emergent themes from the autoethnographies, drawing on the language and ideas young people expressed in their writing. In addition, to achieve an embodied understanding of youths' digital experiences, the interviews further engaged students in the process of knowledge production by asking them to do youth-guided “think aloud” tours (Livingstone, Sefton-Green, 2016) of their social media practices—including browsing habits and profile self-analysis. (Refer to Supplemental Appendix A for the complete interview protocol.)

Participants were recruited using fliers, email announcements, and in-class announcements. Requirements for participation in the interview process included being over the age of 18; identifying as low-income (and/or being a recipient of a State University Grant, Cal Grant, or Federal Pell Grant for college tuition) and/or belonging to one or more historically underrepresented groups; using social media; and not currently being a student of the researchers. Interested students were asked to complete an online survey about their demographic background and digital media use, which we used to assess whether the student fit the parameters of the research. A total of 60 students filled out the survey, out of which 49 met the study criteria and were invited to participate in an interview. Twenty-five students completed interviews, which each lasted approximately 1 hr.

Seventy-two percent of interview participants identified as low or lower middle income and 28% as middle income. (Eighty-eight percent of participants reported receiving a State University Grant, Cal Grant, or Federal Pell Grant as part of their financial aid package.) Sixty-eight percent of participants identified as female. Fifty-six percent identified as Hispanic or Latinx, 16% as African American or Black, 12% as Asian or Asian American, 8% as Middle Eastern, 4% as White, and 4% as mixed race. (Refer to Supplemental Appendix B for a complete list of interviewee profiles, based on how they self-identified in the online survey.)

We used an interview-based thematic analysis process that involved transcribing, multiple rounds of coding and note-taking, and consolidation into larger themes (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). As a first step, we transcribed and listened to the interview data, to check for inaccuracies in the transcripts. Next, we read the interviews separately, along with the relevant data from the online survey, and took

notes on salient aspects in relation to our research question about the intersections between identity and design. Then, we read interview transcripts once again horizontally, along with our initial notes; in doing so, we made note of frequent occurrences of similar themes, as well as uncommon or atypical instances. We then began to synthesize findings, by more explicitly labeling specific subthemes that emerged (e.g., platform design shaping self-presentation; implications for social capital). Finally, we explored the interrelations between these subthemes and coalesced them into three larger themes that enable a deeper understanding of our findings holistically.

What follows are these key findings, organized thematically: first, how young people imagine the designers of the social media they use, and how they think those designers imagine their users; then, disempowering and, respectively, empowering aspects of social media design; and finally, recommendations that youth participants had for more ethical and equitable design of social media platforms. We include some examples of excerpts from the interviews below, using pseudonyms; for basic background demographics on the corresponding interviewees, refer to Supplemental Appendix B.

Findings

In the Mind's Eye: Images of Designers and Users

To reach a more contextualized understanding of the ways in which youth might feel represented, or not, in relation to social media design, we asked our participants to envision who the designers of their favorite platforms are, and, second, who these designers might envision as their users. Unanimously, participants imagined the designers of social media to be male, White, and in their mid-20s to mid-30s; some interviewees did mention other demographics (e.g., Asian designers, or a female designer for Pinterest), but in such cases, this was secondary to the primary image of male, White, and young. Perceptions of designers were heavily gendered male, due in large part to perceived (and well-documented) difficulties associated with being a woman in the tech world. (Sara: “I do imagine them all being male because it’s very, very hard for a woman to be in the, you know, to be either in coding or in tech and all of that. It’s very hard.”) In terms of race, participants on the whole seemed unable to imagine non-White designers, and further felt that the designers’ ethnicity was not similar to theirs, despite other cultural traits that they might have in common. Designers were perceived to be highly educated, with a graduate degree in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) or related fields, and belonging to a

higher socioeconomic class than our interviewees (Diana: “I’m getting a picture of them getting out of a BMW or something!”). Interestingly, designers were perceived as quintessentially nondescript (“very normal”; “nothing special”; “average Joe”; “some White dude, like Tom from Facebook or something”), a characteristic which was implicitly associated with being White, male, and representative of dominant cultural norms in the United States.

