

ALGORITHMIC RECOMMENDATION AND USER EXPERIENCE ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF STUART HALL'S ENCODING-DECODING MODEL

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ABSTRACT

Digital video platforms shape the viewing experience not only through content selection but also through algorithmic recommendation systems and personalized interface customizations. This study examines how users interpret the experience of algorithmic steering within the framework of Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model. The research is a qualitative study conducted using a phenomenological design. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted online with 15 participants who actively use digital video platforms. The study sample was created using snowball sampling, and the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis in MAXQDA, and the codes were converted into themes. The findings show that algorithmic recommendations serve as a guide that facilitates the decision-making process and saves time for some users. However, the fact that recommendations lead to repetitive content and fail to meet expectations reveals algorithmic errors and a vicious cycle. While the promise of personalization can yield a positive experience for some users through recognition and a sense of being special, others perceive this process as directed and are concerned about surveillance, developing a more distant relationship with the platform. Technical limitations such as subtitle visibility and interface density can complicate the viewing experience, potentially driving some users to alternative sources. Consequently, the study reveals that algorithmic steering creates a tension between functional convenience and loss of control in the user experience, with users developing varying interpretations across dominant, negotiated, and oppositional reading positions.

Keywords: Algorithmic steering, Personalization, Encoding-decoding, Stuart Hall.

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DİJİTAL PLATFORMLARDA ALGORİTMİK YÖNLENDİRME VE KULLANICI DENEYİMİ: STUART HALL'UN KODLAMA-KODAÇIMLAMA MODELİ ÇERÇEVESİNDE FENOMENOLOJİK BİR İNCELEME

ÖZ

Dijital video platformları, izleme deneyimini yalnızca içerik seçimi üzerinden değil, algoritmik öneri sistemleri ve kişiselleştirilmiş arayüz düzenlemeleri üzerinden de şekillendirmektedir. Bu çalışma, kullanıcıların bu algoritmik yönlendirme deneyimini nasıl anlamlandırıldığını Stuart Hall'un kodlama-kodaçımllama modeli çerçevesinde incelemektedir. Araştırma, fenomenolojik desenle yürütülmüş nitel bir çalışmadır. Dijital video platformlarını aktif kullanan 15 katılımcı ile çevrimiçi ortamda yarı-yapılandırılmış derinlemesine görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Çalışma kümesi kartopu örnekleme ile oluşturulmuş, görüşmeler kayıt altına alınarak deşifre edilmiştir. Veriler MAXQDA üzerinden nitel içerik analiziyle çözümlenmiş, kodlar temalara dönüştürülmüştür. Bulgular, algoritmik önerilerin bazı kullanıcılar için karar verme sürecini kolaylaştıran ve zaman kazandıran bir rehber işlevi gördüğünü göstermektedir. Bununla birlikte önerilerin tekrar eden içeriklere yöneltmesi ve beklentiyle örtüşmemesi, algoritmik hata ve kısır döngü deneyimini görünür kılmaktadır. Kişiselleştirme vaadi, bazı kullanıcılar açısından tanınma ve özel hissetme üzerinden olumlu bir deneyime dönüşürken, bazı kullanıcılar bu süreci yönlendirilmişlik duygusu ve gözetim kaygısı ile birlikte okumakta ve platforma mesafeli bir ilişki geliştirebilmektedir. Teknik boyutta altyazı görünürlüğü ve arayüz yoğunluğu gibi tasarım sınırlılıkları izleme deneyimini zorlaştırabilmekte, bu durum kimi kullanıcıları alternatif kaynaklara yöneltebilmektedir. Sonuç olarak çalışma, algoritmik yönlendirmenin kullanıcı deneyiminde işlevsel kolaylık ile kontrol kaybı arasında gerilimli bir alan ürettiğini, kullanıcıların egemen, müzakereci ve muhalif okuma konumları arasında değişen anlamlandırmalar geliştirdiğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Algoritmik yönlendirme, Kişiselleştirme, Kodlama-kodaçımllama, Stuart Hall.