However, despite these demographic differences, designers were perceived to be in sync with mainstream youth culture. Many interviewees even pictured them wearing attire similar to their own, like jeans, Converse or Vans sneakers. At the same time, some participants implied a commercial motivation—and perhaps a lack of authenticity—behind the designers’ youthful ethos:

So it’s kind of like being a method actor, right? Like, you have to kind of *be* the thing to create. (Olivia)

Probably, like, their interests are very young, because they want the content from young people so that they can track us. (Silvia)

Interestingly, youth felt that designers “matched” or personified the specific social media platforms that they designed, while acknowledging that this is based on their subjective impressions of each platform:

I think people who work at Facebook maybe are a little more corporate and maybe at Instagram there are a little more free spirited ... because that’s how I see those platforms. (Rebecca)

I feel like the person on Twitter is like a person who is entertaining but also wants to keep it professional because I feel like that’s how you see Twitter and how it’s viewed ... I feel like [the designers of Instagram] are kind of very casual, like laid back. I don’t think they would come in in a tie and a suit, because of what I see on Instagram. Yeah. I wouldn’t see them with a tie. (Silvia)

As far as Instagram goes, I picture like a really artsy looking guy with glasses and probably a moustache ... (Isabel)

When asked to reflect on who the designers imagine their users to be, our participants unanimously mentioned age—specifically the fact that designers are targeting a young audience (“late teens or going into college,” “middle school through college,” “that whole 10 to 28 range,” “younger than 22,” “20 or younger for sure,” “people my age,”

and “my generation”). Other demographic factors, like ethnicity or socioeconomic status, were not perceived to be significant to designers in terms of how they imagined their user base. One exception, however, was Isabel, a Latina who remembered the lack of diversity in terms of skin tones when emojis first came out. Even though, as she put it, “it seems like such a small silly thing,” she internalized it as further proof that social media was not designed for her, and understood it within a larger trajectory of exclusion or underrepresentation: “It’s like you get so accustomed to things not being tailored to you, that you don’t even know how it would look like, or how to fathom what it would look like, if it were, like, inclusive for you.” Although emoji designs have expanded to be more inclusive, for Isabel this nod toward inclusivity by designers seemed only skin deep. In other words, it was not the result of a substantial change to the underlying dynamic of lack of diversity in the technology design field.

Reflecting on designers’ imagined user base, several participants indicated an awareness of being treated primarily as a demographic to profit off of, and noted how disempowering this felt. Robert, a mixed race, first generation student, explained:

[The designers] look for demographics that, um, that are going to best suit how much money they’re going to make. If these companies are using my data to sell for advertisements, then all I am is just a consumer on these platforms. Then if I’m just a consumer ... I’m not valued as a person. It doesn’t matter what I post, what I think, what I see, what I’m sifting through on social media. At the end of the day I’m being used so that I can add to the revenue of massive companies and CEOs pockets basically. So that’s pretty disempowering, to me at least.

“Present Yourself as a Casual American”: Disempowering Aspects of Social Media Design for Underrepresented Youth

Youth expanded on the disempowering aspects of social media design in the interviews, sharing their views on how platform design significantly shapes their experiences, both online and offline. Primary among these aspects was the way in which social media design conditions their self-presentation, most often negatively, by structuring how users are able to present themselves and their identities, and rewarding them for adhering to dominant norms:

The way that I set my profile, the way that I create and share myself is a template. So that means that I have limitations and restrictions, and restrictions on how I get to, like, rhetorically present myself to the world. (Robert)

These limitations create a relatively uniform “blueprint” for self-presentation; in his recommendations for designers—which we address in a later section—Robert suggested enabling greater customization of profiles on social media.

Participants also noted how they present themselves differently on different platforms, based on their perceptions of how each are used. These perceptions are informed by both design and norms of use. For instance, David, a Latino student, explained how Instagram is about communicating an “idealized life,” whereas Reddit “is a great place to express opinions, issues you may be having ... Reddit is where you can be more transparent, [because] you’re anonymous. Instagram can’t be as transparent, there’s certain things you can and cannot do.” David also talked about making deliberate decisions about cultural aspects to present or hide, to generate likes and positive reactions:

There’s certain things that are expected of you in a community. You can’t post certain things ... I have a couple of other Latino friends posting about certain holidays or things like that. You don’t get the same reactions you would from posting things about Christmas or Thanksgiving. It’s better to post about Thanksgiving or Christmas, those traditional holidays and things like that ... More about Americanness. When people post pictures of themselves wearing certain clothes or doing certain ethnic things, people tend to poke fun at it. It’s typically just, present yourself as a casual American. You don’t partake in any particular ethnic traditions or things like that.