INTRODUCTION

Digital video platforms are environments that shape users' viewing practices not only through individual preferences but also through personalized interfaces and algorithmic recommendation systems. Algorithmic recommendation systems, which aim to manage viewing practices based on content abundance and diversity, present users with options they are likely to consume while also establishing a selective structure that determines which content will be visible and to what extent. This structure, defined in the literature as algorithmic culture, indicates that the platform experience is shaped more by algorithmic processes such as ranking, classification, and filtering than by individual preferences (Striphas, 2015). Indeed, in communication studies centered on digital platforms, it is argued that the role of

algorithms in shaping the user experience is often invisible. They reproduce parameters governing content visibility (Li et al., 2025).

Personalization on digital platforms, which is a key component of today's communication ecosystem, is not limited to generating user-based recommendation lists. Rather, it operates on a kind of microtargeting logic that determines which themes are highlighted on the interface for each user, how content is ranked and positioned, and what visual representation strategies are used for all of this. Studies on subscription-based platforms indicate that the same content can be presented to different users with different visual codes, and that this has become a direct component of interface personalization (Eklund, 2022). Similarly, it has been argued that platforms can narrow users' choice space and obscure user preferences by promising personalized experiences based on interface design (Matthew, 2020). In this context, drawing on the relevant literature, it is possible to say that the user experience is shaped not only by the content offered but also by the way the content is presented.

From the user perspective, algorithmic recommendations are perceived differently in terms of daily media consumption. Accordingly, while some users view recommendations as a facilitating factor, others perceive these systems as manipulative due to repetitive content and the narrowing of diversity. Indeed, various studies have shown that some users feel they are being watched and may develop a more distant relationship with the platform due to the perception of data-driven tracking (Li et al., 2025; Özel & Özyay, 2021). On the other hand, a recent study has revealed that personalized recommendations, while facilitating the decision-making process, can also generate pressure and fatigue on user preferences (Romero Meza & D'Urso, 2024). Another study conducted specifically in Türkiye reveals that interface design, personalization, and recommendation components guide tracking practices. It emphasizes that this guidance must be considered alongside the strategic goals of the platforms (Özel & Özyay, 2021).

Within this framework, the present study focuses on how users perceive the promise of digital platforms to deliver personalized experiences through algorithmic steering and personalization mechanisms, and within which interpretive frameworks they are interpreted, in the context of Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model. Indeed,

a review of the relevant literature reveals that the role of algorithms in cultural consumption is a significant topic of debate (Bucher, 2012; Striphas, 2015). However, discussing whether users perceive the recommendations they encounter on the platform interface as personalization or as behavior-shaping guidance/manipulation, and under what conditions these interpretations transform into different readings, will contribute to the current literature. The dynamic and transformative impact of digitalization points to the need for such contemporary studies. It can be argued that this need has become more apparent with critical approaches that emphasize that algorithmic systems are not merely technical mechanisms but also operate based on economic and managerial logic. Moreover, discussions of surveillance capitalism draw attention to the transformation in which user data is constantly produced and placed at the center of economic value production processes (Zuboff, 2015). Similarly, the data colonialism approach critically discusses the reorganization of everyday life practices within data relations (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). The present study aims to relate these discussions, which mostly occur at the macro level, to user experiences and interpretation processes at the micro level.

1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. Algorithmic Steering and User Experience

Within existing social structures and the communication ecosystem, it is an incomplete approach to evaluate digital video platforms as a technical service infrastructure that offers users a broad content archive. These platforms are important intermediaries that continuously collect data through user interactions, analyze this data, convert it into economic value, and thereby reorganize the relationship between users and content. Indeed, the platform capitalism literature, which attempts to explain this structure, views digital video platforms as socio-technical intermediaries that operate through code and data analytics, establish multi-sided markets, and capitalize on user interaction (Langley & Leyshon, 2017). Studies focusing on digital monopolization processes in different countries and societies show that these platforms are becoming increasingly dominant actors in national media ecosystems and are reshaping the dynamics of production, distribution, and visibility (Foster, 2024; Uluç & Balci, 2024; Yuan & Zhang, 2025). Accordingly, subscription-based

business models and service networks spreading globally are reshaping viewing practices toward an on-demand, multi-screen, and flexible consumption culture. Interface design and personalization arrangements, while facilitating the user experience, can also establish a framework that technically defines users' areas of preference by limiting content visibility (Matthew, 2020).

This data-driven process becomes clearer when examined alongside discussions of surveillance capitalism and data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Yuan & Zhang, 2025; Zuboff, 2015). This is because these approaches argue that online platforms continuously record human behavior and transform everyday activities into behavioral data suitable for prediction, classification, and targeting purposes. This process, which is argued to be not limited to functions such as marketing and content recommendation, is considered a new form of power established by platforms over users (Foster, 2024). In this context, users are conceptualized not only as content consumers but also as subjects who continuously produce data and are positioned within algorithmic categories.

The concept of algorithmic culture, which has gained prominence in communication studies literature in recent years, is used to explain how technical processes have become increasingly decisive in the selection, ranking, and classification of cultural content (Striphas, 2015). Research on the concept suggests that human-centered editorial intervention plays a diminishing role in the formation of cultural preferences, while decisions regarding visibility, accessibility, and recommendability are increasingly made through algorithmic systems (Yuan & Zhang, 2025). In this scope, algorithms are positioned not merely as technical filtering tools on platforms but as intermediary mechanisms that regulate cultural circulation.

Discussions about how algorithmic systems operate on digital platforms point to the existence of an order that produces conditions of visibility and invisibility. Indeed, it is argued that algorithms on digital platforms determine thresholds of access and visibility, and that these thresholds can regulate content production and sharing practices (Bucher, 2012). Within this context, the recommendation and ranking logic of platforms creates a normative field that indirectly guides user behavior.

Studies focusing on machine learning-based personalization applications reveal that platforms use behavioral indicators such as viewing history, genre preferences, viewing time, and interaction patterns to create recommendation sets that vary according to the user (Eklund, 2022; Erdoğan, 2023). In his research based on visual presentation strategies, Eklund (Eklund, 2022) discusses how the same content can be presented with different cover images to different user profiles, and how personalization extends to the visual layer of the interface. Thus, the coding process is not limited to the content itself but also extends to interface decisions that determine how the content is represented. Studies conducted in the Türkiye context examine the relationship between user selection and recommendation algorithms on digital platforms, showing that a significant portion of users shape their content preferences through recommendation streams and that these recommendations are gradually adopted as a normal part of daily viewing practices (Özel & Özyay, 2021). These findings indicate that the viewing experience must be considered in conjunction with the platforms' computation-based arrangements as well as individual preferences.

1.2. Stuart Hall's Encoding-Decoding Model

Due to the influence of traditional effect-response approaches in communication theories, the audience has long been treated as a passive and receptive receiver. However, with the tradition of cultural studies, the view that the audience actively interprets media texts in line with their own social positioning, everyday experiences, and cultural background has gained prominence. Livingstone (Livingstone, 2007), evaluating Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model as one of the fundamental pillars of audience research, emphasizes that reception studies should conceptualize the audience as an interpretive subject capable of producing different meanings in different contexts. With this repositioning of the subject, the impact of digital platforms, including social media, in transforming ordinary people into individual mass publishers through their two-way, interactive nature is undeniable. This is because the current communication ecosystem has transformed the passive, receptive audiences of traditional media into active, participatory users (Hall, 1980).

In this regard, Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model does not treat communication as a linear process in which the meaning conveyed by the sender is

received as is by the audience. The model's basic assumption is that meaning is encoded during the production phase and decoded by the audience during the reception phase. Encoding refers to the structuring of media texts within specific discursive and ideological frameworks, while decoding refers to the interpretation of the text in line with the audience's social position, experiences, and contextual conditions. Therefore, the same text can be interpreted with different meanings by different audience groups (Shaw, 2017). Hall explains these different forms of interpretation with three reading positions (Hall, 1980). Dominant reading refers to the widespread acceptance of a text's dominant meaning. Negotiated reading is a form of reception in which the dominant framework is generally accepted, but some elements are accepted conditionally, and objections are raised on certain points. The oppositional reading, on the other hand, represents the rejection of the dominant meaning and the development of an alternative interpretation. Hall's model provides a suitable framework for discussing how guidance established through recommendation systems and interface design on digital platforms is interpreted by audiences, who have now become users.