Robert and David’s quotes illustrate the ways in which design features (e.g., components and layout of profile pages, anonymity, and feedback mechanisms such as likes or comments) intersect with perceived norms of use (“there’s certain things that are expected of you” and “there’s certain things you can and cannot do”) to shape non-dominant youth’s self-portrayals on social media. While this most often leads to conformity (as Francesca, an Afro-Latina first-generation student, summed it up, “[t]here is freedom to be whoever you want [on social media], but for the most part we naturally want to be like others”), it can also spur an opposite reaction. In Nadia’s case, for instance, self-presentation on social media becomes an agentic act to assert her identity as “other”—although this was an exception in our data:

People will mistake me because I’m a light skinned Latina. There’ll be like, ‘oh, you’re a white girl’, you know? And I’m just like, “well no, there’s so much more to me. I’m Latina, I’m this, I’m that.” You know? So I even in my bio, I think it explicitly says Mexicana and, like, I have to show that image to the people who are

following me ... [Social media helps me] stand out because I feel like I'm not like everybody else, you know? ... Like, I'm a girl who's Latina, who's bisexual, who likes to skateboard, who's, like, Mexican as fuck. (Nadia)

In terms of race, ethnicity, and immigration status, many participants noted that seeing and experiencing racism on social media—which they mentioned has increased since Donald Trump's presidential election—is one of the most disempowering aspects of being a person of color online. In particular, youth brought up anti-Mexican and anti-immigrant sentiments expressed on social media, and mentioned unfriending Trump supporters in their networks. While these tensions are not unique to this particular context and demographic, it is important to note that social media design can play a role in deepening these divisions and fueling racism online (Highfield, 2017; Massanari, 2017), and that youth of color are often at the receiving end, with significant consequences—both short- and long-term—for their concept of self, culture, and society. While social media design is not responsible for such negative content per se, algorithms that privilege sensationalist content are one example of the ways in which design may contribute to the circulation of racist content and deepening divisions online (e.g., Taub & Fisher, 2018).

Youth similarly shared how their low-income status affects their access to and experience on social media; this was also a key finding in the first phase of this study (Literat & Brough, 2019). In terms of access, they noted that they monitored how much data they used (and trying to use wifi when browsing social media, so that their phone bill is not charged) and how bill payments, or lack thereof, would affect their streaks² on Snapchat. In terms of content, while the aspirational nature of many social media posts made low-income youth feel inadequate for not being able to afford the lifestyles they see online (e.g., vacations, concerts, fashion brands), several participants also believed that their financial limitations negatively impacted popularity measures like followers and likes, since users who had better financial conditions posted more exciting and diverse content, often linked to travel. This awareness was met with mixed strategies, as some youth (like Maristela) tried to hide their low-income status on social media, while others (like Anna) did not:

I know for sure I've had so many financial burdens, um, but it's not shown on Instagram. And what you see on my Instagram, like you would see me just kind of like traveling or spending my money I don't have—but obviously my followers won't know that. (Maristela)

I've seen people who don't have money and they try so hard to like take ... take pictures next to like a fancy car that I know it's not theirs ... To me it doesn't really matter if I look poor or not. (Anna)

Connections, Representation, and Information: Empowering Aspects of Social Media

In an effort to support more ethical and equitable design, much of this research is focused on the shortcomings of social media design and specific areas of opportunity, as these are perceived by underrepresented youth. However, we would be remiss to omit the positive aspects that many youth mentioned in their interviews. We also hope that sharing these more positive perceptions adds value to our main research question by illuminating the complexity of underrepresented youths' social media experiences, and informing design choices that would further build upon these empowering affordances.