The encoding-decoding model is being revisited in communication studies, adapted to different media environments. Woodstock (Woodstock, 2016) argues that, through the conceptualization of meta-decoding, audiences evaluate the intentions and operational logic of media systems while interpreting media texts. Shaw (Shaw, 2017), on the other hand, approaches the model in conjunction with the concept of opportunities offered by interactive media technologies and suggests that the processes of encoding and decoding in digital environments be reconsidered through platform design and usage practices. Current research demonstrates, with concrete examples, how Hall's dominant, negotiated, and oppositional reading positions manifest across different media texts and contexts, indicating that these positions can vary contextually (Li et al., 2025). The central finding is that individuals are not mere recipients who directly accept messages within today's digital media system. Rather, they reinterpret them through the filter of their own experiences.

When Hall's encoding-decoding model is reexamined in the context of digital platforms, it becomes clear that the coding process is not limited to content production. Coding is also established in algorithmic ranking logics, tagging practices, and

interface design (Livingstone, 2007; Shaw, 2017). Therefore, users experience not only the content but also the manner in which they encounter it within an order established by the platform. Studies showing that digital platforms' recommendation systems can steer users toward certain genres, languages, or aesthetic preferences reveal that this steering process is not uniformly received by users (Eklund, 2022; Li et al., 2025; Romero Meza & D'Urso, 2024). At this point, it is possible to say that Hall's dominant, negotiated, and oppositional reading positions provide a functional framework for classifying how digital platform users interpret algorithmic steering. Accordingly, in the dominant reading position, users evaluate recommendations as a convenience that saves time and reduces the burden of choice, accepting personalization as a natural part of the platform service. In the negotiated reading position, users generally find recommendations useful but develop a critical assessment based on experiences such as reduced diversity, repetitive content, or being stuck with certain types. In the oppositional reading position, algorithmic steering is associated with surveillance, data exploitation, and the narrowing of choice autonomy. Users question this system through strategies such as rejecting recommendations, consciously changing their usage practices, or distancing themselves from the platform.

2. METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this study is to analyze users' processes of making sense of their experiences with algorithmic steering and personalization on digital video platforms. Since the study aims to explain how users perceive and experience the platforms' personalization and algorithmic steering/recommendation systems, a qualitative research method was chosen. In this context, the question of whether the recommendations presented on platform interfaces are experienced by users as a form of behavior-shaping guidance or as a type of personalization tool was addressed within the framework of Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model. Hall's model forms the predictive focus of the research because it centers on the position of the target/recipient in reading messages (dominant, negotiated, and oppositional) and the form of interpretation in communication. While the role of algorithms in media consumption is a current topic of debate in the literature (Striphas, 2015), there is also a need for

studies that closely examine what algorithmic recommendation systems mean in terms of user experience.

The present study aims to relate experience and meaning-making processes by examining macro-level discussions on algorithmic consumption patterns at the micro-level through the lens of user experience. In this context, the study examines the user experience that occurs between algorithmic steering and the claim of personalization within an encoding-decoding model from a phenomenological perspective. For this reason, the phenomenological design, a qualitative approach, has been adopted in the study. The phenomenological design is described as an approach that aims to reveal how the respondent perceives a particular phenomenon and how they interpret this phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Elnur, 2025). In this context, in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals who use digital video platforms, and participants were asked to describe how encoding-decoding practices shape their viewing experiences. In this framework, drawing on Hall's model, the study sought to answer the following research question:

- How do users of digital video platforms interpret algorithmic content recommendations through dominant, negotiated, and oppositional reading positions, and how do these interpretations shape their user experience?

The study group consists of users who actively use digital video platforms and state that they regularly watch content on these platforms. Snowball sampling was used in the study to ensure that participants could thoroughly convey their viewing experiences and the meanings they attach to these experiences. The sample comprised users who actively consume content on digital video platforms such as Netflix, YouTube, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+, Mubi, and HBO Max and therefore have experience with the process. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 users, and participants' platform experiences were examined in detail, specifically the reading positions (dominant, negotiated, oppositional) they attributed meaning to within the context of Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model. Eight participants were male, and seven were female, indicating a relatively balanced gender distribution. The participants' age range was 22-51. Regarding platform preference, usage intensity is

concentrated on YouTube and Netflix. Indeed, YouTube was the most frequently used platform among 12 participants, followed by Netflix, which was ranked in the top two by 10 participants. In terms of frequency of preference, these platforms are followed by Disney+ (2 participants) and Amazon Prime Video, HBO Max, and Mubi (1 participant each). On the other hand, other platforms conceptualized as non-mainstream platforms are seen by 4 participants as alternatives to mainstream platforms. For 1 participant, it is the most frequently used platform.

Semi-structured interview techniques were used to collect the current research data. The interview form was designed to thoroughly examine how participants interpreted their digital platform experiences within Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model framework in terms of which reading positions (dominant, negotiated, oppositional) they adopted, in line with the study's objectives. In this context, studies examining topics such as algorithm-based consumption culture, digital tracking habits, and personalization were reviewed. Based on the relevant literature, four open-ended questions were developed to explain digital platform users' experiences with algorithmic recommendation systems, their perceptions of satisfaction and control regarding this structure, and how these perceptions translate into different decoding positions. The interview form was shared with two experts in the relevant scientific field to confirm its content validity. Based on the opinions and feedback of the relevant experts, the statements were simplified, and two guiding questions were added to deepen the study, thereby finalizing the interview form. The interview form was submitted to the Harran University Social and Humanities Sciences Ethics Committee to evaluate the research's compliance with ethical principles, and the data collection process was started after obtaining the necessary approval (Date: 16 December 2025, No.: 2025/389).

The semi-structured interview guide, developed based on the research objectives and finalized with expert recommendations, was administered online to 15 participants who actively use digital video platforms. The interviews with participants were conducted one-on-one via Zoom. Prior to the interviews, participants were provided with preliminary information and a voluntary participation form via Google Forms, and their consent was obtained. The recordings obtained from the interviews

were transcribed by the researchers and assigned representation codes P1-P15 to participants in order to comply with the principle of confidentiality. The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis with MAXQDA Analytics Pro. The codes were grouped based on semantic proximity, and themes were developed in consultation with two experts in the field (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In qualitative research, trustworthiness are addressed in ways that build trust in the research, as in other scientific studies (Elnur, 2025). In this context, the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were particularly considered in the present study to establish the reliability of the findings.

3. FINDINGS

This section presents the findings derived from the themes and codes identified through qualitative content analysis, along with participant statements supporting these codes.

3.1. Theme 1: Functional Decoding of Algorithmic Codes

This theme focuses on examining how users interpret algorithmic recommendation systems offered by platform policies under mottos such as efficiency and personal assistance. According to Hall's model, media platforms encode content in the most appropriate way to retain users within the system for as long as possible. Users, on the other hand, filter this coding through different critical lenses, such as systemic success, poor content recommendations, and/or failed algorithmic steering. In this context, the functionality of algorithmic codes is accepted as a mechanism that facilitates the decision-making process and saves time for users in one respect. On the other hand, it is interpreted as an algorithmic error and a vicious cycle.

3.1.1. Guidance and Time Savings in the Decision-Making Process

This code represents the user's interpretation of the algorithmic recommendations offered by the platform as a kind of convenience, fully in line with the platform's policy and message. In this position, the algorithm is understood as a digital guide that prevents the user from becoming lost among an endless stream of content. This interpretation is clearly seen in the statements below from participants coded as P3, P8, and P15.

P3: I prefer it because I have no difficulty using it, as YouTube recommends videos in styles I like.

P8: I think it's a good thing. When I watch a series, I often consult the you may also like section at the bottom, especially on Netflix, and I usually select movies from there.

P15: It was very helpful. It's easy for me to find a suitable movie or series, and I don't have to waste time researching.

3.1.2. Algorithmic Error and Vicious Cycle

This code refers to situations where the platform's personalized message fails to resonate with the user. In such cases, the user perceives that the algorithm does not truly recognize them and, instead of meeting their actual expectations, resorts to superficial repetition, thereby disrupting the viewing experience and calling into question the platform's algorithmic success. The statements below from participants P1, P3, and P9 clearly illustrate this situation.

P1: Sometimes I get extremely annoyed when it shows me something I absolutely dislike. I say, don't you know me? I go and specifically dislike it.

P3: The part YouTube recommends is broken. It makes me very angry. Sometimes things I've never watched and have no interest in appear.