Specifically, participants identified three key positive functions of social media in their lives: the facilitation of connections, representation, and voice. In terms of connections, youth appreciated how social media platforms enable the formation of identity-based communities and networks (e.g., Michael using the #blackLBGTQ hashtag to “gain more friends who are more like me, Black LGBTQ members,” or Nadia connecting with local Latinx women and supporting each other's Latinx businesses via dedicated Instagram accounts). Participants emphasized how social media helps them build social capital, and several shared success stories of getting work, connecting with professional contacts, or gaining access to career mentorship due to interactions on social media—all seen as particularly important for low-income and under-resourced youth:

I posted on my [Instagram] story because I coach for the city of LA, like sports. So, um, I posted a few videos of me training some kids, and through that, a bunch of parents would contact me ... So through that I've had work come up [and] I've met people who have offered me jobs. (Fernando)

I got contracted to be an ambassador for this clothing line. So I feel like in that sense it really helps because I get to promote their stuff and at the same time I can be promoted on their page. (Natalia)

I've been engaging with the industry I probably want to work in for my career, and even though I'm not in Grad School

[...] I've gotten to know some of these people online, and a lot of them are older than me, so they gave me some sort of insight as to, you know, how you make it through Grad school or what it's like to be in a management role in the future.
(Christina)

Youth also emphasized the significant role that social media platforms play in creating more awareness among the broader online public about their experiences (e.g., “coming from a low income community and being first generation and a person of color,” being “a mixed race person,” and being undocumented) and making space for their voices. They noted a bidirectional empowerment effect of social media: that is, on one hand, by putting their stories out there, they are helping raise awareness and reduce bias in others' eyes, and, on the other hand, seeing successful role models who come from similar backgrounds is an empowering experience for them.

Significantly, participants also relied on social media for access to relevant news and information, because mainstream news might not cover certain topics or communities of interest to them (e.g., Anna following “this Black Lives Matter account” to find out “what’s going on in the black community throughout America ... because the news won’t even show that”). Connecting with communities of interest was particularly significant for transnational youth, who rely on social media as a source of information about their culture and country of origin. For instance, Sara, a first generation Asian American student with family in China, shared how she uses Instagram to connect with her roots and learn about everything from Chinese festivals, to Chinese makeup, to making the dumplings that are traditional in her family’s province. In terms of more mainstream news, our interviewees noted how important it is to stay abreast of current events and not feel “left out” of conversations. In this sense, social media is a valuable, low-cost resource, especially for low-income youth; Anna, for instance, talked about accessing the New York Times via Instagram because she cannot afford the subscription. At the same time, it is important to consider the broader implications of such practices, in terms of equity and access to information, as well as the reliability of news accessed only through social media.

Youth Recommendations for Designers

Overall, youth had mixed opinions about whether designers hold any ethical responsibility for the wellbeing of their users. Although participants talked about the negative effects of social media, many did not believe the designers should be concerned for users' wellbeing because “at the end of the day, they’re running a business” (Michael).³ When asked about specific messages that they’d like to convey to

the designers of their favorite social media platforms, many participants just wanted to thank them for the “great job” that they are doing “in connecting people and allowing people to connect and network” (Parham). Those who did think designers had an ethical responsibility toward users spoke mostly about content moderation, and the need to curb hate speech on social media—clearly a significant concern for youth of color and other minority groups in the current sociopolitical climate. Some participants noted that designers had a particular responsibility toward young users, as youth might be more easily influenced and affected by the negative aspects of social media.

Beyond a general need for more transparency about algorithms and updates, these youth also had some specific recommendations for designers. Many participants called for features that would reduce time spent on the apps. Suggested methods to accomplish this included the following: pop-up reminders and notifications that you’ve been using it for a while; having the app “lock itself” after a given amount of time; or removing the “explore page” which was perceived as a major drain on users’ time. At the same time, youth also expressed doubts about whether such features would actually be effective. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook and Youtube have already introduced reminders about time spent on the app, which were deemed ineffective:

[On] Instagram, they have this new thing where I think if you’ve been on it for like, you can set like a time limit ... I tried that and it didn’t really work. It would just tell me, “Oh, you’ve been on Instagram for an hour.” And then I’d be like, “oh, okay.” You know, ignore it. And then I keep going. (Carla)

Another recommendation had to do with customizability: allowing users more freedom in presenting themselves online, so that they could escape the aforementioned feeling of having to fit their multifaceted identities and personalities into a predesigned template. “Everyone [should] be able to, like, code their own profile. So there’s no limitations or templates. Each profile gets to be what each profile wants to be. So maybe that means that there isn’t a profile picture” (Robert). This ability to customize should extend to practices of sharing, allowing users—as per Natalia’s suggestion—to choose how long you want your photos or content to be visible, “like if it’s like a seasonal thing, I want to leave it till, like, the end of December.”