P9: After watching a lot of things on YouTube, the algorithm can suddenly go haywire and fill my feed entirely with a video I watched only twice that day.

3.2. Theme 2: Power Relations and the Ideological Analysis of Personalization

This theme focuses on the power balances defined in Hall's model. According to this, platforms attempt to code their algorithmic recommendation systems as a personalized service and generate consent. Users, on the other hand, can interpret this situation as a kind of privilege (dominant reading) or manipulation/surveillance (oppositional reading). In this process, the user experiences a tension between their individual will and free choices on one hand, and platform policies and the associated commercial impositions on the other. In this context, the platform message gains

meaning for the user either in a self-centered and narcissistic way or through a sense of manipulation and direction stemming from the algorithm's determinism.

3.2.1. Narcissistic Coding

This code positions the user as an influential, active, and participatory element within the system. Indeed, the user can perceive the algorithmic architecture's self-confirming suggestions as confirmation of their individual identity and preferences. This situation can be linked to the dominant reading position defined in Hall's model. This reading position indicates that the user largely accepts the message the platform seeks to convey, namely that the user is valued. Indeed, the statements below from participants coded P1, P2, and P3 clearly characterize this perception.

P1: I say, oh, it knows me, it's showing me this for me... It makes me feel special.

P2: I feel special. It shows they've taken my thoughts into account, since they're showing me this.

P3: It makes me feel special personally. Because there are suggestions that I would like.

3.2.2. Algorithmic Determinism and Surveillance Anxiety

This code refers to the user interpreting the messages encoded by the platform as a type of control mechanism and/or marketing trap. Indeed, as can be understood from the statements of participants coded P1, P11, P14, and P5 below, users may feel that their personal will is restricted and/or that they are constantly being recorded/listened to. This negatively affects the consumption experience, causing users to take a distanced stance towards the algorithmic system and architecture.

P1: They actually decide what we watch and stuff. It's a slightly uncomfortable feeling. That guidance is like Big Brother.

P11: I call this America's game. I definitely feel guided.

P14: I feel like the algorithm is categorizing me as a Type 17A member. It's not truly individualized.

P5: I'm not buying a bag of my own free will. I ultimately like and purchase a bag based on their recommendations. It makes you feel pressured.

3.3. Theme 3: The Experiential Equivalent of Technical Codes (Interface and Subtitles)

Digital platforms are designed to retain users for as long as possible by promoting ease of use (e.g., through coding-friendly interfaces) in their interfaces, algorithmic recommendation systems, and visual and technical architectures. However, these messages/codes promising ease of use may not always be interpreted by users in line with the platform's expectations. Technical elements such as subtitles and interface complexity can act as barriers to users' decoding of the code, leading users to resist the platform and turn to alternatives such as pirate channels. In this context, the following subheadings explain the visual and technical issues that arise under the current theme, as well as the codes that cause problems stemming from interface design.

3.3.1. Visual Limitations and Technical Resistance (Subtitle Issue)

This code explains how the subtitle format, which digital video streaming platforms encode as static and unchangeable, has the potential to disrupt the viewing experience by causing physical discomfort to the user. Participant statements reveal that this situation, particularly noticeable in the context of Netflix, has the potential to drive users away from the platform. Indeed, when users cannot change this code, they may develop alternative resistance strategies such as manually turning off the subtitles or switching to the dubbed version. The statements below from participants P1, P2, and P3 clearly illustrate this situation.

P1: You can't change the brightness of the subtitles on Netflix... The background is black, and the white text is very difficult to read. At some point, I cover the subtitles with my finger.

P2: The screen is white in front. I can't see or read the white text. I have to really strain myself to read it.

P3: The white subtitles hurt my eyes. They tire my eyes more. I just leave.

3.3.2. Interface Design and Information Fatigue

This code represents how users interpret the interface/homepage layout, which platforms code as content richness, mental overload, and confusion. The statements below from users coded as P1, P7, and P14 clearly illustrate this situation.

P1: A lot of information suddenly floods my mind. I experience a momentary overload, and I don't like it at all. I avoid that interface.

P7: Some sites, like TOD, won't let me watch what I want to watch because of their interface. I'm fighting a battle on the platform.

P14: The moment I move my mouse... I feel like I can't see 40% of the screen for 10 seconds.