To ease the pressures associated with seeking social validation online, youth suggested the replacement of current features with likes and other popularity metrics that only the profile owner can see. And more generally, participants encouraged designers to think about creating and sharing positivity on these platforms; youths’ appreciation of

inspirational and positive content on social media was a key thread throughout our data. When asked what makes a good social media platform, participants’ replies illustrated this focus on positivity:

I’d define a good social media, like, maybe, you know, just positive stuff. (Elisa)

I feel like the ideal social media application would have, just start the day with inspirational things ... Like it could just be like amazing, beautiful places around the world. (Nadia)

Very, very innocent, if that makes sense ... Innocent. Yeah. So, like, just something where you can, you don’t really have to think about heavy things. (Tam)

An app where people can go for whatever reasons, and not fear being judged. Not having people being rude or disrespectful. (Michael)

Good social media? Maybe one that’s open for all in a way that nobody, you don’t feel judged, [or worry about] not having that many followers. Just like a way that makes it equal for all, so people don’t feel left out in certain things or that kind of nonsense. (Parham)

You know, somewhere where you can make a difference on. You can promote yourself but also do some good in the world too. (Christine)

Discussion

This research investigated underrepresented youths’ experiences with social media, as well as their perspectives on how social media could be designed to be more ethical and equitable. In doing so, we sought to center difference rather than universalize it, in contrast to previous approaches to ethics and equity within human-computer interaction (see Literat & Brough, 2019). We also heeded Nagy and Neff’s (2015) call to consider the affordances of social media as “imagined affordances,” emerging at the intersection of the materiality of the technology with users’ and designers’ perspectives, attitudes, and expectations— with the focus of this article being primarily on users’ perspectives/attitudes/expectations as they relate to design, broadly conceived. Our study advances their theory of “imagined affordances” by illustrating how social media functionalities combine with users’ perceptions and expectations to shape affordances along distinct identity markers—underscoring that the actual “affordances” of technology result not from their design or materiality alone but also from users’ (and designers’) perceptions, attitudes, and expectations. Our findings

show how the “affordances” of social media appear (and are used) differently depending on one’s racial, ethnic, gender, sexuality and/or socioeconomic standpoint, and the intersection of these and other identity markers.

Beyond facilitating a deeper understanding of user perspectives on frontend and backend design elements, our study also drew attention to user imaginations of designers themselves. Our findings made clear that, while interviewees felt that designers could more or less relate to their age group, users felt a significant gap along other demographic markers like gender and race/ethnicity, and expressed a palpable sense of underrepresentation in the digital technology design sector. Interviewees correctly imagined social media designers to be predominantly White, male, highly educated young adults of higher socioeconomic status (United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Interviewees did not perceive any racial diversity among designers, yet Florini (2014) and others have convincingly argued that race is a key organizing concept that structures both offline and online experiences. Returning to Nagy and Neff’s (2015) framework, how users imagine the designers and, significantly, who they imagine them designing *for* reveals an additional layer of signification that users may map onto their understanding (and use) of social media platforms. Whether or not a certain platform or feature is deemed culturally or socially relevant affects, in turn, its “affordances” for particular users.

The significance of identity markers in relation to design was further illustrated in interviewees’ discussions of the ways in which they perceive social media platforms as constraining how young people can present themselves online, as well as how social media design heightens pressures to conform to dominant social norms. Existing scholarship has identified strong connections between young people’s social media use and their sense of identity, self-presentation, and social community (see Way & Malvini Redden, 2017 for a review of relevant research). If in fact social media may function as a “super peer” with the ability to influence behavior, shift attitudes, and shape cultural norms (Stevens et al., 2016), constraining self-presentation through limited options for profile design and through popularity rating systems that encourage conformity has significant negative implications, particularly for non-dominant youth. In our data, Latinx youth felt that expressing their ethnic heritage was either not acceptable on social media or at least not rewarded—and in some cases subject to online expressions of racism. This was also a concern with regard to socioeconomic status, as low-income youth often mentioned that they tried to hide their socioeconomic status online, and/or noticed that their friends did; this observation echoes our previous findings (Literat &

Brough, 2019). In all of these ways, design elements of social media can exacerbate a sense of inadequacy among underrepresented youth.