3.4. Theme 4: User Types According to Stuart Hall's Decoding Positions

This theme addresses participants' responses to the messages presented by digital video platforms, categorizing them according to Stuart Hall's tripartite encoding-decoding model as dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings.

3.4.1. Dominant Reading

This code indicates that users accept the commercial algorithmic recommendation systems of digital platforms as a structure that works to their advantage. As can be understood from the statements of participants coded P1 and P3 below, recommendation systems are characterized by some participants as the platform recognizing and caring about the user, and their satisfaction with this is clearly expressed.

P1: I love them. I'm glad they exist... don't you know me? [Gets upset when no recommendations come]

P3: I'm quite satisfied with digital platforms. I can access everything I want... I think everything is at our fingertips right now.

3.4.2. Negotiated Reading

This code describes users who find recommendation systems manipulative/directive but continue to use the platform, considering the practical

benefits offered by this mode of operation. As can be understood from the statements of participants coded P1, P6, and P14 below, when recommendation systems fail to work correctly for them, users attempt to correct the system's operation through negotiation, by creating their own content lists or disliking the content imposed by the algorithm.

P1: I go and specifically dislike it. Look, I don't like this. I'm correcting it by saying, save this well.

P6: It's a marketing method, it feels manipulative... when I enter, the more content I consume on that platform, the more it benefits them [but I still use it].

P14: It has prompted me to take action, but this is very rare, and curation works for me

3.4.2. Oppositional Reading

This code characterizes platforms as censored subtitles, limited content, monopolistic practices, etc., implying that this mode of operation is seen as a form of pressure on users. As can be understood from the statements of participants coded P10, P13, and P14 below, this perspective, developed against platforms, directs users to anonymous/pirated sites and/or alternatives deemed pirated.

P10: I enjoy pirated sites more. Because the people who write the subtitles convey the slang much more clearly, licensed sites are inevitably subject to filtering.

P13: Pirated because why would I do something that isn't comfortable for me? Not everything I want is there.

P14: For boycott purposes... It's been 3-4 years. I started the boycott by pirating a movie.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The aim of this study is to reveal the role of algorithmic recommendation systems and personalization mechanisms in the viewing experience on digital platforms through the meaning frameworks that users assign to the system. The study was conducted using a qualitative approach centered on the user experience. In-depth interviews were conducted with participants, and the narratives/data obtained were

analyzed using a phenomenological approach. The findings of the study were discussed in relation to the dominant, negotiated, and oppositional reading positions defined in Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model (Hall, 1980).

The findings have opened the door to current and significant conclusions regarding tracking practices on digital platforms. The first is that algorithmic recommendation systems on digital platforms are widely accepted by users as a mechanism that enhances usability. Indeed, platforms code recommendation systems for personalization and ease of use. Users, in turn, interpret this message in line with the platform's promise, to such an extent that a significant portion of participants view the content recommendations offered to them as a kind of guide that facilitates the selection process and describes it as a time-saving structure. This result parallels the algorithmic culture discussions that emphasize the phenomenon of algorithms in the daily routine of today's digital media consumption (Striphas, 2015). In this scope, it can be argued that the platforms' promise of tailored content is largely embraced by users and seen as a functional advantage.

On the other hand, the algorithmic error and loop code that became apparent in Theme 1 show that the platforms' promise of personalization does not always work and cannot produce an experiential response for some users. Indeed, when users are exposed to recommendations they are not interested in, they describe the recommendation system as broken or dysfunctional and feel uncomfortable with it. When the algorithm fails to meet the expectation of correctly analyzing the user, users' tendencies to move away from the platform and/or seek alternatives increase. This finding is consistent with the literature suggesting that users develop everyday explanations about algorithmic steering and that the system's operation shapes the user experience (Rader & Gray, 2015). According to the literature, as the algorithmic process becomes more apparent, the mismatch between user expectations and the recommendation output increases, potentially creating a kind of perceptual break (Eslami et al., 2015). The findings of the research support this judgment by showing that the promise of personalization is not limited to producing better recommendations, but is also the basis of the trust relationship built between the platform and the user. However, this trust relationship has the potential to rapidly weaken or even break down

due to flawed and unsuccessful recommendation systems and the associated negative user experiences.

The narcissistic decoding code defined in Theme 2 shows that users perceive recommendation systems not merely as a technical element, but as a form of recognition and acceptance related to their personal identity and values. Indeed, the findings reveal that the message that you are valuable to us, built by digital platforms on algorithmic recommendation systems and personalization, is directly accepted by some users. This result is similar to previous studies that discuss the relationship established between the user and the platform through algorithmic recommendation systems in terms of visibility and value (Bucher, 2012). However, the code defined under the same theme, algorithmic determinism and surveillance concerns, also reveals that recommendation systems and the promise of personalization can be perceived by users as a type of control and/or manipulation/steering mechanism. Indeed, some participants' emphasis on feeling directed and others' use of the Big Brother analogy reveal that recommendation systems can be perceived not merely as a mechanism reflecting content preferences, but as a mechanism that actually determines preferences. This points to the micro-level experience of current debates such as data colonialism and surveillance capitalism. It is argued that today, user data has become centralized in production processes as an economic value in its own right, and that behavior is being attempted to be guided through prediction (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Zuboff, 2015). The findings show that users can simultaneously experience both a sense of recognition and surveillance anxiety. This situation also explains why the negotiated reading position can produce a widespread intermediate position.

Theme 3 outlined in the study indicates that algorithmic steering is not merely a list of recommendations but is experienced in conjunction with elements such as technical design and interface. For example, design limitations that do not allow user intervention, such as subtitle brightness, can negatively affect the user experience and, in cases where they cause physical discomfort, may also lead users to change their platform preferences. Similarly, it is understood that an interface containing dense information can cause mental fatigue in users, leading to outcomes such as confusion

and avoidance in the experiential dimension, contrary to the platform's theoretical promise of rich options. The results are consistent with previous findings that well-designed platforms, in terms of their interfaces, encourage viewing behavior, whereas poorly designed ones negatively affect the experience by creating manipulation and/or confusion and may even cause avoidance behavior (Dekker & Tverdina, 2025). Indeed, the findings clearly show that technical limitations can direct users to alternative platforms and/or viewing practices. The fact that some participants' statements about turning to piracy and/or boycotting the platform are based not only on content preferences but also on direct experience elements such as subtitles, filtering, and ease of use explains this point.

The section addressed as Theme 4 in the study constitutes the direct intersection point with the theoretical approach of the work. Accordingly, the findings show that users decode the messages conveyed to them by the platform through direct or indirect codes in dominant, negotiated, and oppositional positions. In this context, while recommendation systems are accepted as a useful personalization service for users in the dominant reading position, in the negotiated reading position, although the benefit is not ignored, a distant relationship is established with the platform based on knowledge of guidance, manipulation, and commercial approaches. Finally, in the oppositional reading position, the recommendation system is read alongside censorship, monopolization, and control, resulting in practices such as avoiding the platform and turning to alternative sources becoming prominent. This distribution appears consistent with Stuart Hall's argument that meaning is not a one-way transmission process, but rather that reception manifests itself in different ways depending on social position and experience (Hall, 1980). Ultimately, the study brings a fresh perspective to the literature by linking macro approaches that discuss the role of algorithms in cultural consumption (Bucher, 2012; Romero Meza & D'Urso, 2024; Striphas, 2015) with micro-level experiences and interpretations from the user perspective.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the findings obtained are limited to the subjective narratives of the participants in the study. The findings were produced based on a specific timeframe and specific user experiences. Therefore, the findings do not

carry a claim that can be generalized to all digital platforms and users. Furthermore, because the data is based on users' recollections and narratives during the interviews, it does not provide objective measurements of the technical functioning of algorithmic recommendation systems. Netflix and YouTube are highlighted as platform examples in the study. However, it should not be overlooked that the interface design, content policy, and recommendation logic of different platforms may vary, and therefore, the distribution of reading positions on different platforms may also differ. Finally, it should be noted that while the study reveals the user experience in-depth, it does not have a longitudinal design to track the transformation of experiences over time. For this reason, it is thought that future studies with different and larger sample groups, supported by cross-platform comparative and longitudinal data, will enrich the current findings.

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Yazarların çalışmaya katkı oranları eşittir.

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