Interestingly, the call for greater customizability in profile design is reminiscent of earlier social media platforms like MySpace that allowed much more flexibility in self-presentation than Facebook or Twitter (Brake, 2008; Perkel, 2006). Nonetheless, it should be noted that while more customizable profiles can enable a broader range of self-presentation, that alone does not eradicate all pressures to conform nor competition for popularity. And for some users, the added complexity of creating a more customizable platform might also be experienced as a burden or source of social pressure.

On the flip side, interviewees felt that social media could in some instances also be used to counter negative images of underrepresented youth and raise awareness, similar to how undocumented students used social media to raise awareness about the Dreamers' movement (Zimmerman, 2016). As several other studies have also documented (e.g., Abbas & Mensch, 2018; Ito et al., 2019; Rice & Barman-Adhikari, 2014), interviewees additionally felt that social media can be used to connect with others like themselves, or to build social capital, and provided several specific examples of this. Designers interested in creating more ethical and equitable social media platforms would do well to study these usage patterns and consider how they might proactively design features to support these kinds of positive outcomes, while being mindful of the diversity of uses and goals that drive young people to their platforms.

It was noteworthy that most of the interviewees expressed acceptance of the fact that social media platforms' commercial aims tend to trump designers' ethical obligation to users. It was not possible to discern from this data whether this was more a reflection of the interviewees' sense of ethics, or of a general and widespread acceptance of the hegemony of capitalist ideals in the United States. Of course, ethical and social norms differ across distinct geographic, cultural, and social contexts, so the perspectives and concerns expressed in these interviews would likely be different in other contexts.

Nonetheless, interviewees did have concrete recommendations or requests for social media designers that pertained to the wellbeing of users. Young people's desires for exposure to more positive content was palpable; some also called for social media designers to find ways to curb hate speech on their platforms. They also frequently cited the need for greater transparency in how user data are utilized. Several interviewees felt that social media platforms would better serve them if they included

features to help limit excessive time spent on them. Many of our interviewees had at least a vague sense that social media is designed to capitalize on users' psychological and cognitive vulnerabilities to maximize their time spent on the platform (Andersson, 2018; Bosker, 2016; Eyal, 2014; Harris, 2016; Salehan & Negahban, 2013), and felt that shifting this paradigm toward one that helps users maintain healthier use patterns (i.e., more limited use) would constitute more ethical design.

Tech entrepreneur and writer Om Malik (2014) has written,

I can safely say that we in tech don't understand the emotional aspect of our work, just as we don't understand the moral imperative of what we do. It is not that all players are bad; it is just not part of the thinking process the way, say, "minimum viable product" or "growth hacking" are.

While not all social media designers are likely to agree with Malik's assessment, it speaks to a concern at the heart of this study, which is that social media designers do not have built-in incentives nor necessarily the resources or capabilities, to study the experiences and needs of underrepresented youth and factor them into their designs. Yet, doing so clearly yields important insights that can and should inform more ethical and equitable social media design. It is our hope that future design better takes these considerations into account, and that researchers and youth themselves continue to surface aspects of their experiences that can inform how designers understand their "moral imperative."

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Footnotes

1. Here, we understand social media design as incorporating all components including frontend (the visual features users interact with directly, for example, the interface and graphic design) and backend (e.g., software code and functionalities

that are not immediately apparent to users). As such, in this article, we use the term “designer” broadly to include graphic designers as well as software developers, or others who contribute to the design and functionalities of social media. ↵

2. On Snapchat, a streak refers to direct back-and-forth messages (“snaps”) with the same user over consecutive days. In the absence of follower counts, streaks are seen as a popularity marker on Snapchat, and long streaks are rewarded with special emojis (Lorenz, 2017). ↵

3. As illustrated by Michael’s quote, some of our participants often referred to platform owners and designers interchangeably, conflating the two roles. This could be due to an inaccurate understanding of the organizational structures of technology development companies. From users’ perspectives, however, this distinction may not be significantly relevant; both can be understood as actors who influence the design of social media platforms. ↵